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National Reconciliation and Protection of Minorities

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A general elevated view of a church and a mosque in Aleppo, northern Syria, 02 February 2017 © Youssef Badawi / EPA



Arab Reform Initiative

The 2011 Syrian revolution cannot be detached from the historical events that the country had experienced for decades. The current Syrian regime, established in 1970 by Hafez al-Assad and resumed by his son Bashar in 2000, has been shaken by many divisions in Syrian society, to which the regime has managed to adjust to remain in power.

In the 1980s, several protest movements emerged within society and were violently repressed, resulting in thousands of deaths and the entrenchment of the culture of fear. The events of the 1980s had very few repercussions in the West. This was due to two main factors: on the one hand, some considered the Damascus regime a reliable ally and, on the other, access to information was not as democratized as at present thanks to social networks and satellite news channels.

After 20 years of brutal repression, some Syrian intellectuals tried to make their voices heard again in the days following Bashar al-Assad's accession to power in 2000, as the heir of the Republic after the death of his father Hafez (1970-2000).

Optimistic observers believed in a "Damascus Spring" long before the Arab springs but was hastily repressed. In 2005, the Damascus Declaration for National Democratic Change was signed by diverse sectors of the opposition, including communists, Islamists and liberals. Despite the moderate nature of the petitions formulated, repression was again a reality.

Submerged in a civil war since 2011, Bashar al-Assad's regime seems to be strengthened from its confrontation with Sunni Islamists but also with pro-Kurd militias backed by Shiite powers.

The chapter will analyse how the regime has been exploiting sectarian and confessional divisions, in order to gain political power. It will try to deconstruct several myths used in Syrian regime political rhetoric in order to present itself as the final line of defence for minorities in general. Finally, the chapter will provide some recommendations on how to address the false divisions of the Syrian society created by the regime, in order to be able to reconstruct the Syrian state based on a strong civil society.



The Foundations of the Al-Assad Family Regime: A Defective Management of Diversity

The premises of confessionalism and the political exploitation of the question of minorities go far back in the history of the region. The two most recent episodes occurred in the final years of the Ottoman Empire (1516-1920) and under the French mandate (1920-1946). The occupying forces used the confessional approach to better control the societies under their supervision. Thus, the prevailing international forces of the time (France, the United Kingdom and Russia) strengthened the confessional approach of the empire when it was weakened by imposing rules on it concerning the management of the “minorities”.

The post-independence government found it hard to build a nation based on a real social contract despite the dynamism of Syrian society in the late 1940s and 1950s embodied by charity associations, literary salons and social movements always ideologically or organizationally linked to political movements. During those years, Syrians experienced a glimmering democracy with a relatively free parliamentary life, “real” elections and a blossoming press.

The alternation of brief democratic periods and coups after the end of the British mandate prevented democracy from taking root within Syrian society and strengthened ethnic, religious, confessional, tribal and regional affiliations. The coming to power of the Baath party via the 8 March 1963 coup confirmed this tendency and contributed to maintaining and even worsening the existing ethnic and religious divisions.

The new regime skilfully monitored, supported and developed the divisions between communities. The political and security measures adopted left no room for free political expression. Both associative life and the media space were appropriated. Affiliation to the party was the only criterion of emancipation for citizens.



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Inspired by the experience of the German Democratic Republic, Hafez al-Assad, who took power in 1970, introduced a pluralism controlled by the National Progressive Front in 1972, which at first was formed by five parties but whose composition constantly evolved. As a reward for their affiliation, its members were given positions and material advantages but could not carry out any real political activity.

Since his coming to power, Hafez al-Assad sought to weaken the two most powerful institutions in the country: the army and the Baath party. He promoted special units and confined the Baath militants to surveillance activities of his entourage in exchange for favours. After his visit to North Korea in 1973, Assad also introduced the idea of monitoring society at all ages. Thus in 1974 he created the Baath Vanguard Organization for primary school pupils. In secondary school, they had to join the Revolutionary Youth Union and, if their services were appreciated, they would be given higher grades to enter highly demanded university courses. This monitoring of society was not limited to youths: we find it in trade union life or women's organizations and always under the banner of what the regime called "people's democratic organizations".

A highly individualized and atomized politicization emerged as a result of the culture of fear. From 1970, there was no longer any opposition but only opponents, disparate and scattered voices who lacked the means to come together or organize. Faced with the early uprisings in 1976, the regime made a decision to which it has firmly held: to stress the radical Islamist component in order to retreat into a confrontation that enables it to play the role of a "secular regime". In this climate, Syrian intellectuals were forced or almost forced to choose between three options: co-optation (grants, positions), corruption or exile. However, this exile did not give way to a truly structured opposition.

Despite the "unifying" and "progressive" discourses of the first period of the Baath party's reign (1963-1970), it must be noted that the confessional approach was one of the main pillars of the management of public life in general and political life in particular. One only needs to analyse the recruiting and dismissal movements that took place within the armed and security forces to understand the relatively discreet sectarian orientation of the leaders of the time.



This political sectarianism and the exploitation of the confessional approach that appeared between 1963 and 1970 was systematized and institutionalized by the Assad family from 1970 onward. Thus, it was no longer belonging to a community that mattered most but rather allegiance to the leading class, the clan in power. This allegiance could comprise a heterogeneous mix of ethnic and confessional communities. What must be analysed is the fact that it is a minority of the power rather than the power of a minority.

Before 2011: Syrian Christians or Christians from Syria?

Christians are at the centre of the concerns expressed by international bodies about the future of Syria. Although they do not by themselves represent all religious minorities in the most basic numerical definition, they are nevertheless the catalysts for the prospects of minorities.

“I am proud of being Syrian and Arab. In contrast, I find it hard to encourage my son to continue on the same path ...”. A Christian father explains the resentment that spread among the community ranks in the years before the revolution.¹

The Church leaders I was able to interview for a study² on the migration of Christians expressed their concern about this migration trends. For them, the most serious aspect is that Christians feel forced to leave the land that is the cradle of their religion. The official stances of the different churches must be analysed by taking into account their amicable relations with the political authorities, on the one hand, and their desire to avoid any discord, on the other. To justify their stance, the clergy stressed the qualities of the regime from their point of view: its “openness” to religious minorities, notably Christians, and the establishment of the necessary conditions for a “stability” that reassures the faithful in a troubled region. To understand this stance, we can speak of a “commitment” to the political power, showing “a submission to it that may become a sharing of interests.”³

Few religious Christian figures have opposed the regime or adopted a critical stance in an open way. The almost unconditional support for the political and



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economic measures adopted seems to be unanimous. This attitude is not exclusive to religious leaders but is also shared by much of Christian society, notably its wealthiest class, who were frightened by what had happened to their Christian neighbours in Iraq. Therefore, for many of them, the regime represented the last line of defence against radical Islamism.

In this context, it is worth pointing out that the internal movements of Christians from certain rural regions to big cities was mainly due to the lack of economic development of the country as a whole and, more specifically, of these areas. For the north-eastern region of Syria, one of the wealthiest in theory, where Syrians have always lived, there is also another factor that made them flee to other inland cities, notably Aleppo, and abroad, notably Sweden and Germany: Christians accused Kurds of having made them sell their farms at extremely low prices.

The Orthodox bishop of this region, Matta Rohom,⁴ argued that the marks of the Ottoman period had never vanished. Thus, he accused Westerners of having always encouraged Christians to leave. The bishop considered that the West was responsible for the rise of fundamentalism in the region. “The French returned Khomeini to Iran, while Saudi Arabia, which adopts Wahhabism, is supported by the United States.”⁵ In contrast, as was common among religious leaders, he referred cautiously to the weight of the security repression that may have encouraged some to go into exile.

The Catholic Bishop of Aleppo, Jean-Clément Jambart, explained his role within the community: “Our faithful are a minority and feel neglected. So, they gather around the Church in search of guidance and support from the bishop. If the political power is democratized and transformed, perhaps our way of doing things will evolve but for the time being this is not the case.”⁶ This same bishop who mentioned democracy is at present the spokesman for the Damascus regime and is successfully helping to restore its image in the West in general and in Europe in particular. For his part, the Chaldean Archbishop Antoine Odo⁷ explained that Eastern Christians must reconsider their attachment to countries that are hostile to them. Why continue to envisage their existence in a country “that offers youths no more than uncertainties”?

In a debate on emigration held in March 2006, five years before the popular



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revolt, Bishops Jeanbart and Odo debated the situation of Christians, crises and prospects. They endeavoured to emphasize the importance of remaining in the country. A participant highlighted an alarming statistic: in Syria in 2006 only 7% of Christians remained. They accounted for over 15% in the early 1970s. This figure was adjusted downwards by several members of the church who asked to remain anonymous: some said, “we account for less than 3% of the Syrian population”, while others claimed “we are still above 5%”. The Catholic bishop in the region of Homs, Asidor Battikha, expressed his concern about how young Christians see this situation as they consider that “this land is not for [them], [they] don’t feel that [they] have a future here”.

As in Syria, Saddam Hussein instrumentalized Iraqi Christians. The situation of Christians in Iraq after the 2003 American invasion also made a strong impact on the Syrians. The Christians of Iraq were targeted by several attacks of the radical groups who considered them as close to the old regime. On their way to exile, they reached Syria with stories about how they were treated by radical Islamists, who destroyed their houses, killed their children, prohibited their prayers, humiliated their prominent citizens and blew up their churches. This caused increasing fear among Christians from Syria.

Thus, a feeling of insecurity developed among Christians from Syria long before 2011. The future of Christians in the region was increasingly seen as dark and under threat. A deep-rooted fear emerged concerning the forms that the constant rise in religiosity took among some Muslims. This was compounded by official propaganda that “sees Islamists everywhere” and seeks to make it believe that “fundamentalists”, “Wahhabists”, “Salafists” and “Takfirists” are ready to attack the state and society and, therefore, the only salvation would lie in subordination to power.

The “withdrawal” of ideologies as well as the weakening of secular currents, the abandonment of democratic experiences, the failure of attempts at socio-economic development and the increase of fundamentalist movements are some of the factors that currently frighten Christians from Syria, or those who remain.

Minorities, Myth and Reality



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Prevalent among the strategies of the current regime in Syria are the exploitation of the religious question and the appropriation of minorities. The current Syrian regime uses increased control of the minorities and clientelist relations to impose on them total domination; the privileges granted to certain groups in exchange for their submission may involve sanctions for attempts at emancipation.

In order to better understand the situation of the “majority” and that of the “minorities” it is important to try to deconstruct several “founding” myths of the political rhetoric on Syria.

The first myth, widespread among certain Westerners, consists of defining the Syrian regime as secular. Hundreds of religious centres have been founded with a view to creating an official Islam following the example of the tight control exercised on the Church since 1970. This tendency became a reality after the regime managed to violently suppress the uprising of the Muslim Brotherhood in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Since then, it has kept religion away from the political sphere.

Reformist and enlightened currents [movements?] had not well understood their place in this scenario. The regime systematically resisted all progressive initiatives within religion with the help of an “army” of submissive and manipulated religious people. These practices resulted in increased fragmentation within society long before 2011. Tribal, regional, community, confessional or religious identity became more important than national identity.

It is also necessary to deconstruct a myth widespread in the West that defines the Syrian regime as that of the Alawi community. As mentioned before, it is “a minority of the power rather than the power of a minority.” The minority can be made up of Sunnis, Alawis, Christians or Druze who pay allegiance to this power. They are a minority in the political arena but even so they did not emerge from a single minority. Part of the Sunni middle class of Damascus, Aleppo and other cities, for instance, supports the regime and has benefitted from systematic corruption, smuggling and public markets for years. Its “survival” therefore depends on the durability of the system.

Finally, the third myth to be deconstructed is that of Christians. Christians are no



more under threat than Muslims in Syria: all those who do not support Daesh are threatened, as are those who do not accept the stranglehold and repression of the regime. Syrians as a whole, whether Christian or Muslim, are caught in the crossfire. However, the scenes of organized jubilation within the Christian community after the retaking of East Aleppo by the regime in December 2016, at the cost of thousands of lives and tens of thousands of displaced people, will leave incurable wounds in the short term. Once again, the exploitation of Christian “fear” by an acute Machiavellianism has a very negative impact on all possible attempts at reconciliation.

The Exploitation of the Islamist Argument

In the Syrian framework, and after a war that has lasted for six years, a question emerges: is there “a real Islamist danger”? Will the country inevitably head towards an Islamist fundamentalist system that must be nipped in the bud in order to ensure a constructive reconciliation?

Syrian conservatism is well rooted in the religious practices both of the country and the region. However, since the creation of the modern state and the foundation of a socio-political system inspired by the West with its ideological diversities, Syria has experienced a movement of secular reform and a school of thought that could influence a society highly marked by religion. Since the late 19th century, bold and outspoken writings have addressed the religious question from three perspectives: interpretation, manipulation and reforms. Then, the political scene saw the creation of secular parties and the development of a “purified” spirituality independently of the political sphere. The 1940s and 1950s also saw a social and cultural development far from the religious field, although this was not its target.

This evolution enabled the establishment of a national platform, which brought together seculars and conservatives while agreeing on the principle of sharing and accepting the other as he is. Later, in the 1960s and 1970s the progressive and liberal ideologies deeply marked society in spite of the authoritarian nature of the political system. The development, almost without religious taboos, of a wide



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range of artistic and literary production during this period is also related to this. Over those years, political Islam in Syria was embodied by the Muslim Brotherhood who in the 1950s had sat in the democratically elected parliament, something rare in the history of contemporary Syria.

Violent confrontations put an end to this “cohabitation” in the Syrian political scene. Between the early 1960s and late 1970s, this political movement became the sworn enemy of the power of the Baath party. Later, the regime focused on the creation of an official Islam.

A clear revival of the demonstrative practice of faith is observed. The number of women wearing a veil grew exponentially in the years before the 2011 uprising, religious books had great success and the centres of religious studies increased. There was also a “violent” rise in religious expression in social and cultural practices.

Obviously, the regime, in search of legitimacy, let it happen and made concessions. The authorities had no fear of losing control of the phenomenon that they were trying to channel. Sermons were monitored but small mosques escaped these controls. Despite the hypothetical adoption of the principles of secularism in the discourse but never in laws, religious school textbooks were still virulent with a high dose of conservatism. Tolerance of other “sects” of Islam was minimal but, in contrast, was quite permissive of Christians.

The regime had started to emit its religious “radiance” beyond the borders. Indeed, talks and meetings on religious issues increased. The scientific and cultural institutions diverted their focuses of interest toward religious studies or, in the best of cases, they always found the necessary link between their activity and religious references.

The Muslim Brotherhood, in its turn, published in 2004 the political project for Future Syria, in which they reject violence and call for the protection of human rights. They mention the institutional modern rule of law, the separation of powers and pluralism at a political, ethnic and religious level.

One of its leaders, Mounir al-Ghadban, exiled in London, reassured Christians about a possible coming to power of a party that emerged from political Islam. He



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considered that the regime benefits from this climate of fear to convince Christians and Westerners of securing its position and protecting it. This same leader stressed that the regime uses Islamists as a scarecrow and since then has been the refuge of all minorities. “The Islamic danger might devastate them: the hell of the regime is therefore better than the paradise of democracy.”⁸

In recent years, the abandonment felt by most Syrians sends some of the most desperate to the ranks of radical groups. In Aleppo, and during the siege in the last months of 2016 before its fall, the prevailing discourse among the population, whether religious or not, was that “we are damned because we are Muslims. Nobody worries about our situation because we are Sunnis ...”. Consequently, it is striking that some observers state that the Syrian revolution has been dominated by Islamists from the outset. The regime has understood all the benefits it could draw from the rise in radicalism by blowing on the embers of ignorance and obscurantism. Thus, on some occasions the regime and, on others, its regional “enemies” have done their best to ensure that radicalism is all-invasive.

In the West, the discourse according to which Bashar al-Assad’s regime would be the lesser evil has the wind in the sails today. Among entire sections of opinion, the Damascus dictator is seen as the final line of defence for minorities in general and the endangered Christian minority in particular. This perception is the result of a strategy that is yielding fruit: that of a regime that has always managed to skilfully focus on exploiting the division between the diverse components of Syrian society and use religion for purposes of domination. Far from protecting Christians, it has condemned them to their own fate. In a society in which freedom of expression and citizenship do not exist, the Assad family has begun by creating a complete religious hierarchy – both Christian and Muslim – under its thumb. The designation of muftis and bishops is subject to the approval of the all-powerful Syrian information services.

Some Western chancelleries are increasingly moving to a “forced” rapprochement in order to be able to possibly cooperate with the regime on terrorism. Western public opinion is obsessed, on the one hand, with Daesh and, on the other, with the persecution of minorities. Minorities are in danger, certainly, but no more than most of the population. With excessive coverage of their persecutions, we separate them from the other victims, which contributes to strengthening the feeling that



they are apart and a privileged caste. In Syria, this was the objective of the regime: to divide the communities to control them better, even if this means setting one against the other.

We ponder the actions of Daesh and the situation of threatened minorities but never the struggles of the new civil society that represents all citizens without distinction. The media also tends to marginalize the importance of the actions by young Syrians (the citizen journalists) who, with derisory resources and, at risk to their lives, continue to inform the world about the situation of the Syrian people, taken hostage between the loyal army backed by the death squads and the Jihadists of the Islamic States. It should be noted that these last few years have seen the emergence of a “true” civil society.

The four decades of dictatorship had almost destroyed the concept of civil society. The public space was taken over by the regime. By way of example, in March 2011, on the eve of the start of the revolt, there were around one hundred active civil associations, mostly charities, closely controlled by the regime. Today there are almost 2,000. Although many of them operate outside the territories for security reasons, they provide moral and material support to those who continue to resist there. The number of artists, writers, caricaturists, visual artists and creators that put their art at the service of this new society has exploded. A democratic movement is certainly underway despite the shortcomings.

The Persistent Risk of Sectarian Division

The crystallization of the confessional divisions and sectarian violence, whose main victims are the Sunni majority, is therefore one of the main threats to the region. Fighting against this phenomenon does not require a selective support policy, which would be in contradiction with European universalism, given the unprecedented level of violence suffered by the whole population.

Apart from the fact that it would not help to bring about democratic change, diverting attention from the crimes committed by the regime against the whole population, such a crystallization would also be dangerous for the minorities themselves. By widening the gaps and fractures between the components of Syrian society, by stigmatizing them based on their religious identity and by



linking some of them to foreign interests, it would threaten their geographical, historical and social integration, the only true guarantee of lasting protection of these “minorities”.

The message sent to the religious “majority”, who consider itself the victim of Bashar al-Assad’s regime, would also be catastrophic and lead to pushing the desperate into the arms of Daesh. In short, by adopting the sectarian logic of the Islamic State, we would risk giving it what it has not managed to acquire: a rooting in Syrian society. “The Syrian people are one” was just one of the first slogans of the revolution, based on a firm demand for social justice and equal rights to citizenship for all Syrians. Acting against the sectarian or confessional crimes perpetrated by the Syrian regime, Daesh and the Shiite militias that are holding sway in Syria and Iraq involves understanding the responsibility of the states that promote them. It is paramount to defend citizenship, in contrast to the old colonial recipes based on the exploitation of local senses of identity and of religious minorities.

If the populist and extremist trends developed in the shadow of social and economic crises in the West push decision-makers to fall into the trap, the price paid by all the protagonists will be high. This will breed, for example, an accelerated religious extremism, a steady mistrust among citizens and an increased rejection of the West.

After six years of conflict, the fear of an increase in sectarian division is gaining ground. The authorities’ dangerous game of manipulation is sowing some seeds of doubt in the ranks of the “silent minority”, despite the fierce attempts by intellectuals of the opposition to try to explain the exploitation of religious differences and to raise awareness among society of the dangers of such manipulation. This manipulation that tries to link the protest movement with “Jihadist Salafism” sometimes manages to gain reticent minds in Syrian society but also in the diplomatic circles of some Western chancelleries.

Recommendations by Way of Conclusion

1. **Strengthen** the role of the emerging civil society: These last few years of



suffering have seen the emergence of a “real” civil society, a concept that the four decades of dictatorship had almost annihilated. The public space was completely taken over by the regime. The Damascus regime had replaced the civil society organizations with “people’s” organizations following the example of practices developed in North Korea in order to monitor all sectors of society. Syrians who do not fear the division of the country organize themselves to ensure a peaceful and progressive transition, hoping that violence will end. They are convinced that their future is linked to their union. The new civil society will play a key role in the process of moral reconstruction after so many wounds and divisions. It will need powerful support, belief in its mission and backing for its fulfilment.

2. **Reconstruct** the education system on healthy foundations: After several decades when the school was the symbol of discrimination and submission, it is now time for the future generation to adopt the principles of citizenship. The first clash suffered by students is when they are obliged to separate between Muslims and Christians for religious lessons. It is there where the rupture begins. It will be enhanced at home by parents who have suffered the same treatment. Therefore, it will be inevitable to review the education system in depth, especially when lack of schooling is also a key challenge in Syria, with 3 million young Syrians outside the education system.
3. **Promote** a democratic culture that enables citizens to go beyond their primary identities (tribal, clan, regional, religious...) and mobilize to implement political and economic programmes in which these factors are no longer significant. The democratization of public life in Syria “is not an external demand. It is a profound desire felt within.”⁹ Thus, it is necessary to end the despotism that produces discrimination, the deprivation of rights and the exploitation of the religious question engendering a minority dimension.

More generally, Western countries must break with authoritarianisms; Western support for these regimes is one of the reasons they persist. If the support



disappears, the authoritarian regimes in the Arab world will be weakened.

4. **Managing diversity** in the region will be crucial in the next few years, and within the framework of reconstruction of the states or in the relations between the countries in the region. The catastrophic management of diversity adopted by dictatorships has given way to a fragmented society without a real national identity.
5. **Transitional justice** is paramount to rebuild permanent social cohesion. Turning the page will only serve to bury the causes of the massacre under moving sands.
6. **Constructive national dialogue** between the religious and non-religious actors is needed on the preceding points so that the above points are adopted collectively to lead to tangible outcomes.



Endnotes

1. Interviewed by the author in December 2006.
2. http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/8269/CARIM_A&SN_2008_02.pdf;jsessionid=D405CF213C3473FC0136775FC6E1F374?sequence=1
3. Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, head of the Monastery of Saint Moses the Ethiopian in the region of Damascus. He was expelled from the country by the government because of his commitment to peaceful revolution. He was kidnapped in July 2013 on his way to Raqqa, the capital of the Islamic State, when he endeavoured to start a dialogue with its leaders.
4. Interviewed by the author on 25 December 2006. He is currently in Sweden after having been prosecuted for his lack of loyalty to the regime.
5. Ibid.
6. Interviewed by the author in Aleppo in November 2006.
7. Interviewed by the author in Aleppo in November 2006.
8. Al-Ghadban, M. (26November2006). Les chrétiens de Syrie : n'ayez pas peur de la démocratie sur votre destin dans la région. *levantnews*. Retrieved from www.levantnews.com
9. Father Paolo Dall'Oglio. See note 2.



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