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The Future of Syrian Christians after the Arab Spring

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The Future of Syrian Christians after the Arab Spring[1]

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"O people, and I mean you the non-Moslems who use the letter *dad* [whom speak the Arabic language and are Arabs], I appeal to you to forget past wrongs and rancour, and what has been committed by fathers and grandfathers. . . Let the wise men among us tell the non-Arabs and the foreigners who instigate ill-will among us: allow us to manage our own affairs. . . Permit us to manage our affairs in this world, and make religions rule only the next. Let us come together around the same declarations: Long live the nation! Long live the watan, the fatherland! Let us live free and strong." ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Kawākibī (1855-1902) (Funatsu, 2006, pp. 14-15)

Executive Summary

The wave of popular uprisings that started in 2010 offered religious and ethnic minorities an opportunity to obtain full rights in a new democratic, political regime. However, a violent turn of events in many of these countries has put religious and ethnic communities under unprecedented threat. In particular, this is the case of Christian communities in Syria that have found themselves caught between the rise of radical Islamist groups and the inability of the political regime to offer them basic public services, not even security.

This paper seeks to analyse the different political attitudes of Syrian Christians towards the 2011 Syrian uprising through its various phases; what are the main challenges that have shaped these attitudes, and what policies shall be adopted by local and external actors in order to address them? The research relied on more than 20 semi-structured interviews with Syrian Christians, both religious and lay, from different Syrian cities: Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Latakia, and Al-Qamishli during the period from 2016 to 2018.

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Based on this fieldwork, the paper has reached a number of conclusions that challenge some of the arguments taken for granted within the realm of this topic.

First: Christians in Syria are politically divided just like other religious communities in the country, and they cannot be treated as one homogenous group. Moreover, their political position cannot be defined as being for or against the regime. Syrian Christians' political attitude is shaped by their interests in safety and public services, and might change from one point in time to another and from one geographical area to another.

Second: The question that the majority of Christians are facing is not whether to side with the regime or with the opposition, but rather how to survive the risks posed by both sides. From the opposition side, they fear the growing influence of radical Islamist groups and, from the regime, they fear the deterioration of the regime's capacity to offer basic services including guaranteed security in their areas.

Third: The future of Christians in Syria and in other countries in the Middle East is strongly connected to the future of their states and other religious communities. Hence, the struggle for a better future for Christians is the same struggle for all other citizens for democracy, rule of law and full citizenship. The discourse of certain European and American voices from both state and civil society circles concerning the protection of the Christians in the Middle East can only worsen the Christian communities' situation. Instead, Western political voices need to frame a discourse that addresses the problems facing all religious and ethnic communities in the region, not only those of Christians, and to support their struggle for efficient state institutions and democratic political regimes.

The Future of Syrian Christians after the Arab Spring

The wave of popular uprisings that started in 2010 in Tunisia before spreading to other countries in the Middle East had offered religious and ethnic minorities an opportunity to obtain full rights in a new democratic political regime. However, a violent turn of events in many of these countries, as in the case of Libya, Syria and Yemen, has put religious and ethnic communities under unprecedented threats. In particular, this is the case of Christian communities in Syria that have found themselves caught between the rise of radical Islamist groups and the inability of the political regime to offer them basic public services, even including security.

This chapter seeks to understand how the Syrian Revolution has influenced the status of Syrian Christians through its different phases, from the peaceful uprising in its first year to the military confrontation afterwards. The chapter is divided into four main sections: the first offers an overview of the regime-Church relationship before 2011; the second looks at the different Christian reactions to the Syrian uprising; the third analyses the current challenges facing the majority of the Christian communities; and the fourth looks at the possible measures to protect the presence of the Christians in Syria, and the Middle East at large.

Church-State Relations in Syria Before 2011

The Syrian Christian community is composed of 11 different religious denominations: the Greek Orthodox Church, considered to be the largest and oldest Christian denomination, standing under the patriarch of Antioch and All the East who resides in Damascus; and the Oriental Orthodox churches represented by the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Syrian (or Syriac) Orthodox Church. As for Uniate churches, which owe obedience to Rome, the largest group is Melchites (also called the Greek Catholic Church), the Armenian Catholic Church, the Maronites, the Syrian Catholic Church and the Uniate Assyrian Church. In addition, there is also the Nestorian Church, consisting mainly of Christians who fled Iraq in the 1930s. Moreover, there are smaller Christian groups that include the Roman Catholic Church and other Protestant groups (Fahlbusch et al. 2008, pp. 279-280). In addition, Damascus is home to three patriarchates: Greek Orthodox, Melkite Greek Catholic, and the Syrian (or Syriac) Orthodox.

Unlike other ethnic and religious communities in Syria, such as the Druze or the Kurds, Syrian Christians are spread over most of the Syrian territory. The majority lives in and around Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Latakia and Al-Hassakah.

While the current Syrian regime, established in 1970 by Hafez al-Assad and resumed by his son Bashar in 2000, has adopted a secular nationalist discourse, it has treated the Christian religious institutions as the representative of the Christian community before the political regime, following the same Ottoman *millet* system. According to this pact, Christians "are granted certain rights and Churches limited freedom and prerogatives in managing some of their internal affairs, in exchange for total loyalty and acquiescence to the deprivation of their political rights and parts of their civil rights" (Mitri, 2018, p. 117). While allowing the religious leadership certain political and economic advantages, the regime nonetheless put these different religious figures under its strict security control, as it does with other religious institutions.

The authoritarian policies of Hafez al-Assad targeting both political and civil societies has left the Christians with no other institution to seek refuge but the Church to defend them and channel their demands and concerns to the political authority.

This alliance between the Church and the regime has also been reinforced with the wave of radical Islamism in the 1970s. The fear of the Islamist groups has led many Christians to support the regime, particularly after the violent struggle between the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood between 1978 and 1982.

This institutional relationship has served both the regime and the Church. From the Church side, this deal allows it to be the only representative of the Christians, in addition to other economic benefits. From the regime side, it is much easier to deal with one organisation to represent the Christians. The regime also has interest in strengthening the position of the Church within the Christian community not to allow other Christian oppositional figures to gain more power and popularity among the Christian community (McCallum, 2012, p. 121).

With the rise to power of Bashar al-Assad in 2000 after the death of his father, he has kept the same *millet* deal with the Christian communities but has sought to take advantage of it to strengthen the legitimacy of his new rule internally and externally. Bashar relaxed some of the strict secular aspects of the deal and instead stressed the element of religious tolerance of the Syrian regime. By doing so, the Syrian regime aimed internally at framing Christians as the regime's favoured minority and externally at framing the Syrian regime as the protector of Christians (Asfar, 2017, p. 6). Christian figures were appointed in political positions, including Bassel Nasrallah, who was appointed as the advisor of the Syrian Mufti Badr Al-Din Hassoun (Al-Abdullah & Al-Hallak, 2017). This has resulted in greater support for the regime among the Church leadership and many Christians as well, notably its wealthiest class. The regime also controlled the business elite, including the Christian one, which became dependent on good relations with the country's leaders for its wealth.

The tragic events in Iraq after the US occupation in 2003, particularly the violence against the Christian communities, has deeply influenced the views of many Syrian Christians with regard to the cost of changing the al-Assad regime. As Western pressure increased on the Syrian regime after the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005, many Christians sided with the regime fearing the same Iraqi scenario. Almost all the businesses owned by Christians in all Syrian cities displayed portraits of Bashar al-Assad bearing the slogan: "We all are with you, Bachar" (Kawakibi, 2010).

Therefore, maintaining this adaptation of the *millet* approach is seen to be benefiting both the Church leaders and the regime. However, it left a number of Christian actors alienated, such as a part of the Christian youth and a number of Christian political figures who refused to be treated as a part of a religious minority represented by its religious leaders. They wished instead for full citizenship rights within a democratic regime that treats all Syrians equally, as was the case with the Syrian journalist Michel Kilo who was one of the leading figure of the Damascus spring in 2000 calling for political, legal and economic reforms and helped launch the Damascus Declaration 2005 calling for a gradual and peaceful transition to democracy and the equality of all citizens in a secular and sovereign Syria.

The wave of popular uprisings that started in Tunisia in December 2010 and then moved to Egypt one month later has shaped the imagination of many Syrian youths, Christians included, who thought they could follow the same path to remove their dictator. In March 2011, Syria joined the wave of Arab uprisings with the first protest against the regime in Damascus.

The Different Christian Reactions to the 2011 Syrian Uprising

With the Syrian uprising that started in March 2011, different groups have insisted that Syria's Christians supported the al-Assad regime. On the one hand, the Syrian regime, through its discourse, tried to strengthen its legitimacy in the West as the protector of religious minorities in the face of radical Islamic groups. On the other hand, certain Islamic voices from the opposition insisted on the same discourse to frame the political struggle in Syria as mainly sectarian between the Sunni majority and the Alwaite ruling elite supported by other minority groups. This perception has often been strengthened by three main factors:

- Most Christian areas in Syria have not witnessed demonstrations against the regime, unlike the Sunni areas. There have been only a few exceptions to this pattern, such as the governorate of Al-Hassakah in the far northeast corner of Syria, where a large number of Assyrians joined the popular protests against the regime. In other cities such as Homs and Damascus, Christians wishing to protest against the regime had to go to other neighbourhoods to join in.

- Many Church leaders have spoken in the name of all Christians in declaring their support for the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, which has given the impression that all Christians adopted the same political position of their religious leadership.

- Many Christian voices supporting the revolution often refused to identify with their Christian religious identity, and insisted that they were only Syrians. While this position was mainly motivated by their belief in a democratic regime where Syrians shall not be identified according to their religious identities but only as Syrian citizens, it has also given the impression that there were no Christian voices engaged in the 2011 uprising.

A close look at the reactions of the Christians towards the Syrian Revolution shows that their attitudes varied from one Christian actor to another, one moment to another, and one geographical area to another. There are certainly Christians who support the regime, including senior religious figures, state officials, businesspeople whose interests are invested in it and even Christian militias that took up arms to join the regime military forces. Nevertheless, there are also Christians who have supported the revolution from day one and took part in the peaceful protests in different Syrian cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Al-Qamishli and Latakia. In addition, there is also a third group, arguably the largest, that does not have a clear position towards the uprising or the regime, and focuses on its own survival.

Syrian Christians Supporting the Uprising

Many Christian youths have supported the revolution from day one, hoping to build a new democratic regime based on freedom, justice and human rights. In Damascus, for example, a group of more than 50 Christians, including three monks, began meeting in 2011 to discuss how Christians could support the revolution. They rejected the Church leadership's supportive stance toward the al-Assad regime and drafted a letter emphasising the values of freedom and dignity for all Syrians, which they delivered to a number of Christian religious leaders. The letter stated clearly that:

"We call upon you not to reduce the current popular movement to a mere 'plot', and ask you to go for a new understanding of what is happening today in Syria by placing it in its humanitarian, political, social, economic and historical contexts. It is not possible today to continue to deny Syria's suffering from the absence of political life and the restriction on freedoms, the dominance of a security approach, and the spread of institutional corruption. We also condemn all practices, whether intentional or spontaneous, which try to link the future of minorities in Syria to any political system. We are Syrian citizens with the desire to build a free democratic civil society and to hold us accountable for any regime that threatens Christians and their future in this country" (member of the group, personal communication, 3 December 2016).

Other Christian activists have worked to raise awareness among their Christian communities about the revolution and its goals. They wanted to challenge the regime discourse that tried to frame the revolutionaries as Sunni terrorists who would like to massacre the Christians. Among one such group was Bassel Shehadeh, a young film director from Damascus who went to the city of Homs to document the revolution through his videos and to train other revolutionary activists to make their own videos. He was killed in May 2012 as the regime bombed the city (Sabbagh, 2015, pp. 84-86).

In cities such as Aleppo, Homs, Al-Qamishli and Latakia, Christian activists have taken part in demonstrations and sit-ins. In one of the demonstrations in Homs, for example, the protest was led by a Christian woman carried on the shoulders of the protesters (Christian activist from the city of Homs, personal communication, 22 May 2016).

Many of these Christian activists have been arrested; some of them several times, others lost their lives. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (2012), 69 Syrian Christians were killed by the Syrian security forces from the beginning of the Syrian Revolution until December 2012 and at least 450 were arrested up until December 2014 (Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2014).

A few religious figures have also sided with the revolution, such as Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, an Italian Jesuit who founded the monastic community of *Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi* in the region of Damascus. He was expelled by the Syrian regime because of his support for the Syrian uprising. However, he entered Syria several times through the opposition controlled areas until he was kidnapped in July 2013 when he was in the city of Raqqa in an attempt to open a dialogue with the leaders of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS) to free political prisoners. His last post on Facebook on 27 July 2013 reads:

"Dear friends, I came today to the city of Raqqa and I feel happy for two reasons: the first is that I am in the land of Syria, the homeland and in a liberated city, the second reason is the wonderful welcome by this beautiful city. I enjoyed a wonderful Ramadan night with the people on the streets walking freely and harmoniously. It is a picture of the homeland we want for all Syrians. Of course, nothing is perfect but starting is good. Pray for me to succeed in the task for which I have come. The revolution is not expectations but commitment! Peace be upon you and I wish a wonderful month of Ramadan for all of us."

In addition, the Syrian opposition includes several Christian figures, such as George Sabra, chief negotiator for the High Negotiations Committee, and there are even Christians in the Free Syrian Army, including Assad Hanna, a member of the Free Syrian Army Northern Division's political

office. The Assyrian Democratic Organisation was also among the founding members of the Syrian National Council in October 2011 and one of its well-known members, Abdelahad Steifo, is Vice President of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.

With the militarisation of the revolution, many of these Christian activists moved toward humanitarian work. Their Christian family names make it easier for them to pass through regime checkpoints to deliver aid to areas under siege (Christian activist engaged in a humanitarian work, personal communication, 19 May 2016).

As the regime started to adopt the "protection of the minorities" discourse, and the opposition adopted a more Sunni Islamic discourse, the Christians supporting the revolution started to insist on their religious identity in order to show to both sides, the regime and the opposition, that the uprising is not only Sunni, even though many of them would have refused earlier to be identified by their religious identity. Answering a question about the number of Christians who were part of the revolutionary organisational committees in Homs, a Christian activist replied: "I am not sure. We did not use to identify each other with our religion. We only thought of this after the regime started to use the discourse on protecting religious minorities, and we wanted to prove that there are also Christians supporting the revolution" (Christian activist from the city of Homs, 22 May 2016).

One common feature of most of the Christian youths who supported the revolution is that most of them were already involved in political and social activities before March 2011. Bassel Shehadeh is a case in point. Bassel took part in different voluntary activities before, such as delivering aid for the displaced families from the Syrian Jezira region due to the draught.

Christian Voices Supporting the Regime

However, Christian voices have sided with the Syrian regime, including many top ranked religious leaders. The leaders of the different Syrian churches rejected the call for regime change from the beginning of the uprising, and asked their followers not to participate in the protests against the regime. Already in March 2011, the Council of Bishops in Damascus issued a statement insisting that:

"What is happening in our country is a foreign conspiracy in which, unfortunately, internal actors have been mixed up and the malicious media outlets have tried to distort the bright image that Syria enjoys at home and abroad. We thank God that these conspiracies have not reached their goal and purpose. The beloved Syria was and will remain impervious to the enemies of the nation

in the unity of its people of different sects, the cohesion of its people, their awareness, their deep faith and their love for their homeland." [3]

Another example of Christian religious actors supporting the Syrian regime is Father Ilyas Zahlawi, priest, intellectual and founder of the Choir of Joy. The Choir of Joy was founded in 1977 and includes more than 500 members. Bashar al-Assad supported the Choir before 2011 as part of his new approach to emphasise tolerance of the regime towards religious minorities, particularly the Christians. After 2011, the Choir organised concerts in Syria and in different European countries during which it insisted on its support for the Syrian regime as the protector of the Christian minority in Syria. In December 2015, Bashar al-Assad and his wife visited the Notre Dame de Damas church where the choir was practising for its Christmas concert.

Other Christians went even further and decided to take up arms to support the Syrian regime, within the frame of the National Defense Units (pro-regime militias under the control of the Syrian army) as is the case of militias based in the region of Wadi-el-Nassara near Homs. The group was founded by a Christian businessperson close to the regime. Moreover, the National Defense Units established in Al-Suqaylabiyah and in Mahardah near the city of Hama, inhabited by Christians. The members of these units have often been trained by the Syrian national army. Their main mission is to protect the Christian neighbourhoods and to manage checkpoints. While leadership and funders of these units are figures close to the Syrian regime, their members are not necessarily all pro-Assad. According to one senior religious leader, Christians in his area are willing to take up arms to defend their neighbourhoods against attack from armed Islamic groups but this does not translate into support for the regime. They refuse to serve with the military and are unwilling to fight for this regime. Many believe the regime cares little for their safety (Syrian religious figure, personal communication, 22 September 2016). In addition, for many Christian youths who are required to join the military, applying to join the National Defense Units represented an escape. Instead of being sent to the battlefield in areas like Aleppo, these Christian youths would only serve for a few hours every day in their own neighbourhood while living with their families (Masouh, 2015, pp. 94-96).

In the city of Al-Hassakah also, one part of the Christian Sutoro armed militia has sided with the regime. The Sutoro (meaning "security" or "protection" in the Syriac language) forces were established in March 2013 and are present in the cities of Al-Hassakah, Al-Qamishli, Malkiah and

[3] To read the full statement on the website of the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate (in Arabic), see: http://www.syrianorthodox.com/readnews.php?id=888

Qahtaniya. The group includes youths from different Assyrian groups, such as the Syriac Union Party (SUP), the Assyrian Democratic Organisation (ADO) and the Syria Mother Youth Caucus. It first refused to take a political side and focused on protecting Christian neighbourhoods. However, it could not resist the political pressure from the two main political actors in the region, the regime and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). A split took place after a visit by the regime's National Defense Unit to the Sutoro headquarter in Al-Qamishli, where they offered the Christian militia the Syrian flag and the picture of Bashar al-Assad to be put in their office. The Syria Mother Youth Caucus supported this move, while the SUP and the ADO rejected it, leading to a split within these forces, with one faction supporting the regime, particularly in the city of Al-Qamishli, where the regime still has a presence, and the other supporting the Kurdish authority. The two factions kept the Arabic name but with different English transliteration: Sootoro for the pro-regime militia and Sutoro for the pro-Kurdish group (Hanna & Hourani, 2016, p. 7).

Yet both of these groups – those who support the regime or the revolution – are a minority among Christians. The majority are neither with the regime nor with the opposition. They look sceptically toward the revolution, particularly after its Islamisation. Their political attitudes vary over time and from one geographical area to another. Unlike those who support the regime or the revolution, this group has no definite political position in the current struggle. They simply care for their survival.

The Majority of Syrian Christians and the Question of Survival

With the militarisation and then Islamisation of the Syrian uprising in 2012-2013, many Christians lost interest in the question of supporting the regime or the opposition but rather focused on how to survive this armed conflict. For many of them, both sides were not concerned with their safety but were following only their political interests. An example of this trend is the Syriac Orthodox Bishop in Aleppo, Youhanna Ibrahim. According to Bishop Ibrahim, both the opposition and the regime committed mistakes, and they should return to wisdom in order to stop the bloodshed. Bishop Ibrahim refused to follow the regime line of accusing the opposition forces of attacking the Christians, and insisted that "there is no persecution of Christians and there is no single plan to kill Christians. Everyone respects Christians," adding that "bullets are random and not targeting the Christians because they are Christians" ("Syria´s Beleaguered Christians", 2015). Ibrahim also resisted the idea of allowing the Christians in Aleppo to take up arms to defend themselves against the opposition groups that then controlled large parts of Aleppo. Instead of supporting one side of the conflict over the other, Bishop Ibrahim tried to play a mediatory role. However, he was

kidnapped together with the Greek Orthodox Archbishop Paul Yazigi in April 2013 while travelling to negotiate the release of kidnapped persons.

The attacks against the churches are a clear example of Bishop Ibrahim's point about Christians being caught in the violence committed by both sides of the conflict. Both the regime forces and the opposition groups are targeting churches. In its report "Targeting Christian Places of Worship in Syria" released in 2015, the Syrian Network for Human Rights documented 63 churches attacked since March 2011: 40 by the regime, six by ISIS, one by the al-Nusra Front, 14 by armed opposition factions, and two by unidentified groups. In addition, 11 churches turned into military or administrative bases: six by the regime forces, two by ISIS, one by the al-Nusra Front, and two by opposition groups (Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2015).

Trapped between both the opposition and the regime, the majority of Syrian Christians is currently facing two main challenges. From the opposition side, they fear the growing influence of radical Islamist groups and, from the regime side, they fear the deterioration of the regime's capacity to offer basic services, including guaranteeing security in its own areas.

The Rise of Radical Islamism

The increasing influence of the Islamic militias within the revolutionary scene has fuelled fear among the Christians of the alternative to the al-Assad regime. These Islamic militias include both al-Qaeda and ISIS. Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (former al-Nusra Front) appeared in late 2011 calling for Jihad against the Syrian regime, while ISIS officially announced its presence in April 2013, and expanded its control to include large areas of the provinces of Raqqa, Aleppo, Deir Al-Zour, Idlib and Al-Hasakah in only one year.

The decline of the Free Syrian Army's control over the growing Islamist factions left the revolutionary scene for these Islamist groups to represent the opposition to the regime. The emergence of these Jihadist organisations, in addition to a number of Islamist factions such as the Army of Islam and the movement of Ahrar al-Sham, contributed to the rise of fear among the Christian communities, in particular those who live close to these groups' areas of influence.

From their side, Syrian Islamic factions have failed to address the fears of Christians; on the contrary, in many cases they have used violence against religious minorities. This is particularly the case of ISIS. After its control of Raqqa in summer 2014, ISIS issued a number of restrictions on the Christian community in the city, including paying tax in exchange for their safety; not making renovations to churches, displaying crosses or other religious symbols outside churches, ringing church bells or praying in public; not carrying arms; and following other rules imposed by ISIS on

their daily lives. ISIS offered Christians three choices: to accept these conditions, to convert to Islam or to reject these rules and risk being killed ("Syria Crisis: ISIS Imposes Rules on Christians in Raqqa", 2014). In addition, in February 2015, ISIS attacked the Assyrian villages in the Khabour region and held more than 200 people including women and children hostages for more than a year until the Assyrian Church of the East paid a ransom to release most of them ("Islamic State Releases Assyrian Christian Hostages", 2016).

Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham tried to adopt a different discourse towards the Christians but it often failed. The case of the village of Ma'loulah is a clear example. Ma'loulah is a majority Christian town where Western Neo-Aramaic is still spoken. The town tried to maintain a neutral position during the conflict. However, the rebel forces led by the al-Nusra Front attacked the city in September 2013, and in December 2013 kidnapped 13 nuns from their convent and held them as hostages for three months. This move has sent negative messages to other Christian communities in different Syrian cities, even though the nuns were freed afterwards and said they were kindly treated ("Syria Crisis: Nuns Freed by Rebels Arrive in Damascus", 2014).

Another example is the city of Idlib, which was captured by Jaish al-Fath, an alliance of Islamist groups led by the al-Nusra Front, in March 2015. While the Islamist coalition tried to calm down the fears of the Christians in the city, they could not enforce these rules on all their fighters, and foreign fighters from al-Nusra killed two Christians after claims they worked in a liquor store (Barnard, 2015).

All these incidents have increased the fear among Christian communities all over Syria. Most Christians do not differentiate between the different Islamist militias and believe that they will be the one to pay the highest price if any of these militias invade their areas.

State Institution Efficiency

The lack of basic public services raises another concern for many Christians. In Aleppo, some Christians have shown discontent with the poor public services provided by the state and accused the regime of focusing its investment on the coastal region only. Private and public investment has been shifting since 2011 to the coastal area. According to Jihad Yazigi (2016), "in 2015, for instance, 32 percent of the large private investments licensed by the Syrian Investment Agency (SIA) were located in the Tartous and Latakia provinces, while only 27 percent were located in Damascus and Aleppo. By comparison, in 2010 Damascus and Aleppo attracted a combined 40.5 percent of the projects licensed by the SIA compared with only 4.5 percent for Latakia and Tartous."

In another Syrian city, a senior religious leader warned the regime not to test the patience of Christians in his area because of the deterioration in public services, including the supply of clean water, electricity and gas (Syrian religious figure, personal communication, 22 September 2016).

The lack of security represents an important concern for Christians living in the regime-controlled areas. Many Syrians accuse the regime of being responsible for this situation as its amnesty in 2011 allowed a number of common criminals to be released and then recruited in the regime's militias (Becker, 2014, p. 3). In the secured zone of Latakia, the kidnapping of young Christians has become a major concern for Christian families. Latakia is often considered one of the quiet areas relatively isolated from the armed conflict in the rest of the Syrian territory. Some Christians accuse security officers of being involved in these crimes as way to gain money (Christian civil society activist based in Latakia, personal communication, 22 June 2017).

In Damascus, some Christians who used to support the Syrian regime now complain about the heavy presence of Shia militias in Christian areas, such as Bab Tuma. This presence has put social pressure on Christian families and, in many cases, obliged them to change their way of living. When asked why the Syrian regime allows this strong Shia presence in Christian areas that have supported the regime, the answer given by a Christian activist was "do you think the regime can stop them?" The Syrian state's inability to enforce security and order, and to delegate this authority to other Lebanese or Iraqi militias, represents a serious concern for the Christians of Damascus (Christian journalist based in Damascus, personal communication, 23 March 2017).

What Policies to Protect the Christians in Syria?

As a result of these challenges, many Syrian Christians have decided to leave their homes and move to other cities inside Syria or to leave the country. The migration of Syrian Christians is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, it has been taking place over the last five decades. However, it has significantly accelerated in the past few years due to the armed conflict, particularly among the youth, who saw no future in the current situation. Moreover, many Christian youths, as is the case of other religious communities, wanted to escape the compulsory military service (Davison, 2016). While there are no official statistics, estimated numbers of Syrian Christians fell from 15% of the total population in the early 1980s to 4.8% in 2008 (Kawakibi, 2010). Currently, the figure is estimated at no more than 2%. In cities like Deir Al-Zour and Raqqa, there is almost no Christian presence. Aleppo, Hama and Homs witnessed a sharp decline in the number of Christian inhabitants. The original Christian communities in Damascus, Latakia and Wadi al-Nassara have remained largely stable, and have often hosted displaced Christians from other cities (Oehring, 2017, p. 15).

These developments have raised concerns inside and outside Syria about the future of the Christians in Syria and the Middle East at large, and what policies shall be adopted to protect the Christian communities and ensure their future in the region.

Some countries have reacted to this question by favouring the acceptance of Syrian Christian refugees, as is the case of Australia. Data shows that 78% of 18,563 refugees from Syria and Iraq granted entry from July 2015 to January 2017 identified themselves as Christian (Patrick, 2017). The French authorities have also declared it will help facilitate visas for Iraqi and Syrian Christians seeking refuge in France (Elzas, 2015). In addition, US President Donald Trump said that persecuted Christians from Syria would be given priority over other Syrian refugees (Burke, 2017). Moreover, Christian religious organisations have been offering help to the Christian communities still living in Syria, as is the case with Aid to the Church in Need, a pontifical foundation of the Catholic Church, which is offering food, shelter and medicine to 2,200 Christian families in Aleppo and Al-Hassakah.

However, such an approach that focuses solely on protecting Syrian Christians is unlikely to improve the situation of Christian communities in the Middle East in the long term. In a meeting between a Syrian bishop and a German official, the latter asked how the international community could protect Christians in Syria. The bishop answered that they should work to protect all Syrians, not only Christians (Bishop E. Toume, personal communication, 22 September 2016). This reaction is idealistic but also rational. The bishop knows very well that addressing the challenges facing the Christians cannot be done independently from addressing the challenges facing the region as a whole. The future of Christians in Syria and the Middle East at large is strongly connected to the future of other religious and ethnic communities and it would be naïve to think that the solution to the current crisis of Christians invokes the adoption of measures that would protect only Christians, while ignoring the others. What is needed is a wider approach that goes beyond narrow sectarian solutions to tackle the ongoing armed conflict, the relation between the different religious and ethnic communities, and the shape of the new Syrian state and political regime that should be built after the end of the war.

Ending the Ongoing Armed Conflict

The future of Christians in Syria is not connected to the presence of the al-Assad regime. Bishop Youhanna Ibrahim admitted that Christians have serious concerns over their future in Syria, but he insisted that "our concerns are not related to those who will come to power, we are afraid that whoever will come may close their eyes and ears, or will not like to deal with us" ("Syria's Christians Caught in the Middle", 2012).

The continuation of the war is itself the biggest threat to the presence of Christians in Syria. Regardless of the winners and losers of the current armed conflict, reaching a compromise between the different sides of the conflict would in itself calm many of the Christians' concerns about their future. Such a political compromise needs to be not only imposed but also cherished by the different political groups in order for it to ensure stability. Political solutions based on coercion would only lead to further escalation on the ground between the different religious and ethnic communities, even if all political parties are involved. Rather, such a compromise should be achieved through a dialogue that takes into consideration the concerns of the different players.

Building Trust between the Different Religious and Ethnic Communities

Rebuilding trust between the different religious and ethnic communities is an important step to ensure a durable and stable peace in Syria. The Syrian Civil War has left many wounds between Syria's different religious and ethnic communities, including the Christian communities, as with the Kurdish-Christian and Sunni-Christian tensions. Hence, in parallel to the political process, there is also a need to work on the societal level to build trust between the different Syrian communities in order to overcome the experience of the conflict. Given their legitimacy within their own groups, religious leaders can play an important role in this process. Bishop Elia Toume of Wadi Al Nassara in the region of Homs offers a positive experience in this regard. He established in his region centres for peace and reconciliation mainly targeting the children from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds. These centres are perceived by Bishop Toume as an important step towards a larger societal reconciliation in his region. Through its different classes, these centres provide physical, educational and psychological support to help the children overcome the experience of war (Bishop E. Toume, personal communication, 7 July 2017).

However, to ensure a positive role for Christian religious figures in similar reconciliation processes, they should avoid taking political sides in the current conflict in order to gain the trust of the different ethnic and religious groups. The decision of some senior religious figures to declare their full support for the regime has harmed their image and that of the Christian community as a whole, among other religious communities. It would be more productive for the different churches to focus instead on developmental projects that serve all Syrians regardless of their religious and ethnic backgrounds. Such an approach, as practised by Bishop Toume, would help to bridge the gap between the different religious and ethnic communities and decrease the level of religious polarisation, particularly in the areas that experienced armed confrontations, as in Aleppo and Homs.

Reforming State Institutions

As shown in the earlier section, the main challenge facing Christians in Syria is the growing weakness of state institutions and the increasing fragmentation within the regime's forces. In this case, the weakness of state institutions refers to state institutions' inability to enforce order, to maintain security and to provide public services for its citizens.

Within this frame, several recommendations can be made on the shape of the new political entity after the end of the war: state institutions and particularly the security forces need to be reformed to increase efficiency and lower corruption, a democratic and transparent decision-making process should be consolidated and all forms of religious discrimination should be terminated.

With regard to Church-state relations, a return to the old *millet* deal that governed the relation between the state and Christians in Syria prior to 2011 is not a viable option anymore as the two parts of the deal have changed much since 2011. On the one hand, state institutions, including the security sector, have significantly weakened since 2011; on the other, the Christian religious leadership has less control over the Christian sphere. With weak state institutions, which have in many cases been unable to protect Christians, and a less powerful Church leadership that is unable to control the anger of its followers, the pact between the regime and the Church is unlikely to work. Rather, there is a need to work on a new social contract where the new Syrian state should keep the same distance from all religious and ethnic communities and fully enforce the principles of citizenship and the rule of law where Syrian Christians would have a chance to claim their religious and political rights as Syrian citizens.

Conclusion

The issue of the future of Christians in Syria has been debated extensively over the past few years within both religious and political circles in the Middle East, Europe and the US.

This chapter has analysed the situation of Syrian Christians through the different phases of the Syrian Revolution and has reached a number of conclusions that challenge some of the arguments taken for granted with regard to this topic.

Christians in Syria are politically divided just like other religious communities in the country, and they cannot be treated as one homogenous group. Moreover, their political position cannot be defined as being for or against the regime. Syrian Christians' political attitude is shaped by their interests in safety and public services and might change from one point in time to another and one geographical area to another.

The question that the majority of the Christians are facing is not whether to side with the regime or with the opposition but rather how to survive the risks posed by both sides. From the opposition side, they fear the growing influence of radical Islamist groups and, from the regime side, they fear the deterioration of the regime's capacity to offer basic services including guaranteeing security in their areas.

The future of Christians in Syria and in other countries in the Middle East is strongly connected to the future of their states and other religious communities. Hence, the struggle for a better future for Christians is the same struggle for all other citizens for democracy, rule of law and full citizenship. The discourse of certain European and American voices from both state and civil society circles concerning the protection of the Christians in the Middle East can only worsen the situation of Christian communities. Such discourse reinforces some Islamist propaganda that presents Christians as the protégés or even the agents of the West and hence reinforces religious polarisation in these societies. Instead, Western political voices need to frame a discourse that addresses the problems of all religious and ethnic communities in the region, not only those of Christians, and to support their struggle for efficient state institutions and democratic political regimes.

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