

The Massacres at Houla and al-Qubeir: The Work of Terrorists?

Written by Radwan Ziadeh

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RADWAN ZIADEH, JUN 19 2012

The Syrian foreign ministry is right: terrorist groups are behind the massacres that took the lives of women and children in Houla and al-Qubeir. But these terrorists were not members of Al Qaeda, nor did they belong to any other similar stateless group. In fact, the monsters who perpetrated the unspeakable murders of innocent civilians were government terrorists, sponsored and commanded by the Assad regime.

These regime terrorists comprise a mix of Syrian military and government-hired militias called *Shabiha*. Ask any of the residents of the villages of Houla and al Qubeir who slaughtered their neighbors, and they will tell you with certainty that those responsible were regime forces.

Syrians are unfortunately familiar with the *Shabiha*, militias hired by the Assad regime to do its dirty work- to massacre mercilessly aiming to devastate and quell the populace. They have served as the president's personal thugs- willing to carry out virtually any task with impunity and without respect to any official role. These government gangs have long been a staple in the regime toolkit.

On May 25, these death squads entered the villages of Houla. According to the United Nations, a total of 108 were killed, including 49 children and 34 women. A recent report by Amnesty International confirms that "most were summarily executed in cold blood by men in military clothing, believed by the residents to be state-armed militias." In addition to the massacre, government forces looted and systematically burned homes to the ground.

The Government's targeting of Houla was intentional. The town was an opposition stronghold, making it a likely political target for the regime. Some report that the Free Syrian Army had taken control of Houla. This mixture of Syrian soldiers and *Shabiha* thugs is ready to carry out the brutal oppression and violence that reinforces the regime's political bidding.

On the day of the massacre, the Syrian Army fired upon a crowd of protesters in Houla. Opposition fighters retaliated by attacking a government checkpoint in one of Houla's villages, destroying an armed personnel carrier. In response, the Syrian regime forces responded by shelling the villages of Houla using tanks and mortars.

On the evening of May 25, residents of Houla say that a group of government fighters- some in uniform and others in civilian clothes- entered the town, moving from house to house, looting homes and slaughtering families. Indeed, this massacre is evidence of political purging: Human Rights Watch reports that pro-government militias killed 62 members of a single family- the Abdel Razzaks. The notion that those responsible for these murders are regime-sponsored is supported by their use of intelligence: an eleven-year-old boy who survived the massacre by smearing blood on his face to make the militia men think he was dead said that the fighters who arrived in armored vehicles killed six members of his family. When they entered his house, they asked specifically for his father, brother, and uncle by name. The *Shabiha* and soldiers were looking for specific individuals, most likely known for their opposition activities. Thus, the massacre had a decidedly political purpose and was intended to purge Houla of those challenging the regime.

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On June 6 a similar massacre occurred in the village of al Qubeir outside of Hama. At least 78 were killed, including many women and children. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon stated that some of the victims were burned and others had their throats slashed with knives. UN observers were prevented from entering al Qubeir until two days after the massacre. The leader of the UN observer mission in Syria said that government forces were responsible for preventing the monitors' entrance to al Qubeir. Upon their arrival to the village, the UN observers did not find any bodies, further evidence that the regime was trying to avoid the international community's knowledge of the true atrocities like what occurred in Houla. A BBC reporter traveling with the UN observer mission said that al Qubeir smelled of burnt bodies and buildings were splattered with blood.

The massacres at Houla and al Qubeir bear striking similarities and are almost identical in process. The pattern goes as follows: regime tanks and soldiers shell the village. Then, *Shabiha* follow, looting homes, murdering families, and burning entire neighborhoods.

In both the cases of Houla and al Qubeir, the villages targeted were largely Sunni and were known as opposition strongholds. Locals reported that the government forces that perpetrated the massacres came from surrounding Alawite or Shia villages. If this is true, the pattern corroborates the notion that the regime is sponsoring and fueling sectarian violence by asking Alawites and Shias to do its dirty work targeting anti-regime forces, mostly of Sunni background.

A recent report by Amnesty International states that "the patterns of abuses documented [...] in these areas are not isolated," and therefore constitute crimes against humanity. The Assad's regime's claim that Al Qaeda is responsible for these massacres is outlandish. At the same time, terrorists were, in fact, responsible for the atrocities, in the form of *Shabiha* militants, at the official command of the Syrian regime.

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