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How Many were Slaughtered in Hama?

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NCR Today

In 1982, Syria's secularist dictator, Hafez Assad, father of the country's current ruler, brutally put down protests in the city of Hama, a stronghold of the Muslim Brotherhood. Today, analysts and pundits tell us we should review Assad Sr.'s behavior toward Hama for clues as to how his son will react to the uprising spreading in his country.

Thirty years ago, the senior Assad ordered the murder of thousands of his countrymen in Hama. But how many thousands?

That depends on whom you ask:

- Yesterday, on **Meet the Press**, Ted Koppel put the number at 80,000.
- The **New York Daily News**, in an editorial, says it was "upward of 25,000."
- **Michael Tomasky**, columnist for The Guardian, says the Syrian Government "slaughtered maybe 20,000 of its own people."
- **The Washington Post** reported yesterday that Assad Sr. "leveled the city of Hama to suppress an Islamic uprising there, killing between 17,000 and 40,000 people."
- The **PBS News Hour**, meanwhile, reported that "the protests in Hama came nearly 30 years after the Syrian army crushed a rebellion there by the Muslim Brotherhood, killing as many as 40,000 people."

There are, it seems, as many estimates of Hama's dead as there are those doing the counting.

"A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic," Joseph Stalin reportedly quipped. But surely the difference between 17,000 (the Washington Post's low-end estimate) and 80,000 (Ted Koppel's estimate) matters; it is not simply a rounding error.

Is the failure of our media elites and others to determine with some precision how many Syrians died

thirty years ago in Hama simply a sign of laziness? That slaughter, after all, was long ago and far away -- so who's going to demand even a minimum level of accuracy?

Or is it more significant? A signal, a small example in the bigger picture, that we, the US and our allies, really do not begin to understand the complex dynamic of the Middle East.

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