



# World must stand with Syrian people against tyranny

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April 15, 2011 12:53 p.m. EDT

**Editor's note:** *Ammar Abdulhamid is a Syrian dissident, democracy activist, and director of the Tharwa Foundation for democracy promotion, currently living in exile near Washington. Ken Ballen, author of the forthcoming book "Terrorists in Love" (Free Press, October, 2011), is president of [Terror Free Tomorrow](#), a nonprofit institute that researches attitudes toward extremism, including in Syria.*

**(CNN)** -- As protests spread across Syria, and the protesters prove to be more brave than intimidated by the use of live ammunition by Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's security forces, one thing should be clear by now: This is indeed a revolution against tyranny.

The revolution officially began on March 15 inside the Umayyad Mosque, where a protester lifted a sign showing a cross, a crescent and the word "hurriyah" or freedom. In every demonstration since, throughout the country, protesters have repeated slogans celebrating national unity and denouncing sectarianism. As security officers have shot live ammunition into the crowds, the protesters in turn have chanted, "silmiyyeh, silmiyyeh," meaning peaceful, peaceful.

What has been the response of the Syrian regime? To justify its violence against civilians peacefully protesting for basic freedoms, the Syrian authorities have blamed rather incongruous bedfellows, claiming that both Islamist "terrorists" and foreign conspiracies led by Israel are inciting the protests.

According to reports by international human rights organizations, protesters known to have been killed so far have numbered in the hundreds; thousands have been injured. The real numbers are likely to be higher since many families are afraid to report missing family members for fear of government reprisal.

The security-led violence continues to be sanctioned by President Bashar

Al-Assad, while the bloody crackdown is being orchestrated by his brother, Maher. Maher is a well-known figure inside Syria, who may have been involved in the Seydnaya Prison Massacres of July 2008 (a video circulating on the internet appears to show him at the scene) when more than 40 political prisoners were killed at the same time as Bashar was being feted by French President Nicolas Sarkozy in Paris.

The Syrian revolution, like all other Arab revolutions, has taken the West by surprise, in no small measure because the leaders of the Western world have believed the rhetoric of Middle Eastern dictators themselves that they were the last defense against Islamist extremism. While the majority of protesters come from a Sunni Islamic background and many might be religious, so are the majority of the Syrian people.

That there exists a religious dimension to the protest movement does not make Syria's revolution a sectarian or an extremist one. After decades of oppression and stifling of free expression and assembly, mosques have become the only places where Syrian people can gather somewhat freely.

Moreover, Muslims of any backgrounds should not be expected to denounce their own faith in order to be considered moderate. This confusion between religiosity and political extremism, more often witnessed when Muslims are involved, muddies the waters and dehumanizes hundreds of millions of people whose basic aspirations are no different than those of adherents of other faiths: to lead free and dignified lives.

Indeed, Syria's revolution is about freedom, justice and dignity, organized and championed by people from different national and religious backgrounds and representing the entire spectrum of Syria's population.

After the events of April 8 inside Syria, now known as Bloody Friday, the international community should begin to rethink its approach to Syria's upheavals. Thus far the American response has been limited to verbal protests. Decisive international pressure, led by the United States, should include international sanctions and litigation, U.N. Security Council condemnation and a freeze of all international assets held by the ruling Assad family.

These forceful steps might still help convince the Assads to look for an "honorable" exit strategy rather than become increasingly mired in bloodshed against their own citizens.

Now that the Syrian people have broken their barrier of fear, it is time leaders of the free world broke theirs: Freedom in the Arab World will finally pave the way for a stability premised on progress, prosperity and peace.

The Syrian people need the international community to believe in them, in their potential, and to stop listening to their dictators and their representatives, who will always try to manipulate international fears and ignorance to justify their bloody rule.

*The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of the authors.*

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