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How Did Anti-Assad Protests Turn to War in Syria?

By Robert Fisk
September 1, 2017

When Nikolaos van Dam was a young diplomat in Damascus, he knew Syria better than many Syrians. A fluent speaker of Arabic, this Dutch scholar's first book on Syria's modern history was so well researched that even members of the Baath party would reportedly turn to its pages to understand the history of their institution and the nature of the regime for which they worked.

Precise, polite, his analysis as cool and lethal as a sword, Van Dam also possesses a cynical – perhaps sarcastic – attitude towards the diplomatic elite that other officials might secretly admire. “It is better to do nothing than to do the wrong thing with terrible results,” he told me a few days ago. “But Western democracies feel they have to *do something* ... If there had not been any Western influence, there would have been a tenth of the violence, the country would not be in rubble, so many would not have died, you would not have had so many refugees.”

It's not that Van Dam blames the Syrian West for the war, but he holds it to account for the influence and interference it exercised so promiscuously. And his new book, *Destroying a Nation: The Civil War in Syria*, is perhaps the only one so far published about the conflict that attempts to set out coldly what the opposition as well as the Assad government did wrong.

Van Dam has never avoided talking about the torture and suppression that the regime has used to maintain power. He stated in the very early weeks of the 2011 demonstrations – in *The Independent* – that Syria's crisis might well end in a bloodbath. He acknowledges the cruelty and stupidity with which the Syrian security apparatus turned to guns and humiliation and torture to

suppress a largely peaceful mass protest movement inspired (or seduced) by the Arab revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. But he also notes how early the “peaceful” opposition turned to violence once the crisis began.

On the Syrian border with north-eastern Lebanon, inside Lebanese territory but in sight of the plain of Homs in the spring of 2011, I listened to a fierce gun battle being fought only a few hundred metres across the frontier – at a time when only the Syrian army and the security police were supposed to be using weapons against unarmed demonstrators. A week later, an Al Jazeera camera crew – working for the Qatar-funded channel whose ruling family would soon fund the Nusra-al Qaeda fighters in Syria, as even its royal family acknowledged – asked to meet me in Beirut. They showed me footage also taken near the north-eastern border of Lebanon. Their tape clearly showed armed men shooting at Syrian troops. Al Jazeera, adhering to the “soldiers-shoot-down-unarmed-demonstrators” story, had refused to air their film. They had resigned. Later, Syrian state television itself showed – all too real – film of armed men among the crowds of protestors in Dera’a. Van Dam dismisses reports that these men were government “provocateurs”.

He does not dispute the Assad government’s killing of the innocent – though he suggests this came about through the inherent and untamed brutality of the regime’s security apparatus rather than a policy decision by Bashar al-Assad himself. Faisal Mekdad, the deputy foreign minister whom Assad sent to Dera’a (the minister’s home town), after the torture of children and killing of demonstrators, admitted to me that “bad mistakes” had been made there. But such “discoveries” were useless. Within months, the public’s demand for “reforms” had turned into an uprising determined to overthrow a regime that then resorted to all out-war against its enemies. Early reports of a massacre of Syrian troops by armed men at Jisr al-Chagour, dismissed by government opponents as the killing of army deserters by the regime, were, Van Dam concludes, true. The soldiers were murdered by those whom we would soon call “rebels”.

Exactly when – and, more important, why – peaceful protest turned to armed uprising and then, inevitably, to an Islamist insurgency against the supposedly “secular” rule of the regime is one of the most important historical questions about Syria’s war. And it remains largely unanswered. There are clues enough. Van Dam is scalpel-sharp in his condemnation of Western policies, which breathed fire into the bosom of the opposition – the American and French diplomats who travelled to Homs to join the demonstrators immediately lost their neutrality, he says – and then left them to the mercy of their enemies. Van Dam praises the work of my colleague Patrick Cockburn, who has often pointed out how those two ambassadors told the protestors not to negotiate with the Assad regime on the basis that it would soon collapse.

But the West closed its embassies, abandoning its new opposition friends. “Had they remained in Damascus, the ambassadors might have been a kind of last contact through whom attempts might have been made to influence the regime,” Van Dam says.

Instead of serious political advice, the West, especially the US and their proxy Arab allies in the Gulf, then poured weapons into Syria – enough arms to destroy Syria but not enough to overthrow the regime, as one ex-rebel told me – and tried to direct the armed groups from Turkey and Jordan. And all the while, they and the UN encouraged talks between the regime and

the opposition which had no chance of success – because the rebel groups would only settle for the overthrow of the Assad government and because the Assad regime would never negotiate for its own overthrow.

When the rebellion turned largely Islamist, there was no one to explain to us why this had happened. Journalists who had arrived in Aleppo with the rebels, en route for the “liberation” of Damascus along the lines of the “liberation” of Tripoli in Libya, justifiably retreated when the warriors of Isis took to beating, imprisoning and chopping off their heads – but largely without telling us what had happened to the revolution. The “good guys” in our stories, after all, are not supposed to turn into the “bad guys”. Van Dam asks why, in all the later reports on the bombardment by the regime of eastern Aleppo, the world never saw film of the Islamist fighters there, nor their weapons, nor their armed control of the streets. “If you look at the media reports,” he says, “it’s as if the bombs only fell on schools and hospitals.”

The people of Aleppo did not invite the armed opposition into their streets, according to Van Dam – he is right – and the fighters then, eventually, failed to win their battle. They lost. The declarations of horror by Western nations helped to obscure this defeat. All along, both the original demonstrators and the fighters and the West “miscalculated the ruthlessness of the regime”.

Van Dam hasn’t visited Syria since the war began, and it sometimes shows. He gives too much credit to the slovenly and undisciplined regime gangs for military victories. When an Alawite militia tried to persuade me they were now a disciplined force – their “commander” speaking in his Lattakia office under a vast metal two-edged Shia sword – the demonstration turned to farce when some of his men turned up in brand new Mercedes with smoked windows and no registration plates. And Van Dam believes that the Syrian army, in 2011, was at its lowest operational capacity in years. In fact, the Syrian military, corrupted by a quarter century in Lebanon, became a fighting machine in the war, took on Isis (despite Washington’s claims to the contrary), lost 75,000 of its men but – with Russian military help – turned on its armed enemies and is now pushing the Islamists from much of the country.

Van Dam, an expert on the Alawis of Syria, slightly overstretches their influence on the army – where perhaps 80 per cent of the soldiers are Sunni Muslims, the same sect as their enemies – but accurately emphasises the enormous casualty figures among the families in the Alawi mountains.

When Assad called his ministers a “war cabinet” – Van Dam takes the evidence for this from a defecting official – and it was clear that there would be no government punishment for its own operatives’ murder or torture, it was clear, he says, that “reforms” were no real part of government policy. He talks of the disastrous pre-war harvest that drove a million rural poor to the cities following the worst drought for 500 years – a unique contribution to the Syrian revolution by global warming – and writes that war crimes should be recorded for future “justice”. But who will ensure such justice is implemented? Without any Western desire for real military intervention (save that of Vladimir Putin), Western “humanitarian corridors” and “safe zones” were a nonsense.

Van Dam speaks mournfully of the continuation of the Assad government, which might win “95 per cent in the negotiations” and in which the opposition might gain the right to hold “the ministries of tourism and culture”. It’s not a prediction. But Van Dam’s expertise shows all too painfully how ignorance and stupidity governed the reflexes of Western politicians who preferred moral correctness to the realities of finding a solution: they sent weapons instead. In some ways, Van Dam concludes, the situation was similar to that in 1991 “when the United States and others encouraged the Shia community to rise up against ... Saddam Hussein, but did nothing to help them when their uprising was bloodily suppressed”. And we all know what happened then.