To Protest or not to Protest? The Christian Predicament in the Syrian Uprising

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“The demonstrators are nothing but terrorists,” said Archbishop Tabé of the Syrian Catholic Church, scarcely veiling his contempt. “In any political system, there are always 10% who have to be sacrificed.” 1 Although hardcore Christian support is steadily waning, after a year of political crisis, the majority of Christian leadership and laity alike failed to support the Sunni-led democratic movement in any collective, cohesive or concrete way. With the specter of post-Spring Islamist rule looming, Christians in Syria were forced to choose between secular autocracy and sectarian democracy, a decision informed by the perception that the status quo ante under al-Assad, though democratically deficient, put a (temporary) lid on civil hostilities and afforded Christian minorities with extensive secular protections and even prosperity. While Christian acquiescence is driven largely by the perceived alternative of an Saudi-style theocracy, analyzing the polarization at the heart of the pluralistic Syrian society through a binary lens of majority vs. minorities neglects the importance of socio-economic interests—which cut across sectarian boundaries. As the persistent co-optation of religious minorities continues to hinder democratic reforms, and as the position and security of Christians (who constitute two million citizens) grows increasingly precarious as Syria slides into a civil war fragmented along sectarian fault lines, understanding the motivations behind Christian passivity is crucial.

Despite Syria’s history of religious pluralism, Muslims and Christians are socio-economically segmented—with Christian presence in the middle and upper class contributing to Christian passivity. The uprising started in the agrarian city of Dera’a, with the disenfranchised revolutionaries suffering the most from the strains of population explosion that particularly afflicted the rural poor living in government neglected peripheries, the urban poor disillusioned with crony capitalism and legions of unemployed youth. 2 Inclination to protest is influenced more decisively by class background (and proximity to the political, economic and military elite) than religious affiliation, though the two often overlap. For instance, the Sunni Nahhas and Jood families of Latakia, who benefited from regime-espoused “sweet-heart deals,” are among the most ardent regime loyalists—demonstrating that co-optation is contingent on affiliation with the professional classes rather than sect. 3

Syrian Christians (especially Greek Orthodox, the most populous Christian sect in Syria) have historically been more urbanized than Muslims and do not generally belong to the lower class. Proportionately more Christians receive secondary education, join skilled-labor professions and attend Western-oriented, private and foreign language schools. 4 Under Hafez al-Assad, the Sunni underclass with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood was categorically denied state protections, jobs and opportunities, while anti-Islamist, secular Christians established connections (wasta) with state officials and rose to socio-economic prominence. 5 Yet even the smaller proportion of lower class Christians who suffer from the same protest-inducing factors as their Muslim compatriots—high unemployment, a devastating drought in the East, an inefficient public sector, the effects of international sanctions and the post-uprising collapse of the tourism industry—disassociated socio-economic frustrations from the regime due to the lingering effects of decades of propaganda. 6

Although they are better integrated with Muslims in big cities, Christians tend to be geographically self-segregated. As class is a function of locality, that districts and villages are so clearly delineated along sectarian lines (such as the Valley of Christians consisting of over 30 predominantly Greek Orthodox villages and the majority Assyrian governate of al-Hasaka, home to the 75% Christian city of Qamishli) indicates that class is closely associated with confession in Syria, which also explains the potency of sectarianism. 7 Members of the
Armenian Orthodox Church—the second largest in Syria—are especially prone to self-imposed isolation, rarely mixing with Muslims (or even other Christians) in less prosperous districts.\(^3\) The affluence of middle to upper class Syrian Christians, relatively unaffected by the same socio-economic grievances afflicting the hordes of protestors, further facilitated Christian reluctance to join the uprising.

The importance of preserving secularism—here defined as state equidistance and radical neutrality vis-à-vis religious identities—was an even more salient source of Christian loyalty to the embattled regime at the outbreak of demonstrations. Syrian Christians enjoy not only legislative and constitutional freedom of worship, but practical treatment as “full” citizens facilitated by a non-sectarian framework in one of the few remaining Arab countries where, as one bishop puts it, a Christian can “really feel the equal of a Muslim.”\(^9\) Syrian non-sectarianism paradoxically grants elites derived from minority communities a privileged societal position, leading Christians to view the al-Assad regime as a bastion of (a favorably distorted) secularism and, as such, their only chance at maintaining prominence in state and society. Such guarantees pushed Syrian Christian liberals to trust the Ba’ath Party and embrace the so-called Damascus Spring when Bashar succeeded his father in 2000.\(^10\) Although the Syrian state nominally privileges Sunni Islam in some ways (and de facto, the Alawite elite), discrimination is reserved for those only for those who jeopardize regime authority. Most Christians therefore prefer the devil they know, four decades of secular autocracy, to an uncertain and potentially dangerous future under Islamists, who will undoubtedly demand a stake in a post-Assad Syria. In short, Christians are terrified of an ‘Islamist winter.’

Such fears are not unfounded. At the onset of protests, reports quickly surfaced of demonstrators chanting “Christians to Beirut and Alawites to the coffin,” and in August 2012 alone, anti-regime elements killed six Christians near Homs and 48 in the mainly Christian and Druze Damascus suburb of Jaramana.\(^11\) Armenian Orthodox Christians have picked up arms to defend their neighborhoods in Aleppo against attacks from the Free Syrian Army attacks as well as the regime’s militia.\(^12\) Syrian Christian refugees from the border town of Quasayr fled to Lebanon after rebels equated Christian neutrality with hardcore regime support and drove them out of the country.\(^13\) Such incidents disconcerted minorities and drove them to rally behind the government, even if they had been skeptical of al-Assad before the uprising. The regime fomented Christian anxieties by continually stressing that the greatest fears of the Christian community—Islamists, Shar’ia law and the prospect of burning churches—would be promptly realized if the regime were to fall.\(^14\) State-sponsored propaganda—like Donia TV broadcasts of the funeral processions of Christian soldiers “assassinated by thugs” alongside hysterical relatives—affirms that the regime has invested much of its energies into intertwining the fate of Christians with its own to scare them into submission for the purpose of regime self-preservation, as authoritarian leaders did in Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq.\(^15\)

Soon after the uprising was underway, revolutionaries (both Muslim and Christian) identified the importance of secularism to loyalists by emphasizing a minority-friendly civil rights discourse, noting that only a shared democratic future can protect Syrians of all confessions. Aside from brutal fringe elements, activists overwhelmingly promoted the notion of egalitarian pluralism under a civil, secular state, dismissing the regime’s oft-repeated canard that only the al-Assad-headed Ba’ath Party can protect Christians from radical Islamists as a “bogus argument meant to frighten the West and divide Syrians from one another.”\(^16\) The opposition’s commitment to a civil state is reflected in survey results that found that opposition members ranked the French political system highest (5.45/7), with a government styled on the Iranian model receiving the lowest marks (1.26/7), and a majority of respondents affirming the importance of protecting minorities, including Alawites (4.69/7).\(^17\)

The Muslim opposition cites the (admittedly small) presence of Christians in the opposition movement, Syria’s long history of religious cohabitation and the solidarity among the demonstrators to support its claims of secular aspirations.\(^18\) A Friday protest on Easter
weekend was dubbed ‘Azimeh Friday (Good Friday) in honor of Christians, protest organizers were quick to silence signs of sectarianism amongst demonstrators, and the Facebook groups “Syrian Revolution 2011” and “We are All Syria,” with over 800,000 members collectively, list a code of ethics against sectarianism. Alternatively, the fear of majority leadership giving free reign to Muslim fundamentalists.

Unwavering regime support emanating from Church hierarchies further entrenches Christians. In statement dated December 15, 2011, the three Syrian Patriarchs declared their absolute rejection of foreign intervention or any other threat to Syrian sovereignty. Throughout 2011, the Armenian Orthodox Patriarch instructed churchgoers to obey the government, support the president, and keep a low profile. In September 2011, Lebanese Maronite Patriarch Rai III expressed concern over the future security of religious minorities in Syria and the region, urging the international community not to rush into regime-changing resolutions that could topple al-Assad, a “poor man who cannot work miracles.” This stance led George Sabra, a Christian and the spokesperson of the oppositional Syrian National Council, to attribute the mass absence of Christian protestors to the lack of Church-sponsored mobilization. The Russian Orthodox Church’s open support of the al-Assad regime may also be spurring similar attitudes among their Syrian counterparts. It is difficult, however, to determine to what degree the Church response reflects the attitude of its constituents or creates it.

It is similarly problematic to ascertain whether such institutional displays of support on the part of the Church are voluntary. Christians may well be coerced into obedience, with the Church leadership constrained by the watchful eye of a praetorian government brandishing a carte blanche arrest policy borne of the 1963 emergency law. Stories of attacks on Christian protestors—including the assassination of Father Basilius of Homs and the beating and detention of 20 year-old student activist Hadeel Kouky and actor Jalal al-Tawil— serve as warnings to their community and demonstrate the systematic silencing of dissident Christian voices, however rare they may be. Christians therefore fear not only for their security tomorrow, but also today.

When choosing allegiances, Syrian Christians also consider the experience of ill-fated Iraqi Christians and the ongoing post-revolutionary struggle of Egyptian Copts. Syria neighbors Lebanon and Iraq, which both deteriorated into sectarian conflict in the absence of strong leadership. Much like al-Assad, Saddam Hussein cultivated a close relationship with fellow minority Christian groups, who were perceived as collaborators and consequently targeted when the regime was toppled in 2003. Bloody sectarian attacks then forced the exodus of at least 330,000 Iraqi Christians to Syria, where refugees settled in Christian areas and came with stories of atrocities at the hands of the Muslim majority. The effect of the deeply discouraging Iraq experience is reflected in a December 2011 YouGov-Doha Debates poll, which found that of the 55% of Syrians polled who supported al-Assad, the most common reason (46%) was “we do not want to see Syria become another Iraq,” rooted in the Christian fear of majority leadership giving free reign to Muslim fundamentalists.

Alternatively, the military and political integration of Christians partly explains the Christian reluctance to join the protests. Christians demonstrated their indispensability to public administration and civic life through the founding of the country’s two most significant post-
independence political ideologies and the subsequent parties they spawned. The Syrian National Social Party (SSNP) and the ruling Ba’ath Party both created a secular framework to unite the Sunni majority with minorities under an inclusive banner of nationalist identity. Christians are counted among the late Minister of Defense and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, as well as previous Prime Minister Fares Khoury and head of the Syrian Central bank, Adib Mayaleh. Although the highly influential despotic bureaucracy, presidential guard and intelligence services are controlled in part by an outer governmental layer of religious minorities such as Christians, the informal but dominant inner circle composed of Alawite security elites (and the weak Christian parliamentary presence) suggests that as the regime has been cautious about totally co-opting Christians into its core of decision-makers.

Despite the administration’s vehement denials of a minority alliance, co-optation is also driven by the Alawites’ unofficial incorporation of Christians in a power-sharing minority coalition underpinned by the belief that ‘minorities protect minorities.’ The al-Assad regime has historically portrayed itself as the protector of Syria’s Christians in a politically expedient act of superficial solidarity, with Christians taking comfort in their mutual minority status. The advantage of being ruled by a minority is that the Alawites have at their disposal an all-dominating and influential leadership in a country of a minority alliance, which could prove unresponsive to minority demands. This strategic alliance stems from the Alawite desire to garner diverse allies to bolster legitimacy and create a pluralistic national identity, the Christian desire to break away from the inferior societal position of minorities, and most importantly, mutual concern of an Islamist takeover. This stance is understandable, though not admirable, as pulling away from the Alawite regime may leave Syrian Christians vulnerable.

As the fragmentation at the core of Syrian society between loyalists and dissidents intensifies, the silent Christian community is caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. As the stakes get higher, so does the eagerness for sectarian revenge—a recipe for a Lebanon-style civil war. By failing to defect in a significant way to an increasingly violent opposition movement, Christians risk irrelevance in a post-Assad context, or worse; being viewed as “cowardly and timid sycophants who were afraid to do the right thing when the opportunity presented itself,” which Sunni compatriots may not easily forget. Betting on the losing horse—al-Assad—will only incite the animosity towards Christians that the community is trying so desperately to avoid, yet siding with the insurgents might incur the wrath of government troops and hasten the advent of a Sunni, sectarian democracy. Whatever trajectory takes shape, the inclusion of religious minorities will undoubtedly mold the social, cultural and political identity of a post-revolutionary Syria in particular, and the Arab world in general.

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