

People are scared. An understatement, no doubt, but my friends — both foreign and Syrian — are worried about the developments. Almost all of my foreign friends are leaving and many have moved departing flights up in light of the recent events. Most Syrians don't have this option and are weighing their options should sustained protests move to inner Damascus. Everyone is thinking along their sect even if they aren't open about it. Much of the violence is attributed by Syrians to these mysterious "armed gangs." Many are still placing hope in "Habibna" (literally "Our Love," a nickname for the president) to bring about enough reforms to placate the demonstrators. A point that I was forced to make over and over is that a lot of the people protesting are doing so because someone they knew was killed and not because they were anti-government, although they are now. Privately, my Syrian friends admitted that Bashar [al Assad, the Syrian president] needs to make some major, major concessions quickly or risk continued protests and bloodshed of which would be attributed to him and not merely "the regime."

By now we are all familiar with the cycle of protests reaching their high point on Fridays, after prayers. This Friday, however, was different for Syrians. Having seen the infamous emergency law lifted, albeit with serious caveats, Syrians were hoping for a relaxing of the security responses to the demonstrations. What they got was half as many demonstrators killed in one day as in all the days of demonstrations preceding it combined. It was almost as if things had been safer when the emergency law had been in effect. (On a side note, my friend guessed that maybe two out of every 100 Syrians could actually tell you what the emergency law was.) What was most striking about the demonstrations was that there were two in Damascus itself (Midan on Friday, April 22, and Berze on Saturday, April 23). While not in the city center these are by no means the far suburbs and countryside of Daraa or Douma. There were also protests in Muadamiyeh, which is right outside town next to the main bus station. I've heard that tanks along this road were seen April 24 pointing their guns not in the direction of the road but toward the city. The regime and everyone is terrified about protests in the city itself.

You could see the depression in the air on Saturday. Everyone knew that those killed from the day before would be having large funerals today and that those gatherings would likely be attacked as well. My Christian friends were especially worried due to rumors that churches were going to be bombed on Easter. As my friend put it, "I know they're just rumors but I'm afraid they [the security apparatus] might actually do it."

What is becoming increasingly apparent is that Bashar is not the reformer he claimed to be. His words are not being met by real, concrete action. Even though he might have wanted to reform and may have been hampered by others in the regime (cousin Rami Makhoul, brother Maher), these efforts are steadily losing traction. The regime seems to be playing by "Hama rules" in its response to the demonstrations and it's unlikely that this is happening without Bashar's full consent at this point. The most positive assessment of him I heard was that he still wanted true reforms (although nothing game-changing) but that he was growing impatient with the demonstrators. One person conjectured that Bashar's mistake was promising reforms when he first came to power. "If he hadn't promised 'reforms' and not delivered on them people wouldn't be so mad. He shouldn't have said anything and given everyone false hope or actually followed

through on them."

Support for the protests is mixed. Many of those out in the streets are there because someone close to them was killed. Think tribal mentality: I wasn't mad at you before but you killed my cousin/brother/friend and now I am mad. People are gathering to defend their honor. There is almost no organization inside Syria among the protesters. I asked several people and they agreed that the Muslim Brotherhood was almost non-present in the country. All that is coordinated is information being leaked out about the responses by the security forces against the protesters. As I told my friend, the problem is that unlike in Cairo's Tahrir Square, all the demonstrators are dispersed across the country and do not have enough time to talk to each other to decide what they wanted. There is also a fairly widely held belief that much of the killings are taking place as a result of these armed gangs firing on security forces and innocents being caught in the crossfire. Some are quick to blame "foreign conspirators" although several of my friends admitted that whatever meddling by Abdul Halim Khaddam (the former Syrian vice president) and Rifaat al Assad (the president's uncle living in exile in the United Kingdom) was minimal. Both of these guys have very, very little support on the ground and while the Muslim Brotherhood might have some latent support among Sunnis, they would not be welcome by any of the minorities in Syria.

At this point the regime is going to have to go Hama-style if it wants to completely shut down the protests, otherwise it will have to make some major concessions like multiparty elections and presidential term limits, which the regime won't accept. From what I've heard is going on today it looks like the regime is opting to play it Hama-style.

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