

# DISARMING TIMES

*The Journal of Pax Christi Australia*

Special Edition

September 2012

## Conflict in Syria: What is it about?

By Dr. Fiona Hill [See biodata on page 2]

***With the conflict in Syria tearing the country apart, and with the ordeal of everyday life steadily mounting, many of us are reduced to helpless and rather confused spectators. And as this tragedy unfolds great and regional powers are cynically pursuing short-term interests.***

***What exactly is going on? Why has this beautiful country with such a long and rich history where people of different faiths have for so long managed to coexist in relative harmony now in the grip of a ravaging civil war? The most urgent task is to become better informed. This is the first and essential step in raising public awareness of the issues involved. At stake is not just the future of Syria, but the wider conflicts in the Middle East and without exaggeration international peace and security.***

***With this in mind, Pax Christi convened a forum on Syria on 16 September. We were fortunate to have two outstanding contributions. Fiona Hill and Joseph Wakim each brought to their presentations a wealth of knowledge and depth of understanding. We are pleased to reproduce their papers in this Special Issue of Disarming Times, and urge readers to distribute this issue far and wide.***

In the middle of March 2011, teenage schoolboys in Dera'a, southern Syria, close to the border with Jordan, reportedly filled with enthusiasm for the excitement in Cairo's Tahrir Square, scrawled slogans on their school wall with such words as 'huriyya' - freedom.

The boys were identified by local security agents, taken to jail, detained for days, and allegedly tortured.

Most Syrians, and many visitors, have experienced the general thuggery and brutal behaviour of Syria's multiple branches of state security, whether as witness or as a direct victim, but the disproportionate severity of this incident, at this time, sent shock waves across the country. President Bashar Al Assad ordered the Govern-

nor of Dera'a to step down immediately. The security officers responsible were imprisoned and we were told that all involved faced criminal charges for their conduct. The President apologised personally to the boys' parents.

Then, during the ensuing Dera'a protests, both Syrian civilians and police officers were killed, the police say by snipers. Police officers insisted their instructions were to safeguard citizens from harm during street protests but that when fired upon, they returned fire. Protesters accused the police of shooting unarmed civilians. It was all confusion. No-one seemed to know who shot whom, but it is true that every-

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# DISARMING TIMES

A quarterly journal of Pax Christi Australia. It aims to provide members and interested peacemakers with peace news and views both local and international. We endeavour in each edition to reflect the three-fold emphasis of Pax Christi which engages members in study, Non-violent action and prayer for peace, justice, human rights, development and inter-faith and inter-civilisation dialogue.

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*Human rights, justice and integrity of creation are central to its work.*

*We take a stand against militarism, nuclear weapons and the arms race.*

*As an ecumenical Christian movement Pax Christi fosters the spiritual and scriptural dimensions of peace-making.*

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*Disarming Times* is printed by Arena Press  
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## **ABOUT The SPEAKERS**

### **Dr Fiona Hill**

Fiona Hill studied at University of Melbourne in the erstwhile Department of Middle Eastern Studies, receiving the Fanny Reading Prize for fieldwork in Syria. Her Doctorate in Anthropology focused on rural communities in northern Syria and the Ba'ath government's interface with the broader Syrian population. She has been visiting Syria as an archaeologist and anthropologist for nearly 30 years now and is widely published.

Fiona was in Syria during the first incidence of violence in Dera'a in March 2011, stayed throughout April 2011, and returned in January 2012.

In her article here she outlines the course of the Syrian conflict to include aspects seldom highlighted in the Western mainstream media (MSM). Her Syrian friends and acquaintances of various backgrounds in Syria and across the world urge her to broadcast the complexities of the Syrian conflict so that people committed to social justice and to an equitable outcome for Syria will be better informed.

### **Articles about Syria by Dr Fiona Hill**

<http://newmatilda.com/2011/11/17/syrians-deserve-better-deal>

<http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/3827746.html>

<http://newmatilda.com/2012/02/17/blindness-road-damascus>

<http://theconversation.edu.au/syrians-ask-why-not-give-democracy-a-chance-5776>

<http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/3926840.html>

<http://theconversation.edu.au/the-west-must-quit-the-theatrics-and-tell-the-truth-on-syria-7303>

<http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/the-question/is-it-time-the-west-intervened-in-syria-20120629-217rv.html>

### **Joe Wakim**

Joseph Wakim OAM is an independent writer on human rights issues. He is founder of the Australian Arabic Council, a former Victorian Multicultural affairs Commissioner.

More articles by Joe Wakim Including:

*Australia's Naivety on Syria*

*This isn't a civil war*

*Al-Qaeda is now a US ally in Syria*

*Muslim majority rises to be heard*

*Syria Needs Elections, Not Arms*

**Available on <http://josephwakim.com.au/>**

***Printed copies are available on request.***

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one expected the worst from police and security forces.

Two weeks after the shooting deaths in Dera'a, a Syrian army convoy was ambushed by snipers on the Tartous-Baniyas road and several officers killed.

State-run Syrian TV became filled with *vox populi*. Syrians griped to camera about local governance issues, from busted water mains to oppressive systems of government. There was general elation at this apparent permission to complain. My host in rural Syria at the time observed 'Before today you could only talk like this under the covers at night with your wife.'

Then this nascent Syrian 'revolution' appeared to change course further.

Western MSM and Al Jazeera reports of new locations of massive civil unrest in the face of heavy-handed army and police suppression were strangely difficult to verify on the ground. Syrians have never relied on their own media for local information, and so relied on their personal networks to verify what Al Jazeera, BBC, CNN etc were broadcasting. In Damascus, Aleppo, and other apparently quiet locations, while watching the day's events on their screens, Syrians dialled the phones of their mother, uncle, cousin, colleague, or friend from university who lived in the town or village in question. In all the times I was present, Syrians at the scene reported they could not see, or even hear, the alleged events. This created great disquiet.

At every meeting in the street, on the bus, at cafes, in markets, Syrians were asking each other what they had heard – not just that day but that hour or that minute. I was leading some Australians on a tour of Syria at the time, and my friends around Syria called me at every step of the way, several times a day.

In the midst of this it seemed almost surreal that amongst the several immediate reforms announced by the President, Emergency Law was lifted, there was an amnesty for criminals arrested in the past few months, and political prisoners were released from detention.

Common criminals, local Bi-Men, and the shabeeha (unofficial pro-government 'thugs') who operate smuggling rings and specialise in intimidation) openly contested their territories in increasingly ugly incidents. At first these were isolated enough to convince Syrians that this aspect of unrest was not a widespread armed civil uprising but rather turf wars.

But today, the Syrian death toll stands between 23,000 and 38,000 depending on your source, there are 1.5 million Syrians displaced, mostly relocated within Syria, and 250,000 refugees in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq.

Syrian state sources quote over 8000 Syrian Army soldier, internal security and police officer deaths.

### **A popular uprising?**

With so many apparently in agreement that the government must change, why is this revolution not universally popular in Syria?

Why does the Syrian Government-run media persist in depicting the armed opposition as "terrorists" and acts of international animosity as attacks against Syria as a whole?

After 18 months of talking with Syrians in Syria, the UAE, and Australia, reading their blogs and surveying website comments, it seems there are four categories of attitude towards the conflict, as follows:

1. The staunch loyalists to President Al Assad are mostly (but not entirely) Alawi (sometimes called 'Alawite') and other Shia Muslims, some because they have enjoyed great personal privileges over 42 years

of Assad-led government, but also others who used to oppose the government and call it to account for its corrupt policies but who now fear the persecution of Alawis and other minority groups at the hands of the Free Syria Army and its associates. Well-known journalist Nabil Saleh, for example, has been imprisoned several times for opposing government policies but he now aims to expose the acts/ambitions of the armed opposition through his website.

2. Sunni Muslims calling for 'jihad', holy war, against the Alawi-led Syrian government. New TV channels in Syria dedicated to broadcasting antigovernment propaganda portray political opposition, and fighting the Syrian Army, as a religious duty.

3. Syrians of all faith backgrounds, mostly well educated and professional, who detest the corruption and obstacles to professional mobility they face on a daily basis in any interface with most government departments and with many (but by no means all) government employees. The ruling elites' conspicuous privileges currently are far beyond what ordinary Syrians could aspire to and this has hardened opposition to the government. This category has provided many newly elected members of the People's Parliament and many newly licensed political parties.

Many characterise the final category as the majority of the Syrian population who are lost in the middle, finding no appeal in the armed opposition, uncertain of the new political parties, and preferring the stability offered by the government until new political processes are able to evolve and mature. Corruption and lack of physical, verbal, and ideological freedom are among the long list of things they want changed, but they believe the new political parties lack broad policies and any ability to govern, and the armed op-

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position poses a real threat to Syria's enshrined secularism. Their homes and village infrastructures are being destroyed amidst the unrest and they maintain they depend on the government to protect them.

Much of the division in Syria is attributable directly to the way the conflict has been reported in the Western MSM and Gulf Arab media as much as to the intransigence of the armed opposition and the rhetoric of Syrian Government propaganda.

### **A Cold War for Oil**

When vast crowds of men, women, and children of all ages rallied in festive street parties in March, April, May, and June last year to show their support for Syria's sovereignty, the Western MSM reported them as anti-government pro-democracy protesters, even though the President and his wife arrived to join some of the rallies.

While many already suspected it, from this point onwards Syrians became convinced that they are pawns in a much larger geo-political game.

The Syrian conflict is a proxy war in the contest between the Western powers, who are utilising the financial and ideological clout of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and Russia and China because Syria and Iran are the tipping points in the balance of power in the colonial Middle East.

In a public forum interview March 2007, retired US Army General Wesley Clark outlined the Bush Administration's general plan for Syria about which he learned at the Pentagon 10 days after the events of 9/11. According to the plan, the US and allies intended to topple 7 countries in 5 years - Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Iran.

The US-led alliance tags Syria an 'axis of evil' obstruction in a neighbourhood in which we do not live but upon which we depend profoundly for fossil fuels

and their associated affects on global markets. Syria remains resolute in its commitment to Pan-Arabism and Palestinian Autonomy, and in its strong relations with Russia and Iran, and this has put Syria out in the cold - for decades. Economic sanctions have contributed significantly to undermining the middle and merchant classes and in creating robust black economies and empowering and emboldening well-armed smuggling rackets, and nurturing the corruption that is rife in government bureaucracy.

Under President Bashar, Syria began to show signs of 'coming in out of the cold'. In 2005 the government announced economic reforms in adherence with IMF guidelines and its ranking climbed upwards in World Bank Doing Business Report 2012.

**Syrians became convinced that they are pawns in a much larger geo-political game.**

When Sa'ad Hariri (son of Rafiq Hariri whom Syria was accused of assassinating) came to Damascus to meet on friendly terms with President Bashar Al Assad, when the Ruler of Qatar paid visits and invested significantly in the country, when a flood of foreign investment poured in and new banking institutions opened, and when the US reopened its Embassy in Damascus in 2010, the mood indicated a happy rapprochement with the US.

But in a recent interview with Syria's Addounia TV, President Bashar Al Assad acknowledged that Syria has been harshly punished and paid keenly for his continuous refusal to capitulate on his government's policies and relationships.

HRH Prince Bandar Bin Sultan Al Saud, ambassador to Washington (1983-2005) and dubbed "Bandar Bush" by the US press for his close friendship with George Bush senior, famously convinced the Pentagon

to save the US military for other theatres of engagement by mobilizing proxy fighters to execute George Bush junior's plan to topple '7 countries in 5 years'. Prince Bandar pledged to equip, arm, train, and pay fighting Sunni Muslim units that would attract other fighters galvanized by a 'holy war' against the infidel and apostate. In Syria this means Christians, Alawis, Druze, Ismailis, Yazidis, and Sunnis who do not support the 'jihad'.

Citizens of Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been providing significant financing to the armed opposition in Syria and supplying arms (heavy weapons shipments were intercepted early 2011) from the very beginning of events in Syria, and senior officials of the Saudi and Qatari governments continue to call for Assad's departure.

On 18 July 2012 a bomb attack on the national security headquarters in Damascus killed Defence Minister Daoud Rajiha (a Catholic), General Assef Shawkat (President Bashar al-Assad's brother-in-law), General Hassan Turkomani (from Aleppo), and national security chief Hisham Ikhtiari. It was reported that the CIA operatives who have long been active in Syria were behind the assassination. Yet U.S. Defence Secretary Leon Panetta announced in response (Reuters reported) that the situation in Syria was 'spinning out of control' and that President Bashar al-Assad's government would be held responsible if it failed to safeguard its alleged chemical weapons sites.

Echoes of the propaganda campaign about WMD in Iraq a decade ago reverberated throughout the global MSM.

A week later a bomb blast in Riyadh killed HRH Prince Bandar Al Saud, apparently in retribution for the attack on Syria's national security command and his openly public role in the assault on the Syrian government.

A somewhat sanguine ABC Radio discussion on the conse-

quences for Israel of an Israeli unprovoked attack on Iran ('Israel vs Iran - How would a war unfold?' only indicates further that Syria is a pawn in a bigger game.

### **Supply of Weapons & Intelligence**

In the early days of its mobilisation and public debut in late July 2011, the Free Syria Army (FSA) claimed to be defected military men dependent on outside assistance to mount a coup in Syria. After skirmishes in each border town in Syria, the FSA gained propaganda ascendancy through the use of mobile phone footage and its fighters gained refuge across the borders in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Iraq refused them refuge. The FSA leadership ensconced in Turkey continues to receive weapons, money, intelligence, and guerrilla training from Saudi Arabia (Saudi Arabia) and Qatar.

On 1 August 2012, Reuters reported that the United States was collaborating with a secret command centre operated by Turkey and its allies in Adana, a city in southern Turkey about 60 miles from the Syrian border, which is also home to a U.S. air base (Incirlik) where U.S. military and intelligence agencies maintain a substantial presence.

Reuters reported that current and former U.S. government officials advise that Turkish authorities are increasingly involved in providing Syrian rebels with training and possibly equipment, and NBC News reported that the Free Syrian Army recently had obtained nearly two dozen surface-to-air missiles, weapons that could be used against Assad's helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft.

The Daily Telegraph reported also that in Istanbul an underground network of Syrian opposition activists is receiving training and supplies of vital

equipment from a combined American and British effort to forge an effective alternative to the Damascus regime. (Damien McElroy, Istanbul 26 Aug 2012)

According to this report, dozens of dissidents are ferried out of Syria to be vetted for foreign backing. Recipients of the aid are given satellite communications and computers so that they can act as a local "hub" linking local activists and the outside world. "The UK and the US are moving cautiously . . . to improve the capabilities of the opposition," said (Alistair Harris) a British political consultant overseeing the program.

President Bashar Al Assad has consistently maintained that the 18-month-old insurgency against his government is largely the work of people he refers to as "foreign-backed terrorists". He insists that Syrian forces are acting to restore stability in the country, and he characterises Turkish citizens as enduring allies who are currently led by a government that has lost its way.

Turkey's official stance is unpopular within many sections of the Turkish population. The Leader of Turkey's opposition Republican People's Party (Kemal Kilicdaroglu) has accused Erdogan's government of violating international law and has called for referring the matter to the Turkish Supreme Court and punishing those responsible for this breach.

### **Who are the opposition and what do they stand for?**

The Syrian Government includes Christian, Shia, and Sunni Muslim ministers.

The President's spouse is a Sunni Muslim. The majority of the army is Sunni Muslim. Not all Sunni Muslims in Syria share enthusiasm for a forced ousting of the government and its replacement with a Islamic based government.

Syria's Constitution demands that the President be a Muslim, but Syria does not profess a

state religion, and does not officially favour any religion.

The political opposition in Syria is a constellation of intellectuals, professionals, and advocates of social justice of all shades who have now formed new and licensed political parties. Syria's Head of the Higher Committee for Elections (Khalaf al-Ezawi) reported in March 2012 that there were 7195 candidates from all over Syria for the 7 May 2012 elections to the People's Parliament, including 2632 with university degrees and 710 females.

Many Sunni Muslim Syrians advocate a stable political transition through continuous reforms that build on those initiated by the government and continuously rolled out since March 2011 but the armed opposition and those who support the FSA and who anticipate Sunni Muslim governance in Syria reject participation in the current political process.

Syria's Grand Mufti Sheikh Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun describes the armed insurrection by the FSA, and the diverse fighting brigades that have come to Syria in response to the call for 'jihad', as a 'takfiri wahhabi expansion'. Many Muslims around the world join in this assessment, including a recent delegation to Syria from the Russian Association of Islamic Accord.

The term 'Wahhabi' is premised on the teachings of the 19th C Arabian reformist preacher Abdul Wahhab, characterised by a highly ascetic approach to faith practice and integral to the monarchic rule in Saudi Arabia. It is an unacceptable term to the Saudis, however, just like calling Islam 'Mohammedanism' is unacceptable to the broad Muslim community.

'Takfiris' are those who accuse others of apostasy - the worse crime under Islamic law. Takfiris support the armed opposition in Syria and regard Syrian and any other Muslims who plead for a

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mediated solution as pro-Assad and by extension pro-Alawi and hence apostates.

Around the world, including here in Australia, Muslims collecting money in support of the Syrian fighters cite the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya (14th Century) quoting his famous fatwa "If you have 10 spears, then you must shoot 9 at the Nusayreen and one at the Jews". 'Nusayreen' is the term for Alawis, Druze, Ismailis and other Shia sects who are deemed more disbelieving than Jews and Christians and who should never be permitted to rule a Muslim country.

Anyone who supports the Syrian government, or who does not help or support the Free Army and other fighting brigades, is considered an infidel ('kafer') or apostate. Takfiris sanction stealing their property and killing them and their families.

Ever greater numbers of fellow Arab and other Muslims driven by a sense of religious duty to perform jihad continue to arrive in Syria.

Co-founder of Medecins Sans Frontieres, Jacques Beres, recently returned to Paris from Syria after spending two weeks working clandestinely in a hospital in Aleppo told Reuters (John Irish 8 Sep 2012) that about 60% of those he had treated in Aleppo were rebel fighters and that at least half were not Syrian. They even included some Frenchmen.

"It's really something strange to see" he says. "They are directly saying that they aren't interested in Bashar al-Assad's fall, but are thinking about how to take power afterwards and set up an Islamic state with sharia law to become part of the world Emirate."

During his previous visits to Syria - in March and May - Beres said he had dismissed suggestions the rebels were dominated by Islamist fighters but he said he had now been forced to reassess the situation.

On July 27 this year, the RAND Corporation reported that Al Qaeda was responsible for suicide attacks and car bombings in Syria (In a July 30 report) and a London Guardian report confirmed that Al-Qaeda fighters were commanding Syrian rebels and teaching them how to build bombs.

A Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations - America's most influential foreign policy think tank and a close ally of the U.S. State Department - writes "Al-Qaeda fighters, may help improve morale, they bring discipline, religious fervour, battle experience from Iraq, funding from Sunni sympathizers in the Gulf, and most importantly, deadly results. In short, the FSA needs al-Qaeda

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now.'

Last month a leader of the Southern Yemen insurgency, Tariq al-Fadhli, who fought alongside Bin Laden was reported in a Yemeni newspaper interview as saying he had negotiated with U.S. and Saudi officials to send 5,000 jihadist fighters via Turkey to Syria to fight in the war being waged by armed groups, including the Al Qaeda-linked groups, in the attempted overthrow of President Bashar Al-Assad (Channel Aalam; Al Akhabariyya)

Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade (DFAT) travel advisory 6 September 2012 advises that 'anti government forces threatened to attack civilian airports in Damascus and Aleppo . (and there are) ongoing military operations, protests and terrorist attacks.'

Violent incidences amongst the Australian Syrian communities and Australian Muslim support for the fighters in Syria

recently prompted a statement from the Australian Federal Police Community Liaison Team (29 August 2012) (5) cautioning that Australians should not travel to Syria or border regions in neighbouring countries and that it is illegal under Australian law to:

- Engage in fighting for either side
- Fund, train or recruit someone to fight, or
- Supply or fund weapons for either side in Syria.

The statement adds that similar sanctions apply to supporting conflict in Lebanon and Iraq.

### **Syrian Armed Opposition Reject Mediation**

The armed opposition in all its manifestations rejected Kofi Annan's six point plan, which the Syrian Government accepted, and they also reject the Syrian Government's pledge to grant general amnesty to all fighters who come in good faith to achieve a negotiated outcome to the benefit of all Syrians.

Syria's Minister of State for the newly established National Reconciliation Affairs (Dr. Ali Haidar) recently announced "Syrians are mostly convinced that the solution won't be through weapons or on the base of one side winning over the other or through the mentality of exclusion". In doing so he echoed the Syrian President's statement that cessation of fighting by all parties is not a surrender in any sense, with one side winning and the other losing, because all Syrians are currently losing. He says a ceasefire should be considered as a first step towards a political solution that benefits Syria and all people faithful to Syria's sovereignty above personal agendas.

Several of the reforms rolled out since March 2011 by the Syrian government are in fact completely congruent with the

demands made by the now defunct Syria National Council and the FSA.

In February 2012, after months of community consultation across Syria, a national Referendum was held for a new constitution that included introduction of the principle of multi-party politics and abolition of the principle of Ba'ath party rule.

Yet the Free Army physically obstructed Syrians from voting in the Referendum on this new Syrian Constitution. My friends in Homs tell me that on their way to the voting centres their identity cards were confiscated by the FSA and they were sent home. Many people around the country spoke of heavy intimidation and threats of violence as they tried to participate in voting.

Syrians who did vote readily tell me they are not entirely comfortable with all aspects of the new Constitution, but they say they are willing to be part of an imperfect political process before they will resort to violence.

At the same time, an under-employed taxi driver from Damascus countryside which is widely under the sway of the FSA asked my middle class friend in Damascus 'What's the point of voting in a Referendum when my family is hungry?'

Syria is an agricultural nation with no foreign debt where most parts of the country have easy access to freshly grown food daily. But several years of crippling drought have affected supply of grain in particular, caused significant poverty in desert rural areas, and increased the flow of urban migration.

Add up to 2 million Iraqi refugees in Syria, unemployment, and the government's attempts at adhering to IMF guidelines, including cuts to government employee wages, along with the economic sanctions imposed by the Western alliance and the Arab League,

and it is no surprise that the incidence of poverty and the level of disenchantment have increased considerably over the past 18 months.

### **Christian communities**

Syria is home to a range of Christian communities that make up about 10% of the Syrian population - Assyrian, Syriac, Melkite, Maronite, Chaldean, Greek Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Jacobite, Roman Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Anglican, and Copts recently fled from violence in Cairo.

As a result of the activities of the FSA, an estimated 80,000 Christians have been displaced from Homs by destruction of their homes, and most are relocated within Syria. Most churches in Homs have been damaged and several destroyed, including the site of Christian pilgrimage "Mar Gergus" (Saint George) in Homs province.

More recently in Aleppo Vatican's Fides news agency reported that the residence of Melkite Archbishop Jean-Clement Jeanbart was ransacked after he and several priests who lived there fled to a Franciscan residence in a safer neighbourhood. The Maronite archbishop's residence and a museum of Byzantine Christian art were also ransacked.

Early in Syria's civil unrest and repression by the Syrian Government forces, His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV (Hazim) of Antioch and all the East for the Greek Orthodox Church joins Mar Ignatius Zaka I (Iwaz) for the Syriac Orthodox Church and Patriarch Gregorius III (Lahham) of Antioch and all the East, Jerusalem and Alexandria for the Catholic Melkite Church together with the Grand Mufti of the Syrian Arab Republic Ahmad Badr Eddin Hassoun and representatives of other religious sects in Syria made a

joint statement.

This statement rejects all violence perpetrated in Syria, any form of foreign intervention, and all the false images presented by the Western media. It calls for economic sanctions under whatever justification to be immediately abolished, and for all citizens to engage in the political reform process that has been initiated for the good of all Syria. What do the clergy mean by false images in Western media?

### **Mainstream Media Reporting**

Al Jazeera has long been a controversial news source in the Arab world, but in the very early days of Syria's conflict several key staffers resigned from Al Jazeera's Beirut Bureau citing "bias" in the channel's stance on the conflict in Syria (and on the unrest in Bahrain).

A year later the Beirut Bureau's Managing Director (Hassan Shaaban) quit after one of his correspondents (Ali Hashem) quit in protest over Al Jazeera's refusal to show photos he had taken of armed opposition fighters clashing with the Syrian Army in Wadi Khaled. Instead of running his images, Al Jazeera lambasted him as a shabeeha (i.e. a regime loyalist thug).

The Western Mainstream Media (MSM) coverage of events in Syria is of particular interest to those concerned with media monopolisation. Journalists from around the world, including Russian, Chinese, German, Italian, Korean, South American, French, and British have been reporting from Syria since the early days of unrest, yet Western MSM reporters do not appear to read or pay heed to their stories.

Six months into Syria's un-

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rest, discerning this form of blindness in the Western MSM and dismayed by the number of proven false reports and fabricated images disseminated, I thought it might be of interest to ABC's Media Watch to survey them. After only a few weeks, however, my list was several pages long and became unwieldy. Here are just a few examples of avoidable errors that were broadcast: March/April 2011 – Pro-government rallies in Syrian cities, towns and villages were reported as anti-regime/ pro-democracy protests.

June 2011 – A lesbian blogger in Damascus, hailed as a heroine of the prodemocracy movement by the Huffington Post, was discovered to be a man living outside of Syria with no connection to Syria.

May 2012 – To depict the massacre committed in Houleh, the BBC ran a 2003 photograph from Iraq, much to the irritation of the photographer, Opposition fighters in Aleppo posted an image of a dead baby in rubble after the earthquake in Azerbaijan and claimed it was in Aleppo.

As for the massacres in Syria, all have been attributed to the Government and responded to by the Western alliance with increased sanctions and the expulsion of Syrian diplomats. Yet each massacre appears to offer sufficient evidence, gathered very soon after these events, that indicate at best uncertainty about the perpetrators and at worst clarity that they were the work of 'jihadist' brigades.

The most famous is the Houleh massacre because it was reported so widely in Western MSM and resulted in the expulsion of Syrian diplomats in all the Western alliance countries. A spokesman for UN High Commission on Human Rights claimed that fewer than 20 of the 108 deaths in Houleh could be attributed to artillery and tank fire. The rest were executed at close range.

Some alternate news sources give the names of the slaugh-

tered families, all of whom were either in support of, or not actively opposed to the government and apparently from Shia background. Some were relatives of a member of the newly elected parliament. A report by a Dutch paper says that the slaughtered families' neighbours, who are known to oppose the government, were unharmed.

Robert Fisk reported on the more recent massacre in Darayya in Damascus countryside (The Independent 29 August 2012), that the Western alliance attributed to the Syrian government forces. Fisk finds that 'The men and women to whom we could talk told a story different from the version that has been repeated around the world: theirs was a tale of hostage-taking by the Free Syria Army and desperate prisoner-exchange negotiations between the armed opponents of the regime and the Syrian army, before President Bashar al-Assad's government forces stormed into the town to seize it back from rebel control.'

Syria's Addounia TV crew went into Darayya with the Syrian army, only moments ahead of Fisk it would seem, and the scene they discovered showed a streetscape in which the men, women and children who had been going about the town by vehicle and by foot were now lying dead in cowering positions. Some of the Syrian soldiers comforting orphaned children and prising dead mothers from their dead babies and children were quietly crying.

One soldier choked out some words as he turned away from the TV camera, 'What can I possibly say? Let the Syrian people see this and let them decide.'

Immediately after the massacre in Houleh in May 2012, the Secretary General of the 57-member Organisation for Islamic Co-operation (OIC) representing over 1.4 billion Muslims, with headquarters based in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, pleaded for

religious scholars and others to re-evaluate their positions. Yet at a two-day Summit in Makkah (14-15 August 2012) under the theme "Promotion of Islamic Solidarity", a decision was taken to rescind Syria's OIC membership, despite lack of unanimous support from member states.

Syria's al-Ikhbariya TV and Syria's General Establishment of Radio and Television have been bombed by the FSA. The same Addounia TV reporter and crew who reported on the Darayya massacre had previously been kidnapped by the FSA, detained for weeks, and their cameraman murdered.

Yet Arab foreign ministers in a recent Arab League meeting took the decision to block Syrian channels from satellites.

### **What now?**

Syrians of my acquaintance argue that there will be terrible consequences for the region and for the entire world should the Saudis, the Qataris, and the US led Western alliance fail to alter their current course. They insist a new approach is needed and that agreeing on this course requires a concerted international effort in mediation rather than war mongering.

My Syrian informants urge Australians' support for an urgent plea to our government to push for:

1. New negotiation between Syria and Saudi Arabia as part of a broader rapprochement between Syria and the Western powers.
2. Complete ceasefire in Syria by all parties.
3. National reconciliation in Syria that includes general amnesty for all fighters and political prisoners.
4. Internationally monitored free elections to take place in 2014 after new political parties have had time to be adequately prepared.

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# Defending the truth about Syria

By Joseph Wakim

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**M**y experience with Syria began in 1988, during the Lebanese war and the Syrian occupation. Australia had closed its embassy in Beirut, and people in Lebanon were forced to travel to the nearest Australian embassy in Damascus.

While travelling to the embassy in Damascus, my cousins quickly warned me never to comment on the Syrian government because mukhabarat (secret intelligence services) were everywhere. They would nudge me to silence in the back seat of a taxi because even the driver could be an informer.

In 2006, my family was on summer holidays in Lebanon, and were caught in the Israeli-Hezbollah cross-fire when roads and airports were bombed. We escaped to Syria as my children were afraid of being bombed by ship en route to Cyprus.

At Damascus airport, a security guard asked me to open my wallet and he helped himself to my money. As someone with the same name as me was on their wanted list, I was then interrogated behind closed doors by the security staff for 30 minutes while my children were petrified and our plane was waiting. When the staff realised that I was not the person they were looking for, there was no apology or explanation. Instead, it was a rude rooh walah.

With all my experiences inside Syria being unpleasant, I have no reason to be an apologist for the Assads.

But I resist allowing my personal experiences to overshadow my quest for the bigger truth, even if it is uncomfortable and inconvenient. I am

less interested in defending Syria, but more interested in defending the truth.

This authoritarian regime has been compared with the Ministry of Truth in George Orwell's nightmare Nineteen Eight Four where Big Brother is represented by the Syrian mukhabarat. The Syrian regime has a profound distrust of western media, and no real expertise in public relations to justify itself to outsiders. Indeed, it is a self sufficient economy which believes that it does not need to justify itself to outsiders. As Syria is governed by the socialist Baath party, it is similar to Russia and China in its tradition of rare pub-

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lic statements.

Mother Agnes Mariam, who has been at St James Catholic monastery in Homs for 18 years, suggested that media access was denied in Syria because in Libya, journalists secretly hid electronic devices for NATO military intelligence.

The Syrian government's restrictions on professional western media inside Syria backfired. It has created a vacuum that has been filled by anonymous amateur voices and self appointed monitors. Their traffic of tweets and mobile phone images have provided feeds to a very hungry media, who has swallowed them without checks and balances. Tweets can claim to be eye witnesses on the ground in Syria reporting facts, yet be in a foreign country creating fiction and indeed friction.

## ALARM BELLS

Even our Australian media resort to copy cat behaviour and take their editorial cues from American foreign policy, which defines who is villain, and who is victim. On 16 May 2011, Media Watch on ABC TV exposed a falsified report of 'Syrian troops beating detained protestors' that was later proven to be in Lebanon three years earlier.

Australian media swam with the strong current and Australians bought the simplistic story that was sold: every time there is a massacre in Syria, believe the unnamed sources who blame the government.

Ironically, any journalist who had bothered to read the Syrian National Council's charter of demands, which are readily available online, and in English, would discover that they closely matched the reform agenda already being implemented by the Syrian president.

For example, the SNC demands include abolishing emergency laws, licensing new political parties, licensing of new media outlets, specific terms governing the election of the president, and a peaceful transition to free, democratic rule.

When the Syrian president opened the door to unarmed dialogue, the SNC could have safely put their cards on the table in the presence of the UN peace monitors. Instead, they squandered that opportunity and their response was name calling: 'we will never sit and talk [with] butcher Bashar... the murderous regime...the illegitimate occupying militia'. With such violent rhetoric, it is no

*Continued on Page 10*

wonder that they have struggled to gain legitimacy among the disparate opposition voices.

Rather than a diplomatic solution, the SNC sought every opportunity to trigger a Libya-style military solution, NATO intervention and a no-fly zone by incriminating the government.

Had neighbouring Israel been under attack from foreign funded forces, not only would it call them terrorists, but the US would insist that Israel had a moral duty to protect its sovereign borders and territorial integrity from invasion.

US spokespersons have condemned the permanent UNSC members Russia and China for (ab)using their power of veto three times to block military solutions against Syria. But this smacks of hypocrisy and forgets the log in America's own eye. Have we forgotten that the US lobbied vigorously against Palestinian statehood when it vetoed the UNSC vote, thus perpetuating Palestinian subordination and suffering?

This disconnect between the truth and the propaganda begs questions for anyone brave enough to swim against the current. The question 'What is truth?' becomes both practical and moral, in the face of horrific images that compel outrage and action.

The US secretary of state Hilary Clinton pounces on cue to mobilise moral outrage, and she contrasts the US from Russia and China: 'The international community cannot sit idly by, and we won't'.

We dismiss the Russian, Chinese, Iranian and Syrian news agency versions as unreliable pro-Syrian propaganda. It becomes tempting to throw our hands in the air in despair, and declare – if the UN monitors have given up, and the armed opposition groups are gaining ground, and regime change is inevitable, please get us out of our misery, cut our human losses, and get the regime change over with.

But do we also cut out truth?

The Arab Spring may have given rise to jasmines in Tunisia, but parasitic weeds may take root, and seeds may fall from foreign gardens. When the Arab Spring becomes a dense canopy, many shady truths hide among its bushy foliage. If we prune the foliage of the Arab Spring, we may expose those lurking parasites.

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#### **PUBLISHED PIECES**

My first foray into Syrian situation in the Australian media was in August 2011, when the opinion editor of The Age phoned me soliciting a piece to explain the Syrian crisis.

As a regular columnist on Middle East issues, I gave my informed opinion: I cautioned that Syria is not Libya as the president enjoys massive popularity by his citizens. I highlighted the pivotal role of Syria in the region and that foreign intervention is dangerous because of the domino effect. I argued that there was a third way, other than status quo, and a bloody revolution, which is evolution by pressing for accountability and timetables for the implementation of Assad's reform package.

I argued that the peaceful protestors seeking a democracy would be hijacked by Saudi Salafists seeking their radical version of a Sunni theocracy. I argued that there was a serious disconnect between eye witnesses in Syria and the media narrative of dictator crushing dissent among his own people. The editor responded

that my piece was too sanguine about Assad in the light of the international condemnation. He had to swim with the school of fish, with the current.

After many edits and re-writes, my diluted piece was finally published in The Age on 18 August. It was titled 'Sweet victory, without the war' because I posed the rhetorical Arabic question to the armed opposition – 'Do you want to eat the grapes or kill the vineyard's guard?' Are you blood thirsty for the president's scalp or do you really want to taste the fruits of new policies in a new Syria?

From there, I was invited many times to comment on the Syrian situation on ABC TV's The Drum and ABC TV's News 24, always expressing caution about the disparate opposition voices. By 2 April 2012, AIJAC referred to me as 'noted Assad apologist'.

This simplistic logic was reminiscent of the George W Bush dictum when he declared the war on terror on 20 September 2001: 'Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists'. This polarising ultimatum forces us to either become allies or be deemed the enemy.

A similar ultimatum now applies to Syria – if you criticize Assad's enemies, then you must be Assad's ally supporting a terrorist regime in the axis of evil. The intention of the 'Assad Apologist' label is to silence debate and stifle questioning.

The more I pruned the dense foliage of the Arab Spring, the more I discovered an intricate array of pipelines feeding Syria through its neighbouring countries. Pipelines of American money funneled through to the SNC. Saudi weapons smuggled through to the Free Syrian Army. Mercenaries from Libya, Turkey, Jordan, Yemen, Tunis, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Iraq and Algeria funneled through to the Salafists. This was confirmed when Robert Fisk interviewed the rebels in Syrian prisons, as published in The Independent on 2 September.

It was no surprise that UN-

Arab League Joint Special Envoy Kofi Annan resigned from the post in August. He must have been tempted to overturn the negotiation table and expose the pipelines. Above the table, the key stakeholder nations talk about a political solution, but under the table they sabotage his 'peace plan' with this lucrative supply chain of arms.

It is ironic that Annan's replacement, Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi, represents the Arab League, who have suspended Syria, but expect Syria to welcome him.

The oil rich state of Saudi Arabia is fueling a sectarian confrontation, wishing to promote another Sunni state and emasculate the secular Syria that was allied with Shiite Iran. Fellow Sunni state Qatar flexed its muscle for the same pro-Sunni bias through its global Al Jazeera news network. These countries committed over \$100 million of weapons and cash after the SNC 'repeatedly called for the arming of the Free Syrian Army.'

Only when we ask the right questions will we find the truth and the heart of the matter:

If the oil rich sheikdoms are prepared to support a jihadist war because they genuinely care about Arab people, why did they choose the suffering Syrians over the suffering Palestinians? Why did they target a fellow Arab country rather than a country which many refuse to name on their map?

If they genuinely care about Arab dignity and freedom, why did most of these Arab states remain silent when Gaza was reduced to a human abattoir in December 2008 when 1300 Gazans were killed during Operation Cast Lead?

When the Syrian government announced an eight day amnesty to hand in weapons last November to mark Eid al Adha, why did the US government advise the rebels to never lay down their weapons, when it could have seized this opportunity for dialogue?

In the month after the April

10 ceasefire, why did attacks by the armed opposition increase, yet attacks by the Syrian army decrease?

Why has the US failed to condemn or distance itself from its arch enemy Al Qaeda who is now an American ally? Is it as amoral as 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'?

Why are ostensibly Christian countries like US, France and Britain siding with the jihadists and ignoring the public pleas from their endangered fellow Christians and church leaders within Syria?

All these double standards do not add up to genuine concern over Syrian citizens. But they do raise questions about a grand plan or promise to the rebels that if they do the ground work, demonise Assad, and decline every opportunity to talk, the rewards in the new regime would be great.

### **REAL TEST OF TRUTH**

There is one pivotal question that must be asked of all those screaming for Assad to simply hand over power:

If there was a UN monitored election in Syria, and the eligible citizens re-elected their president, would the rebels and their sponsors pack up and go home?

Imagine if the UN Supervision Mission in Syria returned to monitor a national referendum on the Syrian presidency that would be free from fear or favour.

If Assad fails to gain the majority of votes from the citizens, he should honour the will of the citizens and step down, facing the consequences under national and international laws — whether it be amnesty, exile or trial.

If he gains the majority of votes, the SNC must honour the will of the Syrian people. The Free Syrian Army would need to disarm and disband. The remaining Salafists, terrorists, suicide bombers and mercenaries would need to 'return to sender'. Most importantly, their

international sponsors would have to immediately cut supply to the rebel militias.

No one could seriously argue with this fair proposal, could they?

Yes we can, said the USA, and it would go along these lines: We cannot accept the outcome of the UN monitored presidential election because those in exile or refugee camps in neighbouring countries could not vote. The Syrian people have lived in fear under a dictatorship for over 40 years, when voting against the president was suicidal. Therefore, we have no choice but to impose more economic sanctions against Syria'.

While the US rhetoric is ostensibly interested in democracy and peace, their unspoken agenda has nothing to do with Syria and everything to do with two other countries which were prominent in the news before the Syrian uprising but have since disappeared off the radar: Iran and Israel

As former US Assistant Secretary of State, James Rubin stated: the US-led alliance against Syria is about targeting Iran to protect Israel. Damascus is merely the bridge to bomb between Tehran and Tel Aviv. Toppling Assad would mean that Iran would no longer have a Mediterranean foothold from which to threaten Israel'.

This was confirmed when Israel's Defence Minister Ehud Barak declared that Syria is 'the only kind of outpost of the Iranian influence in the Arab world ... and it will weaken dramatically both Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza'.

Yet this international proxy war against Syria has been sold to us as a civil war among Syrian citizens. It is like a game of chess where the king needs to be cornered and converted into a pawn. We saw this in the 1980's when 'our man' Osama Bin Laden helped the Mujahadine in Afghanistan fend off the Russian invasion. He was crowned king by the US in that context.

### **HIJACKED VOICES**

As we continue to prune the foliage, we discover hijackers lurking in the dark.

Syria was very thirsty for an

Arab Spring as it suffered a drought without rainfall since 2006, likely to be caused by climate change. According to UN figures, herders lost 80 percent of their livestock, about 3 million Syrians ended up in poverty, and small scale farmers could not cultivate food to feed their families. Syria was so dry, it was highly flammable - physically and politically.

On March 21, 2011, an ember from the Arab Spring in North Africa drifted into Dar'a in Syria. Teenagers inadvertently ignited the Syrian revolution with graffiti: 'the people want the regime to fall'.

The unarmed teenage message was usurped by the Syrian National Council (SNC), who made the teenagers look like kittens.

Today, even the voices of the SNC have been hijacked by the Salafist Sheikhs proclaiming Fatwas and jihads against all the pro-Assad infidels through satellite TV channels. The jihadists do not take man-made orders from the SNC in Istanbul. They take divine orders from sheikhs in Saudi Arabia.

Their rants are viral on YouTube and they make the fractured SNC sound like pussy cats in a lion's den.

Sheikh Adnan Arour declared that 'for those [Alawites] who violated all that is sacred, by Allah the Great, we shall mince them in meat grinders and feed their flesh to the dogs'.

Similarly Sheikh Muhammad al Zughbey proclaimed that 'your jihad against this infidel criminal and his people is a religious duty.... [Alawites are] more infidel than the Jews and Christians'.

As the verbal ember evolved into a militant bushfire and then a religious inferno, the secular teenage slogan was replaced with a sectarian one 'Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the grave'.

Faced with these threats, most Christians in Syria prefer the stability of the Assad government to the (inhuman) price tag that may come with democracy, because they know the truth.

These jihadist calls echo in Australia as their followers have sought to terrorise Australian Alawis with petrol bombs, vilifying graffiti and death threats. It is now the Alawis in Australia who are anxious about mukhabarat from the opposition monitoring their movements and threatening their relatives in Syria.

Ironically, the more the Salafists terrorise Syria, the more the Syrians cling to Bashar al Assad as their saviour, preferring a secular sanctuary over a jihadist theocracy. This feeds directly into the Salafist claim that these heretical Alawites worship Assad above Allah.

Assad is no sacrificial lamb or messiah being crucified by false witnesses. When he enjoyed standing ovations in his parliament, he squandered his historic opportunity to snuff out the embers before they became infernos. But there is a more moral way to right his wrongs besides bribing defectors with gold coins, playing with the truth, and living by the sword.

The Melkite Catholic Patriarch, Gregorios III Laham, recently called on Syrians to pursue the path of MUSAALAH which is reconciliation, as the only way to salvation in Syria. He evokes the beatitudes 'Blessed are the peace makers'. He reminds us that 'violence increases violence, while dialogue adds fruit to the dialogue'.

In Australia, our media was dragged screaming away from the neat narrative of the Arab Spring, and forced to open its eyes and ears to the faces and voices of those who seek a non-violent third way. Where the door is open to the real friends of Syria - those who lay down their weapons, and treat Syrians as people, not as pawns on a chess set.

The truth, like Saudi oil, will rise to the surface.

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Joe Wakim at the Pax Christi Syria Forum  
September 2012

**I/We wish to apply for or renew membership of the International Christian Peace Movement - Pax Christi Australia. Membership is from January to December)**

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