

CHRISTIANS IN SYRIA AND THE CIVIL WAR

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Introduction

The so-called “Arab Spring” has managed to stir up a great variety of conflicts in the region of the Middle East and North Africa. Syria is the only country in the region where civil war is still raging between government forces and the various opposition groups. The article begins with a country background, highlighting what led to this conflict. Afterwards, an overview of Syria’s Christian community and their situation will be presented.

Finally, the authors of the article evaluate the different potential outcomes, and their possible effects on the Syrian Christians. There is the potential of a “French scenario,” where outside (mainly Western) powers step up in the defense of the local Christian communities. One should also account for the possibility of Assad successfully defending his position as the leader of Syria. The worst-case scenario would be that the global powers let Syria fall into chaos, and let the country be divided between the less or more radical Islamist groups that already exert more influence than their secular counterparts, like the Free Syrian Army.

Relating to the civil war, there is one more issue that the article examines. The mass flow of Syrian refugees (and among them large amounts of Christians) towards neighbouring Middle Eastern countries, as well as adjacent regions (emphasis on Europe) poses the question: do these refugees present a regional threat, as well as a threat to Central European security, including that of Hungary? The authors strive to provide an adequate answer.

Syria: a state of conflicts

Conflicts are hardwired into the Syrian state. Its borders are artificial, finalized at the conference in San Remo, in 1920. The country houses a variety of religious denominations: a variety of Sunni and Shia groups (with the Alawites as the most important Shia branch), Druzes, and a wide range of Christian sects (discussed in detail later). There are ethnic divisions as well: besides the majority Arab population, the population also consists of Kurdish and Armenian minorities, to note only the two largest (CIA 2014).

The political system before the “Arab Spring” was defined basically by the Syrian Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party. The system was underpinned by members of the Assad family and other Alawites, holding positions in the military and intelligence services, as well as governmental paramilitary groups. The Ba’athist government was also supported by leading families of other religious groups, with additional emphasis on Christians. These families had both business and personal interests in supporting the regime (Open Doors International 2014, 10-11).

Expectations of a reformist turn were largely hollow after Bashar al-Assad’s inauguration, who continued on with his father’s policies. Both his suppressing of political activism and his position as the head of state originating from and favoring the Alawite minority, seated over a Sunni majority, generated dissent (Open Doors International 2014, 11).

Nevertheless, the militancy and dissent that erupted in 2011 also stemmed from economic problems. The water crisis in the first decade of the 21st century, exacerbated by the faulty policies of the Syrian government, basically destroyed Syrian agriculture, as well as led to fierce urbanization, as the impoverished and hungry rural Syrians flowed to the cities in the western regions. This internal migration towards the urban areas led to an increasing social tension which could be regarded as the one of the real reasons that triggered the revolts in 2011 (Open Doors International 2014, 25).

The civil war

In 2011, the events of the “Arab Spring” triggered a chain of events also in Syria. People took to the streets, demanding socio-political and economic reforms. While answering several requests for reform,

President Assad also ordered the security forces of the government to engage protesters. Some members of the military refused to shoot at unarmed protesters, and their disillusionment of the regime contributed to desertions— of both officers and rank and file soldiers – to the opposition forces. Assad’s aggressive stance towards the protesters, combined with the formation of initial armed opposition groups from the defected soldiers and anti-Assad gunmen, escalated the conflict quickly (Open Doors International 2014, 11-12).

In the initial months of the uprising, the general opinion was that the “Arab Spring” would surely triumph like in other affected countries as Egypt, Libya, Yemen or Tunisia, for instance. However, as Wagner (2014, 4-5) points out, a few analysts argued that while the Syrian regime may be authoritarian, much like those of the aforementioned countries, it has several distinctive features that could prove pivotal for its survival. The Syrian opposition is far from united, an international intervention is unlikely, and as mentioned beforehand, Assad has the support of both his own Alawite group and other religious minorities, as well as some Sunni upper- and middle-class families. In addition, unlike in Egypt, most of the military – minus the deserters – was firmly behind the regime.

The Syrian opposition consists of about 1,000 independent groups, but it can be narrowed down to four major military actors: the Free Syrian Army/the Supreme Military Command; the Syrian Islamic Front and Islamic Liberation Front; the Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State (of Iraq and Syria); and the (Kurdish) People’s Protection Units.¹

During the course of the civil war, a “drift” towards the more Islamist elements of the Syrian opposition can be observed. While the Syrian Free Army had a central role in the initial period of the conflict, it gradually lost ground to radical Islamists or groups like the Jabhat al-Nusra that are expressly linked to Al-Qaeda. An explicit sign is the flow of troops from the ranks of the Syrian Free Army towards the Islamist side of the opposition (Wagner 2014, 13).

Currently, the greatest threat to both regional stability and the security of Syria, and Christians in particular, is the ‘Islamic State of Iraq and Syria’ (ISIS). Initially being the al-Qaeda’s branch in Iraq, the group of

¹ It must be noted however, that the Kurdish community in Syria is split between the supporters and the opposition of the Assad government, but basically strives to maintain a neutral stance, focusing on the defense of the autonomous Kurdish region. For more, see the report of Open Doors International (2014, 16) and Wagner (2014, 15).

Sunni militants changed its name again on 30 June 2014 to the ‘Islamic State’ (IS), announcing its goal to found a new state, a caliphate – based on the strict observation of shari’a – in the territories it currently claims to control.

The Islamic State is in constant conflict with all the participants of the Syrian civil war, both government and opposition. The organization managed to gain a lot of enemies by recklessly forcing out every other opposition group from the areas controlled by the Syrian opposition, as well as deliberately targeting and executing the leaders of other groups – in the already pacified rear area (Wagner 2014, 17).

The Islamic State, as it announced, plans the strict implementation of shari’a on the territories under its control, and its treatment towards civilians in these areas does not lack cruelty, especially towards those who criticize its actions (Wagner 2014, 13). Christians living in Syria are no exception, as will be discussed later.

The conflict in Syria, even though it was described initially as a clash between “government” and “opposition,” has turned increasingly sectarian, with Sunni rebels on one side, and the Shia government on the other side. Christians are caught in the crossfire between the two parties, being categorized as natural allies and protégés of the Assad government.

Christians in the Syrian civil war

Christians in Syria belong to a wide range of denominations and ethnicities: there are groups of Arab Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Arab Greek Catholic, Assyrian Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, Chaldean Catholic, and Syriac Catholic Christians. The majority – about 500,000 – of Syrian Christians belong to the Greek Orthodox Church, most of them Arabs, with a small number of ethnic Greeks. The second largest is the Armenian Orthodox Church, with an estimated number of 110,000-160,000 ethnic Armenian members, followed by the ethnic Syriac Orthodox Church with 89,000 members (Open Doors International 2014, 29).

The Christians are a significant minority in Syria, with their overall numbers estimated around 2.3 million, constituting around 10 percent of the population. Geographically, the Christian minority is in a more

challenging position than the Alawites and the Kurds. The latter are largely concentrated in one region: the Alawites in the Mediterranean coastal region (Latakia, Tartus), and the Kurds in three specific northern governorates (Aleppo, Idlib and al-Hasakah). Christians, though, are distributed throughout the country, with the largest concentrations found in the cities of Aleppo and Damascus, as well as in the southern areas of the Homs governorate, close to the Syrian-Lebanese border. Incidentally, these are the main conflict zones of the civil war, increasing the Christians' exposure to the conflict (Open Doors International 2014, 29).

One of the main groups supporting Assad are the so-called Popular Committees associated with the Syrian minorities – not only Christians, but also Druze and Alawites – and are reported to be tasked with the defense of sectarian villages and minority enclaves like Christian districts. Their mobilization, training and deployment are believed to be supported by Iran and, to a lesser extent, Hezbollah (Open Doors International 2014, 15).

While President Assad can more or less count on the support of the majority of Christians, their stance in the civil war is far more nuanced. Some Christians assume leading positions in the Syrian opposition movement, and the Free Syrian Army includes some brigades, called the 'Partisans of God Brigades', that are comprised entirely of Christian militants calling for a non-sectarian Syria free from the rule of the Assad family (Open Doors International 2014, 31).

Vulnerabilities of the Christian community in Syria

Christians in Syria are exceptionally vulnerable to the ongoing civil war. Besides factors that affect the whole population (lack of environmental security, confiscation of lands, famine – especially in opposition-held areas, disruption of healthcare services), there are vulnerabilities specific to their population. In order to provide a comprehensive picture, these will be listed henceforth in detail.

As was pointed out before, Christians, unlike other denominations in Syria, are not definitely supporting any one side of the conflict: while some groups support the Assad-led government, others are prominent members of the secular wing of the Syrian opposition. Even still, others strive to maintain a relatively neutral stance in the conflict, wishing only

to police Christian areas, and protect them against (mainly opposition) violence. In either case, as the civil war turns increasingly sectarian, Christian communities are becoming more and more militarized, mostly driven by fear of repercussions from mainly Sunni opposition militants that associate them with the supporters of the regime. However, this militarization that goes forward with the assistance of the Assad government (Open Doors International 2014, 43), further fuels the suspicions of the opposition that Christians are enemies of the opposition.

There is also an overall fear of radical Muslim organizations amongst the Syrian Christian population. In the majority of cases it is due to threats against local Christian communities, results in Christians cancelling their religious celebrations, or, in some cases, Islamist groups demanding *jizya*, the religious poll tax infamous among Middle Eastern Christians.² Examples for *jizya* extortion include demands by the al-Farouq Battalions in the city of Homs in 2012 (Open Doors International 2014, 35), and by ISIS in the Syrian province of Raqqa in February 2014 (BBC 2014c; Daily Telegraph 2014).

Another problem is that Christians are usually without any protection, whether from opposition militias or criminals; partly because they generally do not organize in militias (with the exception of the aforementioned Popular Committees), and are not in a position strong enough to defend themselves; partly because in the current situation, the government is unable and unwilling to come to the defense of the Syrian Christian minority (Open Doors International (2014, 52).

Women in general, but especially Christian women, are also facing threats of sexual abuse in the Syrian conflict. These abuses can be attributed both to common criminals, bolstered by impunity in the current security environment, and Islamist fighters. In the case of the latter, according to the report of Open Doors International (2014, 62), the fatwas of certain Sunni clerics expressly justify the rape of non-Sunni women.

Another observation is that the proportion of Christians which qualify as IDPs³ and refugees is comparatively high, due to the fact that they are concentrated in conflict zones. According to official numbers provided by UNHCR (2014), there are on the whole almost 3 million Syrian

² *Jizya* is a certain kind of 'protection money' paid by *dhimmi* ('people of the book', referring to Christians and Jews) to Muslims as a sign of submission. In exchange, Christians can practice their religion with certain constraints: building or renovation of churches, as well as displaying religious symbols (like the cross) outside churches is forbidden, in addition to other similar rules set down in the Conditions of Omar. See: Ibrahim (2014).

³ Internally displaced persons.

refugees in the surrounding countries (the consequences of this are discussed later).

However, these are only the official numbers by the UN, and one can expect a much higher number of refugees, as the exact number of Christian refugees is hard to determine, due to both their reluctance to register and to the fact that NGOs and refugee programmes do not keep records of the religious affiliation of refugees.

One of the reasons behind this decision could be a general distrust of the international community's willingness to step up to their defense, which may be rooted in the tragedy of Iraqi Christians, which has largely gone unnoticed since 2003⁴ ignored by the international authorities; it is also one of the driving forces behind the mass Christian migration from the country. Yet another reason why Christians do not register at the UNHCR camps is the fear of persecution inside the refugee camps by their Muslim compatriots, as well as for men, the fear of being drafted into the opposition forces.

An additional problem stems from the following issue: as Christians tend not to register with the refugee services of the UN, they have less legal protection in the countries they turn to for asylum. Also, their refugee status makes their self-sustenance difficult, since they cannot work in the countries that provide them asylum (Open Doors International 2014, 60). For Christians, alternatives to the refugee camps are either internal displacement or churches and monasteries in the target countries.

Migration from Syria and its risks

The flow of refugees originating from Syria represents a huge challenge for the region. Currently almost 3 million registered refugees are housed in UNHCR camps (UNHCR 2014), and this accounts only for the number of registered refugees – as discussed in detail above.

According to this data, most refugees target Lebanon and Turkey, with smaller numbers going to Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. Lebanon houses the largest numbers of Syrian refugees, about 1.1 million. This poses a significant risk to the stability of Lebanon, especially when we take into account the fragile inter-sectarian “contract” based on the ratio of

⁴ Before the 2003 invasion of Iraq, about 1 million Christians lived under the regime of Saddam Hussein. Currently, it is reported that no Christians remain in the country, among others due to the actions of the Islamic State (formerly ISIS). See: Ibrahim (2014).

denominations making up the population. Another problem is presented by the fact that while Lebanese Shias support the Assad government, Sunnis provide aid for the rebels (Syrian politics were already defined by the stance of Syria's neighbours since the assassination of the Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005)⁵ and the role of the Shia organization Hezbollah in the Syrian civil war further complicates the issue.

Refugees put a complex strain on Lebanon. Firstly, as mentioned before, sectarian tensions are at an all-time high, worsened by the influx of mostly Sunni rebels, including jihadists. What's more, there is ongoing fear that the Syrian conflict might spill over into Lebanon; there are already sectarian clashes routinely taking place in the city of Tripoli, a port city about 30 kilometres from the Syrian border. Secondly, Lebanese authorities do not handle the refugees adequately who are scattered throughout the country, sometimes living in dire conditions. Thirdly, the refugees put an increasing burden on the Lebanese economy, further exacerbating tensions in the country (Khatib 2014). Similar observations can be made in the case of the other neighbouring countries that have to deal with a large numbers of possibly radical Islamist refugees, which presents a potential security risk.

According to the Neighbourhood Migration Report of the EU's Migration Policy Centre (2013, 216), there are 131,108 migrants in the EU that originate from Syria, concentrated in Germany (34,229), Sweden (22,357), France (15,510) and the UK (11,000).

According to a more recent data, up until 11 January 2014, there were almost 60,000 Syrian refugees in the European Union who have filed for political asylum since the beginning of the conflict in Syria. Most of them are concentrated in Germany (24,900 applications) and in Sweden (23,500 applications), while Central European countries house only a smaller amount (about 4,500) of refugees, with Hungary accepting 995 asylum requests (Syrian Refugees 2014).

These include all Syrian refugees, since – as discussed before – migration statistics do not reflect religious affiliation. However, one should note that besides the civilians fleeing the clashes between Syrian government and opposition, there are also members of the opposition among the refugees, and as the opposition includes all kinds of ideologies from the more secular to the outright jihadist, these Syrian refugees could prove to be a security risk.

⁵ For more details, see the relevant section of Besenyő and Gömöri (2013).

Potential outcomes of the Syrian civil war

The Syrian civil war may prove to be a very intractable and divisive conflict. Currently, there are several scenarios that represent the possible outcomes of the war. Henceforth, these will be presented. It must be noted, however, that in the case of each scenario, there is the possibility that certain armed resistance groups will remain and continue fighting against the victor.

The “French scenario”

The French classically assumed a “protector” role of the Middle Eastern Christians, beginning with the ‘capitulation’ agreement between France and the Ottoman Empire in 1535 – the first of such agreements of the Ottomans with Western powers. This agreement recognised the special role of the French in the defense of Christians in the region. The French Consul General in Jerusalem has reaffirmed France’s role as such in his speech in November 2013, both as a response to the Christian discontent over France’s support to the Syrian rebels, and probably also to the renewed efforts of the Russian Federation in the region (Bernardelli 2013).

In the case of the aforementioned “French” scenario, the international community would intervene in the defense of the local Christian communities.

Until recently, this scenario was highly improbable. Nevertheless, with the aggressive expansion of the Islamic State – both in Iraq and Syria – the United States has decided to take action against the organization. Recently, the Hungarian government also made statements favoring intervention in the region, condemning the actions of the Islamic State against minorities, and Christians in particular. It also decided to send a relief shipment to the area (Hungarian Government 2014a and 2014b). Western actions – which include the UK and France besides the US – focus for now mainly on Iraqi territories and providing support to Kurdish military forces defending the autonomous Kurdish region against the Islamic State (BBC 2014b). But one could expect that the crackdown on the Islamic State could follow, and extend to challenge the IS’s positions in Syria.

Assad retains power

This scenario envisages the victory of Syrian government forces in the civil war, ultimately leading to Bashar al-Assad managing to hold on to his position as the leader of Syria. While not likely in the short term, the recent infighting between the Islamic State and the rest of the Syrian opposition could weaken their positions and prove useful for the government forces.

As the Open Doors report (2014, 77) argues, such a scenario would lead to the removal of two main threats to Syria's Christian community: Islamism and the absence of the rule of law. However, it still poses a question whether a possible Western intervention following on the heels of that in Iraq would assist the Assad government, given the previous stance of Western powers favoring the Syrian – increasingly Islamist – opposition.

An Islamist Syria

A third scenario involves an Islamist victory in Syria, leading to the establishment of an Islamic state in Syria. This could be regarded as one of the worst-case scenarios for Christians, since their freedom to practice their religion would surely be curbed. As mentioned before, there were already threats made coming from certain elements of the Syrian Islamic Front targeting Christians (Open Doors International 2014, 35).

The extent of the oppression of the Christian minority could differ. In the case of a state like Iran or Saudi Arabia, strict government control would be exercised over any area of life, including religion. Due to Syrian ethnic composition, a case like Egypt could also occur, where rights of Christians are suppressed, but the community is tolerated (Open Doors International 2014, 77).

An Islamist state

This scenario could be considered as a variant of an “Islamist Syria” scenario. In this case, the Islamic State (formerly ISIS) would manage to establish a “caliphate state” on the territory of parts of Syria and Iraq. This could lead to local Christians being demoted to a *dhimmi* legal

state, paying the *jizya* in order to practice their religion in a strictly state-controlled fashion, effectively as third-rate citizens. Events like the one in Raqqa confirm suspicions that non-Sunni citizens of an Islamic State would be faced with three options: conversion to Islam, paying the *jizya*, or the “sword.”

While recent US actions aid the Iraqi Kurds in their defense against the Islamic State offensive, at the time of the writing of this article it is reported that IS militants made further advances in the Aleppo region of Syria, managing to seize several towns (BBC 2014a). Furthermore, looking back at the consequences of the intervention in Libya begs a question whether Western forces can effectively counter Islamist tendencies in the Middle East.

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