

Protests in Daraa, Syria Undermine Assad's Narrative of Victory

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Brief Analysis

Recent protests in Daraa demonstrate that Assad's hold over regime-controlled areas are not as total as they appear.

Ten years ago, in the southern city of Daraa, Syria, locals rose up in defiance of the Assad regime. The spark came after the regime's torture and killing of local children, who had spray painted "It's Your Turn, Doctor" in reference to Bashar al-Assad. Since then, Syrians across the country have endured a decade of arrests, torture, starvation, barrel bombs, and chemical weapons attacks. Yet on March 18, the people of Daraa took to the streets peacefully once again to mark the ten year anniversary of the uprising and to call, even after everything, for freedom.

The protests in Daraa are a particularly strong rebuke to the Assad regime's claims that it has "reconciled" with the region. The fact that protests took place in 2021 in Daraa show that Assad's grip on power is more porous than many claim.

The 2011 Protests in Daraa

For many in Daraa, time is not linear: 2011 can feel simultaneously like a lifetime ago and just yesterday. After returning the children's bodies to their families in 2011, Atif Najib—the head of the Daraa Political Security

Directorate and cousin of Bashar al-Assad—told the children’s fathers, “Forget you have children. And if you want new children in their place, then send your wives over and we’ll impregnate them for you.” The local tribesmen took this as a major insult on top of their loss, where honor remains an important value.

These actions sparked the initial protests on Friday March 18, 2011, which began after Friday Q prayers at the Hamzah and Abbas mosques. The signal to begin the protests were cries of “freedom, freedom, freedom” and “peaceful, peaceful, peaceful.” The demonstrators, by this point several hundred individuals, then marched to the famous ‘Umari Mosque, and began to chant “No more fear after today!”

Ultimately, thousands of people came out to chant against the regime, marching toward the provincial government headquarters area called al-Mahatah and then down the hill toward an area called al-Karak. There, the demonstrators were met by plainclothes *mukhabarat* (intelligence services) led by Najib, who shot tear gas canisters and then later actual gunshots killing protesters. These attacks led to a cycle: funerals for those killed sparked new protests, which led to further killings by the regime.

In response to the continued outpouring of support for the protest movement in Daraa, the Assad regime raided the ‘Umari Mosque within the week, which had become a focal point of the protest movement and a local medical station for those injured due to feared retaliation from the regime at local hospitals. According to local activists at the time, as a way to cover up this first massacre at the ‘Umari mosque, the regime’s mukhabarat and shabiha hid in state ambulances as if they were coming to help—but on arrival killed everyone inside the mosque. Even so, the larger the protests became, the more people in other villages and cities in Syria came out inspired by the courage of those in Daraa.

New Protests in Daraa

Ten years later, in spite of the fact that Bashar al-Assad claims that he controls Daraa and other parts of the south, locals in Daraa once again showed (<https://twitter.com/OulaAlrifai/status/1372584643371884552>) the world on March 18 that their initial demands for freedom remain the same in the face of a decade’s worth of industrial-scale killing. In the shadow of a decimated ‘Umari mosque and other local infrastructure in rubble after years of regime air campaigns, hundreds of people came out to dance, sing, and wave the Syrian Independence flag. A banner hung on the ravaged building surrounding the protesters that read, “The revolution is a right...and the truth never dies.”

Even though these people have gone through so much pain and trauma over the past ten years, they’re still dancing the famous debke (<https://twitter.com/OulaAlrifai/status/1372586073180811264>) on the same streets where they had been attacked and hoping for a better future. Men, women, children, and the elderly are holding each other arm and arm and swaying back and forth singing “Houran [the region where Daraa is located] is our paradise because of my friends and my brothers.” They show that even after all of the destruction in the region, it is their home.

At other points, those demonstrating brought back chants they had done during the original protests in 2011, such as “death over humiliation, we sacrifice our souls for our nation” and “Syria is for us, not for the Baath Party.” There was also a positive message of hope for the future in the face of everything that has occurred in the last decade: “From Daraa, glad tidings are coming for you the Syrian revolutionaries.”

Beyond the obvious resilience of the original essence of the uprising still remaining with many of those who have suffered tremendously over the past ten years, there are key aspects that tell a bigger story of March 18, 2021.

Most notably is the fact that these protests were even allowed to take place. For anyone that follows the Assad regime closely, it is extremely choreographed in the way it runs society, what it allows and does not allow.

The fact that these anniversary demonstrations occurred highlights that the regime’s control over Daraa and likely

other parts of the broader governorate are not as tight as Bashar al-Assad and Russia claim.

This also demonstrates, in light of other acute problems related to the economy, Covid-19, and continued lack of legitimacy of Bashar al-Assad, the events of March 18, 2021 further undermine the claim that Assad has “won” the conflict and is entitled to legitimate rule of the country. It also demonstrates that Assad, in his white-knuckle approach to keeping power, has not done anything to rectify the original demands of protestors.

The inability to break the spirit of Syrians yearning for freedom from tyranny, after all of Assad’s uncountable human rights abuses, brings into sharp focus the ultimately unsustainable nature of his regime in the end. ❖

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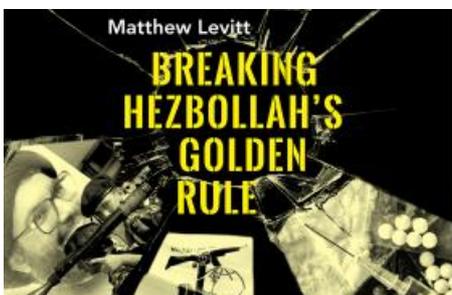
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