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Report finds US-backed Syrian opposition responsible for sectarian atrocity

By Alex Lantier

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A Human Rights Watch (HRW) report published yesterday exposes sectarian massacres of hundreds of civilians by US-backed Sunni opposition forces during an offensive in early August, in the majority-Alawite region around the coastal city of Lattakia.

Based on extensive photographic evidence and interviews with survivors, HRW found that at least 190 Alawite civilians were butchered and 200 taken hostage by opposition forces. The dead included at least 57 women, 18 children, and 14 elderly men.

HRW acting Middle East Director Joe Stork said the massacres were “not the actions of rogue fighters... This operation was a coordinated, planned attack on the civilian population of these Alawite villages.”

These events are an indictment of Washington and its European allies as well as the corporate media, all of which have backed Al Qaeda-linked opposition militias in Syria. The media have falsely hailed this opposition as fighters for democracy, pressing for a US-led war to support them. Two weeks after the Lattakia killings, Washington began a campaign for war with Syria,

based on lies about a chemical attack in Ghouta—pulling back from the brink of war only due to mass opposition from American and European workers.

The atrocities near Lattakia took place amid an offensive starting on August 4, the Eid al-Fitr holiday at the end of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. It appears that opposition forces chose this date—like the Nixon administration’s Christmas bombing of Hanoi during the Vietnam War—in order to terrorize its victims, showing them that it would not restrain its blood lust even during the most revered holidays.

It fielded thousands of troops, armed with heavy machine guns, multiple-barreled rocket launchers, armored anti-aircraft guns, and a few captured tanks. Syrian army forces retook the area only on August 19.

Alawite civilians who fell under opposition control were brutally massacred. HRW cites medical reports: “Cause of death in several of [the bodies] was multiple gunshot wounds all over the bodies, in addition to stab wounds made with a sharp instrument, given the decapitation observed in most bodies.”

Opposition officials contacted HRW early on in the offensive, when most of the killings apparently took place. The report cites one “opposition activist” who, on August 5, boasted to HRW: “We caught 150 women and 40 children, and killed all the men.”

The report details dozens of cases where defenseless civilians were slaughtered. In the village of Barouda, opposition fighters killed two civilians who were unable to escape: Safwan Hassan Shebli, a paralyzed Syrian army veteran, and his mother Shamieh Ali Darwish, who could only walk on crutches.

In the village of Sleibeh al-Hamboushieh, they murdered a blind 80-year-old woman, Nassiba Salem Sleim, and several of her relatives.

Other civilians were killed as they tried to escape the opposition militias. Ghazi Ibrahim Badour, who was fleeing with his wife and 10 children, said: “They cut off the road, so we tried to escape through the trees, but they were shooting at us, and two of my daughters died. My wife and another daughter were hurt. My daughter Sefah Badour, who has a masters in Arabic literature, and my daughter Sara, who has a degree in philosophy, were killed.”

According to HRW, the opposition fighters who carried out the massacres were largely drawn from five Al Qaeda-linked militias: the Al Nusra Front, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Ahrar al-Sham, Suqour al-Izz, and Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar. The first two are the best-known Al Qaeda-linked opposition militias in Syria. Jaish al-Muhajireen is an ISIL-linked group of foreign fighters from countries including Chechnya, Turkey, Tajikistan, Pakistan, France, Egypt and Morocco.

The campaign was supported by forces directly endorsed by Washington, however, such as General Salem Idriss of the Free Syrian Army's (FSA) Supreme Military Council. He traveled to the region on August 11 to declare his solidarity with the Al Qaeda-linked forces: "Our chief of staff is cooperating fully with the coastal military front command regarding their military activities. We are not going to withdraw as was falsely claimed, but on the contrary, we are cooperating to a great extent in this operation."

The HRW report also explains how the operation was planned and financed by moneymen based in various Persian Gulf sheikhdoms, mainly Kuwait, starting in April. They include Sheikh Hajje al-Ajami and Shafi al-Ajami in Kuwait, as well as Sunni Islamist preacher Sheikh Adnan al-Arour, who reportedly donated \$140,000 and, later, \$4.8 million.

Al-Arour is infamous for his threat to run Syrian Alawites through a "meat grinder" (See: "Video shows US-backed opposition fighter cannibalizing Syrian soldier").

The atrocities near Lattakia also expose the treacherous role of the corporate media, which are deeply implicated by their promotion of the Syrian opposition. They have lied through their teeth, praising a collection of cutthroats and gangsters mobilized as part of an imperialist war against Syria, and who are capable of the bloodiest killings, as fighters for democracy.

Such lies about the opposition, exposed by HRW's material, played a key role in the drive by the United States and its European allies to the brink of war, halted only by the emergence of mass popular opposition. The media blamed several atrocities implicating Syrian opposition forces—such as the May 2012 Houla massacre, or the chemical attack in Khan al-Assal a year later—on the Syrian regime. These lies were used to justify further arming of the opposition against the regime and escalating the war.

In the fighting near Lattakia—where Alawite civilians targeted in sectarian killings could only have been victims of the Sunni opposition, not Syria's Alawite-led regime—it would have been difficult to blame atrocities on the regime. The media responded by downplaying the entire offensive.

Thus the *New York Times*, the flagship publication of American liberalism, in particular, covered up the massacres near Lattakia, even though it was very well informed of events there. It spoke regularly to an opposition official, Ammar Hassan, who it said was "in close touch with rebels" near Lattakia, but published only a few brief notes on the offensive, largely in articles on other topics. What little the *Times* did write, however, covered up the massacre and tended to assign blame for sectarian violence in the area to the Alawites.

On August 5, the day after the first opposition massacres of Alawite civilians, it wrote: "Alawites here have long feared they would face revenge killings by the mostly Sunni insurgents, and pro-government Alawite militias have been accused of killing Sunni civilians in the area. Some

Alawites remained in their villages as rebels advanced, and a few wounded Alawites were treated in makeshift rebel hospitals, said Mr. Hassan, who added, ‘Of course the majority of the residents fled to the city.’”

The coverage of the *Times*, both of the August opposition offensive and now of the HRW report, is dictated above all by the needs of the American state and its foreign policy. After the US postponement of war with Syria, divisions are growing among the Syrian opposition militias, and Washington is attempting to isolate Al Qaeda-linked groups like ISIL. The *Times* presented the HRW report as proof that the opposition forces closer to Washington were more humane.

In the face of all evidence in the HRW report, it implied that Idriss and the FSA’s Supreme Military Councils were not implicated in the atrocities. “None of those cited as primary participants appear to be under control of the Western-backed Supreme Military Council, which has struggled to show it can retake the initiative on the ground from extremists,” it wrote.