

### Caught between autocracy and jihadism: Syria's Christians hope for the implementation of Geneva I

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## Caught between Autocracy and Jihadism

Syria's Christians Hope for the Implementation of Geneva I

Petra Becker

The discourse conducted by Syria's Christians since March 2011 reveals that many of them have now turned their back on the protest movement, despite their initial sympathy and even involvement with it. These Christians have not turned away out of any deeply held convictions in support of the regime, but because they are worried by the militarisation and radicalisation of the revolution, and by the fact that after three years the opposition has still not shown itself to be a credible alternative to the regime. German and European policymakers should continue working towards a political solution and avoid supporting any particular religious or ethnic groups at the expense of others, because apart from those in areas where foreign Jihadists operate, Christians in Syria are no more at risk than other Syrians.

Christians are firmly rooted in Syrian society, and account for an estimated 8–10 percent of the population. The three largest of their eleven denominations are the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox and Greek Catholic communities. Apart from the Armenians, the Assyrians and the Chaldeans, Christians are among the oldest inhabitants of the modern state of Syria. Particularly in rural areas, people are very much aware of this rootedness. Many Muslims in rural areas even know which of their ancestors converted from Christianity to Islam; the other side of their clan remains Christian but is still seen as extended family. This knowledge of common roots lives on to this day, and helps to explain why, during three years of conflict, Christians have so rarely been the target of religiously

motivated violence. In various places, there have been reports of local Muslim populations coming to the defence of Christians when they were attacked by foreign Jihadists.

Many Christians hope that the situation will stabilise, allowing them to resume their lives as before. The Armenians are less optimistic, their memories clouded by the genocide of their ancestors during World War I in what is now Turkey. The same is true of the Chaldeans and Assyrians, who fled to the Syrian Euphrates region after World War I in response to massacres of the Christian population in Iraq.

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## Regional Differences

Christian settlements are spread throughout the whole of Syria but, like other segments of the population, Christians have fled their homes to escape the fighting. As a result, the original demographic spread has changed considerably, and the situation of Christians varies a great deal, depending on the forces in control of different parts of the country.

## The Kurdish North-East

After the uprising began in 2011, the north-east remained mostly calm because the regime had bought the allegiance of large parts of the Kurdish opposition. As soon as demonstrations broke out, major concessions were made to the Kurds, who up to that point had been the most heavily marginalised ethnic minority. The regime allowed the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) – the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which operates in Turkey – to take charge of the region's security, and enforce law and order on its behalf.

The historical experience of the Armenians, Chaldeans and Assyrians was a key reason why the majority of them left the north-east long before the first Jihadist groups arrived there. Moreover, they were able to reunite with family members among large diaspora communities of Assyrians and Arameans, particularly in Sweden, the Netherlands and Germany.

Since 2013 Kurdish areas have been regularly threatened by Jihadist militias, especially the al-Qaeda affiliated group the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This has led many Christians in the region to move closer to the left-wing secular PYD, which, according to its manifesto, champions the rights of minorities. However, the PYD has itself brutally persecuted political enemies in the past, and so it seems doubtful that it can be a guarantor of pluralism and democracy.

## Rebel-Controlled Areas

The regime has lost control over the provinces of Aleppo, Idlib, Raqqa und Deir ez-Zor, and most Christians have fled from them. The main reason for their flight was one that equally affected their Muslim neighbours: the threat of fighting and area bombardment, which the regime inflicts upon areas no longer under its control. Furthermore, in rebel-held areas practically all sources of income have dried up. Fear of Jihadists, by contrast, was a less pressing reason to flee. After regime-controlled media had initially fuelled this fear, despite a lack of any particular cause for concern, the threat did become more severe during the course of 2013.

Christians are at particularly high risk anywhere ISIS is active, although practically all Christians have left such areas. In March 2014 it was reported from Raqqa province that ISIS was forcing the few remaining Christians there to pay the *jizya*, a capitation tax that was required of religious minorities under the Ottoman empire for example. In current reports of public executions, the victims are generally fighters from rival rebel groups or political activists who stand up to ISIS.

According to statements by church representatives and human rights organisations, there have so far been very few religiously motivated murders of Christians throughout the country. In Aleppo, Christian institutions and Christian activists are working in the rebel-held part of the city (though only in small numbers). This is also true (or was true) of rebel strongholds in disputed areas, such as the old town centre of Homs or the town of Yabroud in the Anti-Lebanon mountains, where Christians organised a shared civil administration together with the Sunni majority without being subject to discrimination. When in mid-2013 Jihadists from outside the area shot at churches in Yabroud, the local council posted sentries in front of the churches, thus preventing further hostilities. It was not until mid-March 2014, when the government army and Hezbollah attempted to

recapture the town, that most of the inhabitants fled. They were fearful of regime forces, who in recapturing the neighbouring town of Deir Atiyah had gone on a looting spree, shot civilians indiscriminately and burnt their bodies later.

### **Disputed Areas**

In the west-central Syrian provinces of Hama and Homs, fighting has continued to flare up between regime forces and rebels. This, along with the desperate security situation in general, has caused approximately half of the Christians to leave their villages. Large parts of the city of Homs have been destroyed by army bombardment. Residents report that there are no longer any neighbourhoods in which Sunnis and Alawites live together. Nevertheless, Christians in Homs still live in mixed neighbourhoods (some with Alawites and some with Sunnis), without any major conflicts arising.

In Deraa province the frontlines are shifting constantly between the regime forces, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Jihadists, who entered the country from Jordan to form Jabhat an-Nusra. Consequently, most Christians have also fled from the province. Christians in the south-west area around Damascus and the Golan Heights, on the other hand, have mostly remained in their villages, having apparently come to an arrangement with both regime forces and local FSA units.

### **Regime-controlled Areas**

Christians have also migrated from areas under regime control, such as Damascus and the coastal mountain range. However, the proportion of Christians among the population as a whole here has increased, as Christians from other regions have sought refuge in these areas. This applies to the city centre of Damascus, but especially to the coastal mountain range. A special case is Wadi an-Nasara (Valley of the Christians) between Homs and Tartous, which is

the only region in Syria where Christians make up the majority of the population. According to estimates, the number of its residents has quadrupled since 2011 due to the immigration of Christians, mostly from Homs but also from Damascus and Aleppo.

### **Reasons for Fleeing and Places of Refuge**

Apart from the fighting, bombardment and poverty, another major reason for fleeing is widespread crime. Neither the regime forces nor the rebels are paid well enough to support their families, and so they exploit the population by extorting money from them at checkpoints or taking passers-by hostage. Both sides feel encouraged to engage in this behaviour, as they are confident that they will not be called to account for it. Furthermore, common criminals often pose as militia members of one side or the other, and commit crimes in their name. The regime contributed to this situation in the first year of the revolution by enacting amnesties that allowed common criminals to be released. Residents of all parts of the country complain that the regime recruited many of these small-time criminals, who were already known to the police, into their militias. These so-called "Popular Committees" are supposed to provide security in their local neighbourhoods, but in fact often do the opposite.

The uncertain political situation is another factor which could drive the Christians out of the country permanently. If made to choose sides, Christians would tend to side with the Assad regime rather than the opposition; yet in conversation most of them readily admit that they see no future for Syria under Assad either. Among the refugees who have left Syria since the outbreak of unrest in March 2011, the proportion of Christians is relatively low. Most of the refugees in the camps in neighbouring countries are Sunnis. Some of the Armenians have fled to Armenia, but most Christians seek sanctuary in the coastal mountain range or go to Lebanon, where

many hope to receive the support of family and church networks. Above all it seems that the Christians who leave the country are those who can afford it or can emigrate to the West. Those who do not have this option flee from one town or region to the next, depending on where the situation is least dangerous, or are forced to return home if they run out of money.

### **The Syrian Regime – Protector of Christians?**

The Assad regime presents itself as a protecting power of the Christians. However, on a publicity visit to the famous Christian pilgrimage site at Maaloula in April 2014, Assad made no mention of the fact that most of the damage to churches and monasteries there had been caused by the Syrian army and that the town, which had changed hands in the fighting several times, had been looted by rebels and regime forces alike.

Assad's strategy is to polarise religious minorities and the Sunni majority population. He has aimed from the very beginning to drive a wedge between the Sunnis on the one hand and the Alawites, Christians, Druze, Ismaili and Shiites on the other. His regime drove the protest movement to militarisation through heavy use of violence, and fuelled its radicalisation by releasing dozens of Jihadists from high security prisons. Largely through intimidation, disinformation and fomenting conflicts between the various groups, he has managed to prevent the Christians from broader commitment to the revolution.

#### **Intimidation**

From the outset, anyone involved with the revolution ran the risk of being shot or imprisoned, but the security services dealt with Christians more carefully. They were still arrested at demonstrations or subjected to interrogations, but on the whole they were quickly released again. During interrogations they were accused of un-

wittingly supporting foreign-controlled terrorists. However, there was no guarantee of safety for Christians. To name just two high-profile examples: the well-known Christian human rights lawyer, Khalil Maatouk, was taken away by the intelligence service in autumn 2012; to this day he remains imprisoned and has yet to be brought before a custodial judge; the Christian sculptor, Wael Qastoun, was tortured to death by members of the intelligence service in July 2012.

#### **Targeted Disinformation**

One of the most effective weapons of the regime is its consistent strategy of disinformation, which is not only aimed at the home front, but also at the outside world. To implement this strategy it uses the regime-controlled media and the intelligence services. From the outset, the regime-controlled media portrayed the protests as an uprising initiated by foreign Salafists willing to use violence to establish a theocracy in Syria. Meanwhile, the intelligence service was tasked to spray anti-Christian slogans on the walls of Christian neighbourhoods, or to send *agents provocateurs* to mix with the demonstrators, shouting such slogans in order to discredit the protest movement and frighten the Christians. Another frequently observed strategy is to position artillery in the immediate vicinity of monasteries and churches, and to fire at Sunni villages from there.

In pursuing its media strategy, the regime can also rely upon the churches that they have brought into line. In early 2011 a group of Christian activists visited the spiritual leaders of the Christian denominations to ask them to exercise restraint in their pro-regime rhetoric. Subsequently one of the patriarchs betrayed them to the intelligence service. The Greek Catholic church was put under such pressure that it even cancelled its funeral service for the young oppositional filmmaker, Bassel Shehadeh, who died in the army's bombardment of Homs in May 2012.

Clerics of various denominations allow themselves to be used by the regime. They help to spread media lies about massacres of Christians in order to provide publicity abroad for the Assad regime, which is seeking to sell itself as the only guarantor of the survival of Christianity in Syria. Recalcitrant priests, on the other hand, can expect reprisals: the Italian Jesuit Paolo dell'Oglio, who worked for thirty years to improve understanding between Christians and Muslims in Syria, was declared *persona non grata* by the regime at the end of 2011. Priests who do not clearly side with the regime are intimidated.

### **Fomenting religious conflicts**

The regime tries at all costs to prevent Christians from showing solidarity with Sunnis, the main victims of regime violence. The actions of the security services in the small west-central Syrian town of al-Suqaylabiyah on Good Friday 2011 serve as an example of this. In the Sunni villages in the surrounding areas of al-Suqaylabiyah they spread the false message that at midday a large anti-regime demonstration would be held in the town, whereupon the villagers made their way by bus to the supposed demonstration. Meanwhile security forces in al-Suqaylabiyah, where the annual Good Friday procession was taking place, started a rumour that the Sunnis from the neighbouring villages were on their way into town to set fire to the church. It was only thanks to the level-headedness of the town's dignitaries, who had seen through the deceitful plan, that bloodshed was avoided.

### **Syria – a Secular State?**

Practices of the kind outlined above have nothing in common with the protection of religious minorities. Even from a purely legal point of view, the regime's claim to be the sole guarantor of a secular state and of coexistence of all denominations and religions in harmony and equality, does not stand up to scrutiny.

Religious freedom is guaranteed in both the 1970 constitution, which came into force under the Ba'ath regime, and the constitution rushed through by Assad in 2012. However, both stipulate that the president must be a Muslim and that Islam is the main source of legislation.

The principle of equality before the law has always been in place. An exception to this, as in nearly all Middle Eastern countries, is civil status law. This legal area is dealt with by Sharia courts for Muslims, and by church courts for Christians. However, Christians have been increasingly critical of this in recent decades as it means, for instance, that it is impossible for members of the various Catholic churches to get divorced according to civil law.

Moreover, religious freedom only applies to Christians who are born as such. Syrian law does not allow for conversion to Christianity, although it certainly allows conversion to Islam, and this can potentially lead to conflict in interfaith marriages. If a Muslim woman wishes to marry a Christian man, the latter is obliged to convert to Islam. A Christian woman, on the other hand, may marry a Muslim without renouncing her faith. However, she may not inherit his possessions, because neither Christians nor Muslims can inherit from one other.

Christians also criticise the Assad regime for the fact that after the suppression of the 1982 uprising (in which the Muslim Brotherhood was the key player), it co-opted conservative Sunni clerics in a calculated power play. Never before in Syria have so many mosques been built as during the Assad era. The government established large numbers of Quran schools (the so-called Hafez al-Assad schools for memorising the Quran), and in 2005 the Ba'ath regime was so keen to find favour with the conservative Islamic clergy that it banned a book which questioned the veiling of women.

## **Political Representation under the Ba'ath Regime**

If one talks to older Syrian Christians they complain that the influence of Christians has decreased under forty years of Ba'athist rule. In the first half of the 20th century Christians had an active role in politics.

For instance, two major Syrian parties were established by Christians: the Arabic Socialist Ba'ath Party, by Michel Aflaq, and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), by Antoun Saadeh, although neither of these parties had a democratic, pluralistic agenda.

Under the Ba'ath regime, independent political activity was no longer possible. It pursued co-optation rather than participation. In the 1970s, left-wing parties and unions were involved in the uprising along with the Muslim Brotherhood. Subsequently, parties that did not allow themselves to be co-opted were banned, as were all independent youth organisations. Youth employment was then only possible through the Ba'ath Party's "Revolutionary Youth Union".

Only in 2000 were churches re-permitted to set up scout groups, which until then had also fallen under the ban. Their activities were subject to heavy surveillance, however, as were the sermons in mosques and churches. Even today, no ecclesiastical office is awarded without the approval of the intelligence service; their approval is required for all church activities, and for all other civil society activities.

## **High-Profile Christians in the Opposition**

In 2001, encouraged by promises of reform made by Bashar al-Assad upon taking office, a civil rights movement was formed known as the "Damascus Spring", although this was soon cracked down on by Assad himself. Christians were well represented among the movement's main protagonists, with journalists and authors such as Michel Kilo, Akram al-Bunni, Hussein Awdat and Antoun Maqdisi, and the historian Abdallah Hanna. High-profile lawyers in the Syrian human rights movement included Anwar

al-Bunni, Khalil Maatouq, Michal Shammas, Daad Moussa and Catherine at-Telli.

The same Christians were involved when the opposition made another attempt to form, with the Damascus Declaration in 2005. They were involved again in March 2011, when the first protests were organised in Damascus to demand an end to the state of emergency in place since 1963, along with serious political reforms. Christians also took part in spontaneous protests in rural areas. Christian activists from all parts of the country tell of their participation in secret meetings to discuss the demands of the revolutionary movement. According to them, it was unanimously agreed at these meetings that the uprising was not aimed against any particular segment of society, but rather against an unjust regime which suppressed all activity within civil society.

The role of Christians in the revolutionary movement, then, is by no means as small as one might suppose. Apart from Christian politicians and civil activists there are even Christian fighters among the rebels. Despite this, however, the majority of the Christian population has distanced itself from the revolutionary movement. This is as much due to the militarisation and radicalisation of the movement as to the successful counter-strategies of the Syrian regime. Both of these factors have led to the majority of Christians fearing the fall of the regime, although they are aware that the regime actively fuels religious tensions.

## **Weakness of the Opposition**

Although, when asked, most Christians are certain that the Assad regime can neither bring peace to Syria in the long term nor improve their security, they rightly point out that the opposition has so far not managed to provide a credible alternative to the regime that can guarantee the security and rights of all citizens. Many Christians distrust the National Coalition of the opposition, which in their eyes is an Islamist project. High-profile Christian opposition

members of the National Coalition, such as Michel Kilo or George Sabra are dismissed by many as “token Christians” who are being used to give the coalition a secular veneer.

This view is reinforced by the military balance of power in rebel-controlled areas. Financial backing of Islamist and Salafist groups by state and private actors from the Gulf States has led to such groups controlling most of the rebel-held areas. Attacks on churches and – in a few isolated cases – on Christians, mostly carried out by foreign Jihadists, have also earned the opposition a bad reputation as far as Christians are concerned.

### **Representation vs. Civil Rights**

Christians who want to become politically active in the public domain find themselves in a predicament. Almost all Christian oppositional politicians and activists openly wish to avoid making an issue of their religious beliefs, because they would see this as a betrayal of a fundamental demand of the revolution, namely the equality of all citizens with regard to their rights and obligations. Various Christian groups have become established within the opposition who explicitly want to be active as Christians, and occasionally make public statements protesting against being co-opted by the regime. However, attempts to unify these groups to achieve a broader representation of Christians within the opposition have so far failed for fear of slipping into a proportional system, as this kind of system, in which certain offices and quotas are reserved for various religious communities, has not led to a functioning state either in Lebanon or Iraq.

### **Christians Take up Arms**

The insecurity currently felt by Christians in Syria has led to their taking up arms in certain areas. Initially this was for the defence of their residential areas.

However, continued attempts by the intelligence services to involve the Chris-

tians in armed clashes with their Sunni neighbours have been partially successful. Elements of the “National Defence Force”, a militia formed by the regime from local and SSNP militias, have been incited to attack Sunni villages. The most recent notable instance of these dangerous developments was the looting of the village of al-Husn in Wadi an-Nasara in late March 2014, and the displacement of its Sunni population.

In the Kurdish north-east there are a small number of Assyrian Christians who have formed their own unit within the Kurdish “People’s Protection Units” (YPG), the military wing of the PYD. Until now this form of militarisation and use of force has been viewed with unease by the Christian population. However, if the conflict becomes increasingly polarised along religious lines, it can be assumed that the Christians will ultimately become heavily involved in the fighting, as they did in the Lebanese civil war.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

At the present time, Christians are in danger not primarily because of their faith but because, like all Syrians, they are exposed to fighting, bombardments and the desperate security situation. However, if the conflict cannot be resolved in the foreseeable future they will be at considerable risk due to increasing radicalisation and polarisation along religious lines. On the one hand there is the risk of attacks and suppression from Jihadists, and on the other hand there is the risk of growing radicalisation and militarisation within their own ranks. This is bound to lead to confrontation with the majority population, with whom they have coexisted peacefully until now.

It would therefore be counterproductive to emphasise the risk to Christians in this conflict, let alone to allow special quotas of Christians when admitting refugees into the country; this would create the impression that Christians were the protégés of



the West, which would put them under even more pressure at home.

Instead, Germany and Europe should do all they can to find a permanent settlement to the conflict. However, this will only succeed if all groups in the country can be confident that in a future Syria the principles of Geneva will apply: commitment to a democratic multi-party system which respects the rights of all citizens, regardless of their ethnic or religious identity. This was also the conclusion reached by the attendees of a conference which the *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung* helped to organise in March 2014 in Amman (see “Present and Future of Christians in Syria”, [http://www.alqudscenter.org/english/pages.php?local\\_type=122&local\\_details=1&idd=342](http://www.alqudscenter.org/english/pages.php?local_type=122&local_details=1&idd=342)).

The resignation of United Nations and Arab League Special Envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, should not be a reason to give up hope of a negotiated settlement. Russia and Iran need to be included in this in order to put pressure on the regime and persuade it to allow a ceasefire and a transitional government. At the same time Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States must be urged to stop financing Jihadist groups and to prohibit private actors from doing so.

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