

SYRIA

Syrian government threatened by violence and protests

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southern Syrian city of Dara'a opened fire on youths who had scrawled anti-government graffiti, reports The New York Times. In response to government arrests, protesters in several cities burned the offices of the Ba'ath Party and tore down posters of President al-Assad.

In attempts to console demonstrators, al-Assad announced the resignation of the Syrian cabinet on March 29. On March 30, he addressed Syrians in a speech in which he offered significant — if largely symbolic — concessions, which included the lifting of emergency laws that ban free speech and assembly, according to The New York Times.

"The emergency law is a cornerstone of Ba'athist rule and, once it goes, everything else might go with it," said researcher for the Institute of Strategic and International Relations Karim Bitar to The New York Times. IRIS is a foreign policy think-tank based in Paris.

"Things could collapse for them if they're serious about lifting it — liberation of political prisoners, multiple parties, no more harassing activists. People are going to use this to air more and more grievances," said Bitar.

More recently, renewed violence erupted in Dara'a on Friday, April 8 when security forces fired live rounds of ammunition to disperse stone-throwing protestors, reports Al Jazeera.

"What happened is that, after Friday prayers, the marchers started to chant, 'Freedom! Freedom!'" said London-based political activist Ausama Monajed to the Guardian. "When the protesters tried to collect the dead and wounded, the security forces opened fire again."

According to The New York Times, while 21 protesters have been confirmed dead, the numbers are expected to rise. Ammar Abdulhamid — a Syrian dissident living in Maryland — reports that the death toll may be as high as 100, while the number of wounded is expected to reach 500.

"The situation there is disastrous," said a Damascus-based activist — who chose to remain anonymous — to the Washington Post in reference to the violence in Dara'a, where the Post reports that demonstrators had converted the city's al-Omari mosque into a hospital.

According to Al Jazeera, President al-Assad has attempted to respond to the violence with a number of reforms, including granting full citizenship to Syria's Kurds, who constitute 10 percent of Syria's population.

However, nationwide dissatisfaction with the Government's limits of free speech and other human rights violations have continued to foment.

"This President himself is the hostage of the security complex," said Haytham Manna, a Syrian Human Rights activist living in France of the political situation, in an email interview.

"The executive is in the hand of security apparatus and presidential team. If reforms can be decided, it will be by Bashar al-Assad himself," said Manna.

"No Kurd, no Arab, the Syrian people are one. We salute the martyrs of Dara'a," chanted Kurdish protesters in the northeastern city of Al Qamishli, reports Al Jazeera.

Despite crackdowns by the Syrian government, observers remain optimistic of events-to-come in a nation which rarely

sees organized opposition to the ruling regime.

"We saw thousands of protestors taking to the streets, from all walks of life — young and old, professionals and not professionals, educated, not educated," said Field Correspondent for Al Jazeera Rula Amin. "It's a new situation in Syria."

"The future of our beloved country cannot be built on grudges and hatred, it can only be built with love and forgiveness" said Ribal al-Assad, a cousin of Bashar living in exile in England, in an email interview.

"Let's hope that all parties would listen and start thinking about how we could all work together, as one, to move towards our common goal — and, it is only by being united that the regime would feel the pressure and start conceding to the people's demands," said Ribal.



Pro-Assad Syrian protesters fill the street in front of the Syrian embassy in Beirut, Lebanon as they carry pictures of Syrian President Bashar Assad during a sit-in on Sunday, March 27, 2011.

American pastor burns Quran, Afghan groups protest

By Terah Kelleher
STAFF WRITER

The Quran mentions Jesus more than any other prophet, even Muhammad. Jesus is given such titles as "The Word of God." Both prophets' names were engulfed in flames on March 20 by Terry Jones, a Florida pastor.

In a statement released by the White House, President Barack Obama said "the desecration of any holy text, including the (Quran), is an act of extreme intolerance and bigotry."

According to a September 2010 Wall Street Journal article, top U.S. and NATO commander, Gen. David Petraeus denounced the plans of Jones burning the Quran. He and other military officials feared that this act would spark anger that could endanger troops and create anger toward the U.S. Jones originally canceled the Quran burning but broke his word on March 20.

"It's like people forgot about us," said Jones to The Washington Post. "But we kept doing what we do."

On April 1, violent protests began in

Afghanistan in response to Jones' actions. According to The Washington Post, nearly 20 people were killed and about 150 were wounded by the third day of protests in northern and southern Afghanistan. Obama called the murders during the protests "outrageous, and an affront to human decency and dignity."

"There's no excuse for violence, period," said Robert Duncan, visiting assistant professor of political science. "Both sides show a lack of intellect, sophistication and education. It's in the combat of ideas that truth emerges. And when people are not willing to engage in that discussion, truth is suppressed and hidden."

According to The New York Times, international and Afghan news media originally downplayed or ignored Jones' actions — but, on March 31, President

Hamid Karzai gave a speech that demanded Jones' arrest and condemned his actions.

Some observers question Karzai's intentions in giving this speech, according to The Christian Science Monitor.

"Karzai seems to veer between being dependent on the international presence

and a real sense of resentment and powerlessness," said Stephen Carter — an independent policy analyst in Kabul — to the Christian Science Monitor. "He tends to come out with public statements that make clear the degree of resentment that he feels. He could have refrained from

making a statement and acted in a way that would have made this particular outcome less likely."

Parveen Hasanali, assistant professor of religious studies, said that the American identity is being formed on the backdrop of such things as the war.

"The long drawn out aspects of war cause these political reactions," said Hasanali. "The protests that have happened most recently are, most likely, coming from people's discontent with the political situation and their right to protest. But then it goes out of control when deaths happen."

Muslim Senior JoAnn Skinner said the burning of the Quran helped to contribute to violence that has little to do with the spirit of Christianity or Islam.

"I understand the outrage they feel, but aggression and violence are not the way to go about it," said Skinner in an email interview. "A well known Hadith (saying or deed of Muhammad) illustrates the Islamic position on the issue of anger: 'The strong is not the one who overcomes the people by his strength. But the strong is the one who controls himself while in anger.'"

Max Carter, campus ministry coordinator, said that this is a great time for people to analyze their own behaviors. He quoted a Biblical verse on this subject: "We need to take the log out of our own eyes before we condemn the specks in other peoples."

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