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Robert Fisk: The regime calls it 'cleaning', but the dirty truth is plain to see

The word being used by Syria is a chilling one

ROBERT FISK THURSDAY 01 MARCH 2012

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So it's the "cleaning" of Baba Amr now, is it? "Tingheef" in Arabic. Did that anonymous Syrian government official really use that word to the AP yesterday? It's a chilling expression, one that always precedes a lot of killing. And the UN says it's 7,600 so far. The Israelis used the same word in English when they stormed into Lebanon in 1982 (total dead about 17,500). Five months earlier, when the Syrians were finishing off the Muslim insurgents of Hama, just north of Homs (more than 10,000, possibly 15,000 dead), they said they were "researching" the area, "searching", "investigating". The word they used was "bahagh".

It's a honey of a word for all armies when they're going to abandon human rights. The Brits used to like "mopping up" in the Second World War (approximately 60 million dead). So did the Russians. In the Warsaw Ghetto, the Germans referred to the "cleansing" of Jewish streets in 1944. The word was that of SS Major General Jürgen Stroop in his "police" report (50,000 dead). Cleaning, searching, mopping up, cleansing; massed killing washed of all responsibility. After you "clean" something, it doesn't smell any more.

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No, the Syrians are not the Israelis, the Israelis are not the Brits and Russians, and the Syrians, Israelis, Brits and Russians are not the SS. But words do have an unhappy way of reflecting real intentions. The more you polish, search, wash, clean, cleanse, the less blood there should be on the ground. The defence brigades who crushed Hama 30 years ago were led by "Uncle" Rifaat Assad, his nephew, Bashar, is now President of Syria, his other nephew, Maher, is reputedly leading his 4th Brigade into Baba Amr.

Anyway, the tanks bombarded the Sunni district of Homs first, then the infantry – according to residents on the phone yesterday – started to move in. The "decisive month" had begun, according to another "anonymous" Syrian official. Every month in Syria, of course, has been a "decisive month". It's been that way for a year now. In September 1980, I remember, Saddam's gombeen men talked about the "decisive month" in the "Whirlwind War" – the invasion of Iran. The war lasted eight years (about 1.5 million dead).

Anyway, we'll see what Assad's squadrons are made of. Will his infantry defect when they have to batter their way into Homs? A real worry. Will the Free Syria Army fight to the death or run away to fight another day? And civilian casualties in Baba Amr?

If Assad's men win, we might hear a figure. The Assad version won't include Sunni "enemy" dead, any more than his antagonists are going to tell us how many Alawite and Christian "enemies" they've killed. Assad says he's fighting "terrorists". Rifaat said the same at Hama. The Israelis used the word a thousand times about the Palestinians. The Russians said the same about the Germans. Stroop said the same about the Jews.

Alas, all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten these little hands.

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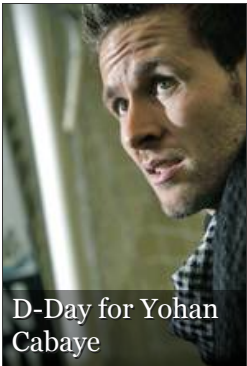
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