

Turning Perception into Reality: The Asad Regime and Syria's Christian Minority

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At the start of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, Bashar al-Asad first made the case that his regime was a bulwark protecting Syria's diverse population from the chaotic forces of sectarianism.¹ During the past three years the regime has consistently promoted its message that the state is fighting against an armed group of foreign-inspired terrorists, whose main goal is to murder Syria's vulnerable minorities or, at the very least, try to upset the ecumenical harmony that the regime and the Ba'th Party have promoted for decades. However, at least one Christian figure and secular political opposition leader, Michel Kilo, a long-time critic of Ba'thist authoritarianism, has forcefully argued to the contrary, namely that Syria's numerous ethnic and religious communities, and Christians in particular, fared well in modern Syria before the Ba'th Party came to power in 1963, and that they would continue to thrive long after the end of the Asad dictatorship.² Yet as violence escalated in the months after the start of civil unrest of March of 2011, Asad's claim to protect minorities was reinforced, and seemed to acquire additional validity. Today, with the threat of radical jihadi groups becoming ever greater, many Syrian Christians are feeling the pressures that have led approximately two thirds of Iraq's Christian minority to flee Iraq since 2003.³ For Syrian Christians there seem to be few good choices in an

¹ Bashar al-Asad's speech on March 30, 2011 argued that a foreign conspiracy was trying to coopt a very small number of people in Syria in order to foment chaos, sedition, and sectarianism, but he insisted that the government was committed to stability and reform and that the forces of sedition would not be able to "stir chaos and destroy the national fabric." An English translation of the transcript can be found online: http://www.al-bab.com/arab/docs/syria/bashar_assad_speech_110330.htm.

² Basheer al-Baker, "Michel Kilo: Syria's prudent dissident," *al-Akhbar English*, October 7, 2011, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/1009>

³ Jane Arraf, "As ISIS advances, what future for Iraqi Christians?," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 18, 2014, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2014/0618/As-ISIS-advances-what-future-for-Iraqi-Christians>.

environment where various religious sects and ethnic groups appear to be arming themselves and standing up for their own interests.

Indeed, the estimated two million Christians still living in Syria, who are located in or around nearly every major urban center of the country,⁴ appear to be solidly supportive of the regime for lack of a better alternative. Yet at the same time, well-known Christian anti-regime activists situated outside of Syria, such as George Sabra, the former head of the Syrian National Council, argue that Asad's message is flawed because a significant number of Syria's Christians continue to hope for a democratic future,⁵ and in reality Christians have only rarely been directly targeted as such (unlike their brethren in Iraq).⁶ Moreover, some Christian opposition leaders fear that Christian ties to the Asad regime may give new impetus to potential enemies, with Christians open to charges of guilt by association; for example, by aligning with Asad they are viewed as tacitly complicit in the alleged chemical attacks, barrel bombings, and the unlawful arrests of tens of thousands of men, women, and children during the past three years.

Syria's Christians are comprised of a variety of denominations and include several ethnic groups, such as the Armenians and Assyrians.⁷ Together, they make up nearly 10 percent of the Syrian population. Given the cultural diversity and the wide geographic spread of Syria's Christian population centers, it is hardly surprising that Christians were never fully united behind the anti-regime protests in 2011. There were a number of reports that in the first few months of the protest movement, Christians joined with their neighbors in the religiously mixed city of Homs and elsewhere to demonstrate in support of democratic reforms. They joined their Sunni Arab neighbors (c. 65% of Syria's total population) in chants such as "God, Syria, and Freedom alone!" However, as the protest movement took on a more obviously Sunni religious character and turned increasingly violent through the summer of 2011, a Christian-Muslim split seems to have occurred within the ranks of the opposition. At the same time, the regime released hundreds of radical Islamists from prisons while it arrested thousands of civilian activists who were not taking part in violence—moves that some analysts have said were aimed at deliberately radicalizing the

⁴ Max Fisher, "The one map that shows why Syria is so complicated," *Washington Post Blogs*, August 27, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2013/08/27/the-one-map-that-shows-why-syria-is-so-complicated/>.

⁵ Mohammed Nemr, (Trans. Rani Geha,) "Michel Kilo: elections will not grant Asad Legitimacy," *al-Monitor*, May 30, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2014/05/michel-kilo-syria-elections-regime-support-minorities.html>.

⁶ For instance, in the suicide bombing attack of October 31, 2010 inside Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad, which killed dozens of worshippers.

⁷ See map of religions in the Levant Region created by the Gulf/2000 project at Columbia University in New York, http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Levant_Religion_lg.png.

character of the opposition movement.⁸ In any case, local militias sprang up in various locations, a Free Syrian Army emerged with few resources to face a heavily armed regime, and events spiraled into a country-wide civil war.

When the fighting spread to Christian towns in 2012 and 2013, such as Maaloula in the strategic Qalamoun mountain area that had served as supply lines for rebels traveling from Lebanon to Syria, pro-regime voices argued that Christians were being targeted as an act of persecution by the Sunni-led opposition. This line of argument was bolstered by several prominent kidnappings of Christian clergy. In April 2013 the Syrian Orthodox Archbishop Mar Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim and the Greek Orthodox Archbishop Boulos Yazigi were abducted, and their whereabouts are still unknown.⁹ Then in December 2013, the *al-Qa`ida*-linked *Jabhat al-Nusra* militia kidnapped 13 nuns and three assistants, who were released unharmed three months later in exchange for female prisoners held by the Asad regime.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it is difficult to prove a pattern of targeting Christians. There have also been a large number of non-Christian kidnappings, including journalists and the relatives of well-known, wealthy Sunni Arabs. Usually these kidnappings have been used to raise money or bargain for the release of prisoners, but in the case of the Christian kidnappings these instances served to fuel the regime's narrative that the rebels are motivated by sectarian hatred.

In other cases, rumors of dubious origins circulated through the Christian communities, at times reaching the English-language blogosphere and spreading vile notions suggesting that Muslims were targeting Christians in order to persecute, kill, and dismember them. In at least one case, images that circulated widely on social media were proven to be taken straight from fictitious horror films.¹¹ Other reports have had a stronger basis, such as when images circulated widely on social media sites allegedly showing the beheading of Syrian Catholic priest, Father Francois Murad, who turned out to have indeed been shot by

⁸ Raniah Salloum, "From Jail to Jihad: Former Prisoners Fight in Jihad Insurgency," *Der Spiegel*, October 10, 2013, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/former-prisoners-fight-in-syrian-insurgency-a-927158.html>.

⁹ Wolfgang Danspeckgruber, "A plea to free Archbishop Mar Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim and Archbishop Youlos Azigi who were kidnapped one year ago today," *Huffington Post Blogs*, April 21, 2014, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/wolfgang-danspeckgruber/archbishop-mar-gregorios-yohanna-ibrahim-and-archbishop-boulos-yazigi-b-5186945.html>.

¹⁰ Scott Lucas, "Syria Daily, Mar 10:13 Maaloula Nus Released by Insurgents," *EA Worldview*, March 10, 2014, <http://eaworldview.com/2014/03/syria-daily-16-maaloula-nuns-released-insurgents/>

¹¹ The story was deemed "False" by Snopes.com an independent blog that investigates rumors, usually spread via the internet, <http://www.snopes.com/photos/politics/syriamurder.asp>.

forces of the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS).¹² Whether he was shot or beheaded matters little to Christians in Syria worried they too may become targets of an anti-Christian campaign by rebels. But on the other hand, even leaders of Islamic militia groups allied with the Islamic Front, which seeks to implement *shari'a* (Islamic law) in Syria, say that they do not target Christians and are only fighting against the regime. They argue that instances where Christians have been killed only occurred because government forces used Christian sites as shields against rebel strikes.¹³ There is no denying, however, that both sides have contributed to the destruction of numerous Christian sites, including historical sites around the country, as they have sought to control mountain-top churches, monasteries, and Crusader-era fortresses.¹⁴

The Christian communities of Syria face a dire situation, and feel powerless to defend their property or themselves. This is evidenced by the flight of at least 7,000 of Syria's estimated 100,000-strong Armenian community to Armenia.¹⁵ Many of the families that made this journey recalled that their ancestors fled to Syria from Anatolia a century earlier to escape the mass killings and ethnic cleansing carried out by the Ottomans during World War I.

Asad's ability to convince the majority of the Christian communities in Syria that his regime is the only viable choice is an example of the regime's ongoing ability to preserve the loyalty of a number of key sectors of Syrian society. In some cases, allies of the regime, including the Lebanese Shi'a militia Hizballah and its Iranian backers have also taken opportunities to extend an olive branch to the frightened Christian communities, even making the case that one of the reasons for Hizballah's decision to fight in Syria on behalf of the regime was to fight sectarianism, in particular to protect Christians from the "*takfiri*"¹⁶ rebellion. Even in the United States, a number of American politicians, who derive significant backing from evangelical Christians, have been forced to acknowledge the growing demands of a number of Syrian Christian clergy calling for an end to

¹² Ruth Sherlock, "Syrian Priest 'beheaded' in Syria actually 'shot dead'," *The Telegraph*, July 1, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10153954/Priest-beheaded-in-Syria-video-actually-shot-dead.html>.

¹³ Omar Kaied (Trans. Sami-Joe Aboud), "The coming 'battle for Qalamoun'," *al-Monitor*, November 21, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/11/syria-opposition-qalamoun-battle-war.html>.

¹⁴ *Asharq al-Awsat*, "Syria's Christian Community under Attack," March 28, 2013, <http://www.aawsat.net/2013/03/article55297140>.

¹⁵ Damien McGuinness, "Armenians flee Syria for their ancestral homeland," *BBC*, March 22, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-21844351>.

¹⁶ The epithet "*takfiri*" refers to certain radical Islamist groups who frequently practice excommunication (*takfir*), often with severe punishments against fellow Muslims who are perceived as unbelievers (sing., *kafir*) or heretics.

America's support for the rebellion, as they are convinced that supporting the Asad regime is the only way to avoid a jihadi takeover in Syria.¹⁷

In sum, Asad's original message has become a self-fulfilling prophecy, wherein the rise of extremist factions or simply the collapse of governance in certain areas are seen as harbingers of a bleak future unless authoritarian rule is restored throughout the country. Cities like Raqqa, which is under the thumb of ISIS and has occasioned numerous reports of suppression of all groups, including Christians, show that indeed the spread of what has been recently labeled the "Jihadi Spring¹⁸" would prove disastrous to civilians in Syria, and especially to the non-Muslim minorities. By contrast, Syrian Christian intellectuals living outside Syria tend to see the possible revival of the Asad regime as a terrible tragedy. Michel Kilo, referring to Syria's recent history, points out that oppression of Syria's vulnerable social groups, in particular the Kurds, but also pious Sunni Muslims, as well as secular intellectuals from across the spectrum, has occurred in the wake of the rise of the Ba'ath Party, and increased during the last four decades of Asad family control.¹⁹ It is fair to say that the Asad regime is keenly aware that Syria's Christians, like their Iraqi counterparts, have no choice but to flee or remain quietly loyal to the secular establishment, hoping that the regime will protect them from the larger struggle occurring between Sunni and Shi'a groups in the region.

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¹⁷ Kendall Breitman, "Virginia state Senator Richard Black praises Syria's Bashar Assad," *Politico*, May 28, 2014, <http://www.politico.com/story/2014/05/virginia-richard-black-lawmaker-praise-bashar-assad-syria-president-107146.html>. Also, "GOP Senator Apologizes for McCain Tantrum at Syrian Christian Leader Meeting," *Judicial Watch.org*, February 5, 2014, <http://www.judicialwatch.org/blog/2014/02/gop-sen-apologizes-for-mccain-tantrum-at-syrian-christian-leader-meeting/>.

¹⁸ *The Economist*, "Two Arab Countries Fall Apart," June 14, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21604230-extreme-islamist-group-seeks-create-caliphate-and-spread-jihad-across>

¹⁹ Michel Kilo, "Matā kanat al-aqaliyat muḍṭahida?" [When were Syria's minorities oppressed?], *Asharq al-Awsat*, September 9, 2012, http://www.aawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&article=694411&issueno=12339#.U57uE_mSz_eI.

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