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King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies

Masarat

The Issue of Minorities in Syria: From Proscription to Tyrannical Presence

Introduction
Minorities in Syria before the 2011 revolution
Geographic and Political Distribution of Minorities in Syria in 2015
The Role of Minorities in the Syrian Crisis
Minorities' Stances Towards the Syrian Crisis and Regime
Attitudes Towards Minorities During the Uprising Against the Regime
The Targeting of Minorities in the Armed Conflict
The Status of Minorities in International Discourse
Casting a Searching Glance at the Future of Minorities in Syria

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This study investigates minority issues in Syria through the observation of their numbers and geographic locations as well as their economic, political, and social status before and after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March 2013, in light of the Syrian authorities' unwritten proscription of minorities imposed since the country's independence, and their reluctance to make relevant data accessible to researchers. The research focuses on the impact of the Syrian crisis on minorities both in terms of population presence and political status, as minorities become key players in the country's political scene following the revolution, and various attitudes including minorities' stances regarding the crisis and the opposition movement, and the perspectives of the regime, the opposition, and non-Syrian religious authorities towards minorities. The study will also evince the targeting of minorities in the Syrian conflict, and the reactions of these minorities towards the international rhetoric surrounding this issue. Finally, the study will cast a searching glance at the future of minorities in Syria.

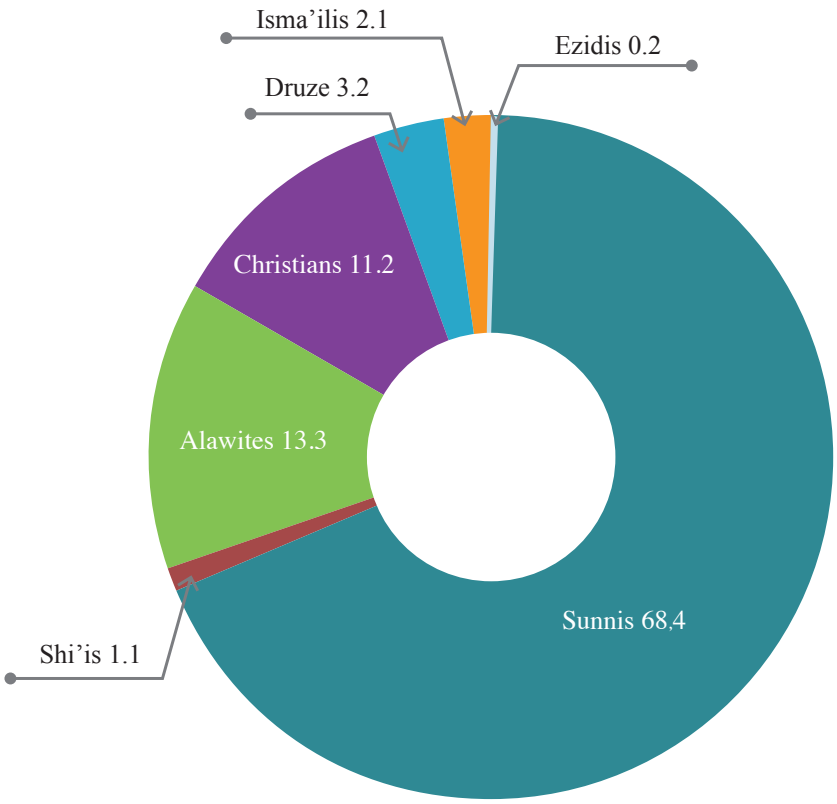
Introduction

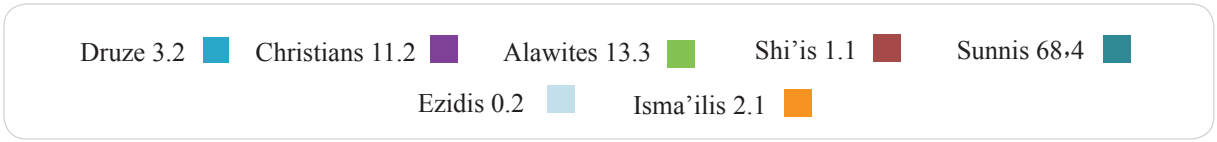
Internationally recognized documents neglect formulating a universally acceptable definition of what constitutes a "minority."[1] Rather, two approaches have evolved by which to distinguish minorities from dominant groups. The first relies on the authorities, and designates the minority label to a group which is culturally and ethnically distinct but co-existent with another more dominant group. The status of the minority in this case is not necessarily linked to the size and proportion of its population. In some cases, even, the figure of the minority outnumbers that of the dominant group, as was the case in South Africa. The second, numerical approach is the one that guides this study, as international political discourse regarding Syria has relied on it exclusively in this case.[2] In this study as in the Syrian context, also, the minority designation refers to religious and not ethnic minorities.

Minorities in Syria before the 2011 revolution

Most researchers of Syrian affairs tend to agree on the vital importance of the issue of minorities and their role in Syria's contemporary political history. Such significance, however, was not reflected by the negligible number of research studies and accessible information generated on the topic before 2011. The major roadblock to generating relevant statistics results from the Syrian authorities' unwritten proscriptions of minorities that date back to the country's independence, as well as the authorities' reluctance to make relevant data accessible to facilitate population research in general. The Syrian government has conducted population censuses once every ten years, but the results do not reveal the sectarian, religious, or ethnic distribution of the country's population. For this reason, all the available figures and proportions relating to minority issues are based on estimations which go back to 1947, the last year in which the population census included sectarian and ethnic statistics. Today, based on these old statistics, and taking into account that minority groups sometimes exaggerate their figures of size, it can be estimated that Sunni Muslims represent 74% of the Syrian population; other Muslim communities represent 13%; Druze 3%, and Christians of different sects constitute the rest of the population, or 10%.[3]

Geographic and Political Distribution of Minorities in Syria in 2015[4]

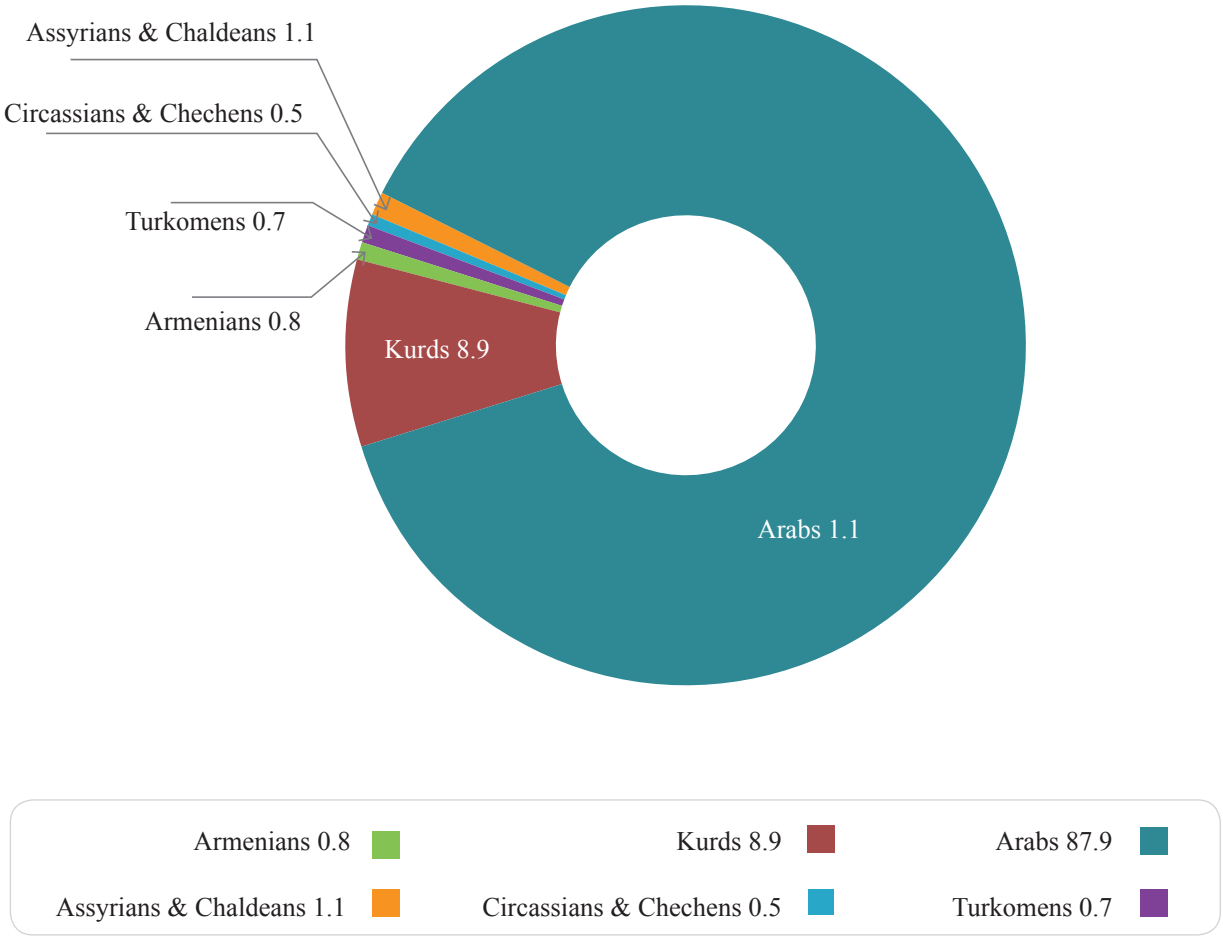




Concerning the geographical distribution of the population, Sunni Muslims represented a vast majority in all Syrian provinces, with the exception of Latakia, Tartus, and al-Suwayda. In Latakia and Tartus combined, the 'Alawites represented 62.1%, and Greek Orthodox Christian 12.8%. In the al-Suwayda province, the Druze represented 87.6% of the overall population, and there was also a relatively large Greek Orthodox minority and other Christian sects. Sunni Muslims in al-Suwayda represented a mere 2% of the province's overall population.

Sunni Muslims represented the overwhelming majority of the Hama province with 64.6% of its population. Isma'ilis in the province are estimated to have been at 13.2% (representing some 80% of all the Isma'ili community in Syria), and Greek Orthodox Christians at 11%. Non-Sunni Muslims lived essentially in the province's countryside, particularly in the al-Salamiyya and Misyaf districts.[5]

It is believed that the proportion of the Christian population has been shrinking in recent years. The United States Department of State estimates



that its proportion may have dropped from 10% to 8%.[6] Meanwhile, Christian sources believe that the figure has shrunk by more than half, to between 600,000 and 900,000 Christians, from 1,900,000 before the 2011 uprising.[7]

If we endeavor to monitor the economic, political and social reality of the minorities in Syria before the 2011 revolution, we will certainly conclude that religious minorities, particularly the ‘Alawites and, to a lesser extent, the Druze, are the communities which have dominated the Syrian political scene since 1949, despite their limited areas of geographical concentration. This dominance reflects their community representatives’ positions in the military and political hierarchy, which has remained in the hands of religious minorities whose members opted to join army ranks. Most researchers attribute the growing political and military role of religious minorities to the French occupation, which sought to widen sectarian and religious divisions within Syrian society, even as the French established the legitimacy of their presence in Syria on the pretext of protecting minorities.[8] The same pretext has subsequently been used by the al-Asad regime, particularly after 2011. The large numbers of minorities present in army ranks is also attributed to their socioeconomic status; by and large, ‘Alawites were unable to pay the sum of money which would spare them compulsory military service, in contrast to most Sunnis who were economically more prosperous in the 1950s and 1960s, many of whom opted out of military service.[9]

In contrast to religious minorities, Sunni Muslims have historically despised affiliation with the military profession. They have long viewed the Military Academy in Homs as home to idles, insurgents, or academically unqualified and socially marginalized elements of society. This attitude was widely exploited by the religious minority authorities, who developed discriminatory policies when they came to power. While Sunni officers enjoyed particularly conspicuous control of the military hierarchy particularly conspicuous during the two years (1961–1963) following the break-up of the short-lived political union between Syria and Egypt (1958–1961) known as the United Arab Republic (UAR), after the Ba'th party's seizure of power on March 8, 1963, most Sunni army officers were relieved of their duties. Sunni students also witness limited admission to the Military Academy and other military training centers and intelligence services, at a time when applicants belonging to religious minorities enjoyed positive discrimination.[10]

Since this time, the 'Alawite minority has enjoyed a marked dominance of the political scene, in contrast to the previous phase during which it played a limited political role. By 1965, sectarian discourse in the army became overt as the result of the arrival of new officers who, in their majority, belonged to minorities or who hailed from the Dar'a region. The proportion of military officers belonging to minorities became much higher than their relative proportion in civil society.[11]

Civil society itself has witnessed a range of liberties granted by the 'Alawite minority-controlled government. Since coming to power, the al-Asad regime has provided a climate of relative freedom for religious minorities to perform the rituals of their faith and promote their culture in return for neutralizing or excluding them (with the exception of the 'Alawite sect) from political life and limiting their activities in the public sphere. Despite the fact that the Christians, the Druze, and the 'Alawites had assumed important government jobs before Hafiz al-Asad came to power, their presence was reduced to limited ranks. Their presence in the Syrian government throughout the past four decades was confined to non-sovereign positions and uninfluential roles, which may also explain their absence in the current political scene.

Prior to 2011, the Syrian regime had allowed several foreign Christian organizations to carry out activities in Syria through existing churches and without officially registering with the government. In contrast, the regime was reluctant to allow foreign Islamic organizations to engage in their activities before their official registration with the Ministry of Endowment.[12] In terms of public education, schools teach separate and compulsory religious lessons to both Muslims and Christians. Christian students study Christian curricula, and members of Muslim sects (Sunnis, Shi'is, 'Alawites, Isma'ilis, Yazidis and Druze) take part in the study of Islamic curricula. As for universities, religious studies programs are limited to shari'a faculties.[13]

Although ethnic minorities are not the focus of this study, it is worth noting their relative presence as of 2015.[14] Arabs make up the overwhelming majority, representing 87.9% of the Syrian population, and they are followed by the Kurds with 8.9%. There are also other ethnic minorities such as Armenians, Turkomens, Circassians, Chechens, and Assyrians. The ethnic and religious minorities in Syria overlap, as the Armenians and Assyrians are Christians, while the Kurds are Sunnis in their majority, with tiny minorities of Yazidis and 'Alawites. The influence of ethnic background on a minority's

experience and perspectives on the revolution falls outside the scope of this work, as when the term "minorities" was coined in Syria it indicated religious minorities only, and dealing with ethnicity would add an extremely complex dimension to the limited data we have available for analysis, making it extremely difficult to tease out the various stances discussed below. This study conducted interviews with individuals concerned with the issue of minorities, including politicians and lawyers, in addition to influential personalities in the ʻAlawite and Druze minorities.

The Role of Minorities in the Syrian Crisis

Issues related to religious minorities began to gradually appear on the Syrian political scene with the March 2011 popular protests, but sectarian and religious issues became very conspicuous in the Syrian political discourse following the emergence of the so-called Islamic State (IS) group in late 2012, and the subsequent acceleration of the course of events which targeted minorities starting from the middle of 2013.

There are no exact figures on the number of victims within the ranks of religious minorities, or statistics regarding their number within the groups of refugees. The United States Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) does not provide information on the religious and ethnic affiliations of registered refugees. For this reason, it is not possible to identify the number of citizens affiliated with these minorities who are forced to flee their homes with other Syrians. Figures provided by lawyers indicate that the number of those killed within religious minorities during the ongoing event have not exceeded dozens, particularly as full names of almost all the victims have been documented by human rights bodies.

No party has published a list of minority victims without including the number of victims from within the ranks of the Syrian army. In fact, no information had been published on the victims within army ranks, and these are not essentially killed for their affiliation with the army.[15] The Syrian government, together with some Christian organizations, has sought to provide large figures of Christian victims, in a move to propagate what the authorities allege is the targeting of minorities by radical Islamist groups. The authorities, however, provide such figures without supporting them with documented evidence, such as the names of the victims, as all human rights groups in Syria do in other cases.[16]

It is therefore unclear if either the regime or the opposition targets minorities. From the beginning, the Syrian regime tried to describe the opposition collectively as groups of radical Islamists, and succeeded, to a great extent, after al-Qaʻida and IS joined the fray. The emergence of jihadist groups, with their political programs and projects, has escalated the fears of Christians and followers of other Islamic doctrines, who are seen by the jihadists as devious or distorting true Islam.[17] Thus with every group attacking another, a distinct pattern of discrimination has not emerged.

Despite the general fears of Christians, radical Islamists, or devious Muslims, it is not possible to know the true stances of the religious minorities towards either the regime or each

other, as most of them continue to live in areas under the regime control. Therefore, as is the case with the Sunni majority in these areas, minorities cannot publicly express positions which oppose the regime, and groups occupying areas under opposition control cannot express positions backing the regime. The general view, however, indicates that minorities have maintained neutrality, with a small number expressing support or opposition to one party or another.

Since 2011, the Syrian regime has been disseminating the idea that religious minorities support the authorities against the opposition, and funding supportive protests and activities in Christian and Druze areas. The Christian minority's neutrality, and, to a lesser extent, that of the Druze minority, have gradually begun to lean towards lending support for the regime as the result of the heightening of the intensity of the extremist religious discourse since the end of 2012. The matter is different with the 'Alawite minority because of the increasing number of the sect's followers assuming important jobs in the army and government, in contrast to the Christians and Druze who are excluded almost completely from power both in the government and the army. Meanwhile, the regime has arrested several Christian and 'Alawite opponents who cast serious doubt on the regime's story that the armed opposition is a movement of "Sunni extremists."[18]

Minorities' Stances Towards the Syrian Crisis and Regime

Christians

Despite the difficulty to understand the true stance of Christian minorities, as is the case with other minorities, researchers and specialists strongly believe that Christians lean more towards the regime than towards the opposition, particularly after the emergence of extremist groups. This tendency, however, is being linked with feelings of fear within the Christian community rather than ones of enthusiasm. Christians may feel that a change of regime could expose them to the tyranny of the Sunni majority, which would deprive them of the protection provided by the al-Asad regime throughout the last decades.[19] In general, Christian-majority areas have not organized any movement in support of or against the regime, except in isolated cases. Only a small number of Syrian and non-Syrian official church leaders, and some Christian public personalities, have issued clear statements supporting or opposing the regime.

The Christian voices supporting the regime are mostly those of church officials. The regime delegated Mother Agnes Mariam de la Croix to attend international forums in New York, Geneva, and London.[20] Assistant Patriarch and Primate of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East Archbishop Luke Khoury also played a key part in the support of the regime's media messages regarding religious and Christian minorities in particular.[21] Statements made by Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East John X also expressed tacit support for the regime. Official media outlets were eager to categorize such statements as indicative of

the Patriarch's political support.[22] Even the Lebanese Maronite Patriarch Bishara al-Ra'i made statements in which he expressed his backing for the al-Asad regime on more than one occasion, and he went as far as to visit Damascus in 2013 and hold meetings with Syrian regime officials.[23] This was the first visit by a Lebanese Maronite patriarch to Syria since Lebanon's independence in 1943.

It is worth noting the important difference in the stances of the Catholic and Orthodox churches towards the Syrian crisis. Overall, Catholic church does not fear regime change if it receives firm and genuine guarantees to protect Christians in Syria and to grant them total freedom to uphold their religious beliefs, whereas the Orthodox church believes that there are no guarantees, and prefers a status quo so that Christians will not lose the gains they have already acquired.[24]

In contrast, a group of Christian personalities and leaders remain at the forefront of the opposition movement. Among them are Michel Kilo, George Sabra, and Fayez Sara, who have all assumed leadership positions in the opposition's institutions. Christian opposition sources speak of tens of thousands of Christian youths who have joined the opposition, work with relief agencies, or have joined the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in groups such as the Jesus Brigade (Liwa Sayyid al-Masih) in al-Ghawta, Mar Girgis Battalion in Jabal al-Shaykh, and other Christian and Armenian battalions.[25] Such participation, however, seems to be confined to individuals or to groups protecting Christian areas, and does not necessarily represent the overall opinion of Christian minority groups.

'Alawites

The 'Alawite community finds itself in the most sensitive position in the Syrian crisis. The sect has been the subject of damaging accusations of siding with the Syrian regime, given the fact that 'Alawite officers represent a numerical majority within the ranks of the army and security services far exceeding the minority's proportion in the Syrian population as a whole. In reaction to accusations that most of the 'Alawite sect is loyal to the regime, several 'Alawite opposition personalities have tried to present a different discourse. This has been reflected by activities spearheaded by some known personalities, but who often avoid referring to the sect directly. The Syrian regime also often tries to avoid reference to the term "sect" in its public discourse, and it tries to avoid putting forward 'Alawite religious leaders.

Thus, on March 24, 2013, a conference was held in Cairo under the slogan "We are all Syrians! Together towards a homeland for all." The conference brought together some 250 'Alawite personalities who opposed the Syrian regime. According to the participants, the conference sought to challenge the legitimacy of the regime that it is the protector of minorities, particularly the 'Alawites and Christians. The participants argued that the natural home of the 'Alawites is with the revolution.[26] The conference was one of the most important activities which brought up the position of the 'Alawite sect as it included known personalities.

A number of observers and 'Alawite opposition figures attribute the weak presence of opposition voices within the 'Alawite community, in comparison with other minority sects, to the fact that security services inflict harsher punishment on perpetrators of 'Alawite opposition movement activities than on those of any other sect.[27] A general consensus justifies the 'Alawites' growing fears, particularly after the increasing

number of 'Alawite victims as a result of the regime's aggressive security policy. Others attribute the lack of such opposition voices to the fear which 'Alawites feel towards the Sunni community, namely that if al-Asad's 'Alawite regime falls, then Sunnis who had suffered from the 'Alawite injustice in the past would exact revenge.[28] And yet, there are signs that the sect is not happy with the regime for forcing it to the brink of an abyss, a point of no-return in confrontation with the Sunni community.[29]

The Druze

The position of the Syrian Druze vis-à-vis the Syrian regime can be inferred from the stances publically adopted by their Lebanon-based political leadership, which exerts its influence on the Syrian Druze sect. While some leaders, such as Wi'am Wahhab, have expressed support for the Syrian regime, the most prominent Druze leader, Walid Junblat, has adopted a clear position in opposing the Syrian regime, and this seems to be the dominant perspective of the Druze as a whole.

Despite that most the Druze live in areas under the control of the Syrian regime, particularly in the Suwayda province, prominent Druze religious leaders inside Syria have openly expressed their opposition to the regime. The most prominent of these is Shaykh Wahid al-Balous who, on more than one occasion, objected to the drafting of the Druze youth into the Syrian army. He criticized the director of the military intelligence in Suwayda, Wafiq Nasir, and rejected accusations that the Druze are not patriots. In early 2015, he was quoted as saying that the Druze "are more patriots than any 'Alawite," and went on to say, "We are more patriotic than Bashar al-Asad."

In one statement, al-Balous laughed off Bashar al-Asad's allegations that he protects minorities by saying, "The way the state treats the Druze is more hostile and more oppressive than Israel." He also referenced the deaths of several Druze youths after they had been subjected to torture at the hands of the Suwayda branch of the military intelligence, and spoke of a particular incident which took place in the town of Jirmana in the Damascus Countryside province. The incident involved a young restaurant owner from Suwayda who was killed by members of the Fourth Army Division after disagreement over the price of a sandwich. When the soldiers refused to pay for the sandwich, residents forced them to leave. However, they later returned and started firing random shots at the restaurant, killing its owner. Al-Balous referred to the incident by wondering, "Are these the defenders of the homeland?"[30]

On September 5, 2015, a booby-trapped vehicle exploded in Suwayda city. Another bomb exploded shortly thereafter in front of the Suwayda National Hospital, coinciding with the transfer, to the same hospital, of the wounded in the first explosion. The hospital bomb blast killed 26 people, including Shaykh Wahid al-Balous and his brother, as well as Shaykh Fadi Na'im. No group or party has claimed responsibility for the blasts.[31] The Syrian official news agency, and pro-regime media avoided mentioning the name of al-Balous as one of the victims of the explosion. They merely referred to the number of the victims.[32] Despite the regime's unwillingness to take responsibility for these events, following the death of al-Balous the Suwayda province became the scene of mass protests staged against the regime. The demonstrators brought down the statue of Hafiz al-Asad in the city center and chanted slogans accusing the regime of being responsible for the death of al-Balous.[33]

Isma'ilis

The worldwide spiritual leader of the Isma'ili sect, Imam al-Amir Shah Karim al-Husayni, has expressed multiple times his hope to bring about peace in Syria, but without expressing clear support to any of the conflicting sides. In a 2013 statement, al-Husayni maintained that he "supports all the efforts which aim to restore peace and stability to Syria through an agreement which would allow all ethnic and religious communities to co-exist in peace and harmony." Meanwhile, his Agha Khan network provided financial support to UN peace envoy for Syria Lakhdar Ibrahimi, and al-Husayni offered his own jet to facilitate Ibrahimi's shuttle diplomacy.[34]

The Isma'ili-majority (by 65%, with Sunnis constituting no more than 25%[35]) city of al-Salamiyya in the Hama province was the scene of anti-regime demonstrations in the first weeks of the 2011 popular protests.[36] The protests, however, came to an end after the regime brought the city under its military and security control. Protests were forced to be abandoned even in the province's Sunni areas, which were under the regime's control. Even though the security forces were trying to disperse the protests, they refrained from resorting to the use of excessive force against the demonstrators, compared with in the rest of the cities and towns that confessed an Arab Sunni majority; while a mere five protesters were arrested in al-Salamiyya, hundreds of protesters were killed in other cities.[37]

Attitudes Towards Minorities During the Uprising Against the Regime

The Syrian Regime

Since the early days of the popular protests, the Syrian regime had endeavoured to invoke minorities in its discourse, either by promoting itself as the protector of minorities (especially religious minorities) and the last secular stronghold in the region,[38] or by accusing opponents of targeting minorities by seeking to eliminate or expel them from Syria and establishing an Islamic state which will not tolerate minorities. Less than ten days after the protests' eruption, the advisor to Bashar al-Asad, Buthayna Sha'ban, was the first to invoke these ideas. She stated that what was going on in Syria was a "sectarian sedition scheme" which targets "Syria's unique example of religious tolerance and co-existence." She invoked the 1980s events, and the confrontations opposing the authorities to the Muslim Brotherhood.[39]

The regime continued to claim the idea of protecting minorities as the very essence of its strategic propaganda. The idea is constantly present in Bashar al-Asad's speeches, statements, and interviews. For example, al-Asad has alleged that minorities prefer to move from areas under the opposition control to areas controlled by his regime, because he provides them with their needs and means to live together in harmony. On July 26, 2015, al-Asad declared,

> Let us see! Don't Syrians of different denominations and confessions flee from terrorist-dominated areas to areas controlled by the state? Are not these communities who fled the terrorist-

> dominated areas now living in peace and harmony in state-controlled areas as was the case before the escalation of the crisis? Some may be tempted to say this is an exaggeration and an overstatement which would have a sectarian dimension! No, this is not true. The sectarian rhetoric is something and the sectarian feeling is something else. The truth is that many who before the crisis were not aware of the danger of the sectarian feeling now they have learned the lessons of war, of which the most important is to reject sectarianism and seclusion which can destroy a homeland.[40]

Pro-regime media have endeavoured to propagate the alleged protesters' hostile attitude towards religious minorities and have seen success to the extent of these ideas being espoused by worldwide investigation bodies despite the lack of evidence which document such allegations.

One of the most blatant cases of such propaganda was the allegation that in the early days of the protest movement, demonstrators chanted anti-'Alawite and anti-Christian slogans, such as, "'Alawites in the coffin and Christians to Beirut."[41] Nevertheless, none of the media outlets or the investigating parties who espoused such propaganda were able to provide a single recording to confirm the allegations.[42] The pro-regime media propaganda also focused on the Christians being a particular target because of the ability of such allegation to capture the sympathy of the West, contrary to other religious minorities. Al-Asad endeavoured to refer to his opponents as sectarianists and promoters of sectarian discourse, an insinuation that they are affiliated with a specific community.[43]

Civil Society

In the beginning, the surging civil society movement coined inclusive national slogans focusing on the unity of the Syrian people but equally on the unity of its components. One of the most significant slogans chanted at the time was, "One, one, one, the Syrian people are one," and "One, one, one, Sunnis and 'Alawites are one." Good Friday 2011, April 22, represented a critical point in the popular movement's relations with the Christian community in particular. On that day, Syrians took to the streets in almost every corner of the country chanting slogans such as, "We welcome Good Friday with Christians, and we confirm their effective presence within Syrian society."[44]

Friday sermons represented a convenient launching platform for the attitude towards religious minorities.[45]

The Syrian Revolution Page designated Friday, June 17, 2011 as "Salih al-'Ali Friday," invoking the name of an 'Alawite hero who put up resistance against French colonialism. In an unexpected reaction, the Syrian official media, which has hardly referred to the designations of Friday names, conducted interviews the same day with Salih al-'Ali's grandchildren. In an interview with the Syrian satellite television, Salih al-'Ali's niece, Dr. Umayma Salman, declared,

> We are amazed and we have tried to understand why they chose his name. They are killing soldiers and people, while true Syrian revolutionaries such as Salih al-'Ali, Ibrahim Hananu, and Sultan Basha al-Atrash had spearheaded their revolution in order to protect people from being killed. The choice of this name is an attack on all those who fought for the sake of the independence and unity of Syria and its people.[46]

The regime's use of excessive violence to crack down on the protests, however, and the emergence of the al-Qa'ida-affiliated Nusra Front and the heightening of its religious discourse by late 2012, have all played a key role in civil society adopting an unprecedented sectarian discourse which eventually replaced the "the Syrian people are one" slogan by the call to arms, "We have come to behead the 'Alawites."[47] Even though the al-Nusra Front and the IS did not succeed in disseminating their individual discourses within civil society, their presence has contributed to the nationalist discourse dying away almost completely from civil society. It became the target of the al-Nusra discourse's supporters or those who view the objective of the nationalist discourse aimed to please the West, which began to gradually turn into an enemy or, at best, to conniving with the al-Asad regime.

Political Opposition

The opposition discourse has constantly endeavored to send out reassuring signals to minorities, particularly Christians and 'Alawites, by urging them to join the opposition movement and allotting leadership seats to them. The opposition has also sought to refute allegations by the regime and its allies that they guarantee the protection of minorities. For instance, in a statement issued on March 21, 2014, Deputy Chairman of the Syrian National Coalition Nura al-Amir maintained that "there are no minorities in Syria. It is a crisis fabricated by the al-Asad regime to use it as a card that would enable it to market its political strategy. We are all one people. Throughout his rule, al-Asad has endeavored to divide and fractionalize the people by invoking ethnic and sectarian strife."[48]

Most Syrian political factions, including Islamists, have continuously endeavored to send similar reassuring messages. In an interview on April 8, 2013, the then-Muslim Brotherhood Supreme Guide Muhammad Riyad Shakfa urged minorities to engage with the opposition, declaring, "The Muslim Brotherhood believes that Syria is a state for all. No one is above the law and citizenship is the basis for a dignified life. There is no longer justification to fear the future. Minorities need to wholeheartedly join the revolution to bar the route for the regime capitalizing on their names."[49]

Despite the Muslim Brotherhood's general openness to minority involvement, other statements have accused the Alawite community of siding with al-Asad and of being responsible for the crimes perpetrated by the regime. General Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood Muhammad Walid has said that the 'Alawite community "has committed a huge mistake with its support for the al-Asad regime," and that the last four years "have created an unbridgeable chasm between the community and the rest of Syrians." He recommended 'Alawites consider that "it is not possible for one sect to rule over Syria for long" as long-term dominance "will equally destroy the sect and the people." It was not too late, however, for 'Alawites to do their "duty" and join the opposition for the sake of the Syrian people's unity and the country's territorial integrity.[50]

Foreign Religious Bodies

Sectarian discourse appeared in foreign religious discourse ahead of its effective emergence on the Syrian political scene. Religious satellite television stations have tirelessly endeavored to disseminate conversations about sectarian issues. Most those involved in presenting such programs and debates are not Syrians.

The discourse of Saudi-based Syrian Shaykh 'Adnan al-'Ar'ur, for instance, was one of the

most conspicuous discourses which evoked the sectarian dimension, and viewed the conflict in Syria as that of confronting the ‘Alawites. His program “With Syria Until Victory” on Wisal satellite TV had considerable bearing in Syria in 2011. The regime’s inability to disseminate a similar program led the Syrian official and semi-official media to react to al-‘Ar‘ur’s discourse with prolonged programs attacking and insulting him.[51] Such an unexpectedly strong reaction turned al-‘Ar‘ur into a star in the eyes of ordinary Syrians and greatly helped disseminate his discourse, forcing the regime’s institutions to produce a specific counter religious discourse.

A large number of other non-Syrian preachers and religious authorities have participated in disseminating the sectarian discourse and in inciting the Syrians to rise against al-Asad, describing him as an ‘Alawite and referring to his regime as “infidel Nusayri.”[52] They have referred to what is happening in Syria as a Sunni uprising against a Shi‘i and Nusayri sectarian regime.[53] In a number of sermons, Qatar-based Egyptian cleric Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi described the popular uprising in Syria as a Sunni revolution against al-Nusayris. He called for a holy jihad (war) against the al-Nusayris (al-Asad’s sect) and their Shi‘i Lebanese Hezbollah supporters. During a Friday sermon in May 2013, al-Qaradawi said that “al-Nusayris are worse infidels than Jews and Christians. Today, they are killing people in their thousands and tens of thousands like rats and cats. Al-Asad remains the dictator and the absolute master backed by his al-Nusayri sect.”[54]

The Targeting of Minorities in the Armed Conflict

By failing to take a clear stance on the country’s crisis, the Syrian minorities have attempted to distance themselves from current events. Once they are targeted by an armed attack or once armed confrontation takes place in their areas, however, there is no denying their involvement in the crisis. The most conspicuous battlefield incidents which brought minorities to the fore started in the second semester of 2013, coinciding with the emergence of the Islamic State organization.

Christian communities have been targeted in numerous ways. The least of them is of the likes of the events on September 25, 2013, when IS jihadists set fire to Sayyida al-Bashara Church and hoisted the group’s flag on the church’s roof. But most other attacks have been more violent or personal.

On April 21, 2013, the head of Syriac Orthodox community in Aleppo and its subordinate areas Archbishop John Ibrahim and Antiochian Orthodox Metropolitan of Aleppo Paul Yazigi were abducted on the road, leading to areas under the regime control in Aleppo. They were on their way from Bab al-Hawa crossing, which has, since then, been under the control of armed opposition brigades.[55] More than three years after their abduction, their kidnappers and their fate remain a mystery.

On July 29 of the same year, Syria-based Italian national Father Paolo Dall’Oglio was kidnapped in Raqqa on his way to Islamic State organization’s headquarters. His fate continues to be uncertain. Father Paolo, who settled in Syria in the early 1980s, was expelled by the authorities from the country on July 10, 2012

after making statements criticizing the regime and rejecting the government's allegations that opposition groups were targeting Christians.[56] Since 2011, Father Paolo had become one of the most formidable opponents of the regime. Syrians staged dozens of protests in solidarity with him, and the protesters carried his posters, seeing him as one of the icons of the revolution against the regime.[57]

The abduction of Ma'lula Monastery nuns was one of the most burning issues concerning Christians in the Syrian crisis. The pro-al-Asad media made full use of the abduction at the time, before disregarding it completely. On November 20, 2013, the al-Nusra Front stormed the Christian village Ma'lula in al-Qalamun in the Damascus Countryside province, and kidnapped nuns in the village's monastery. On March 9 of the following year, the nuns were released in a deal which secured the release of al-Nusra fighters detained in the regime's jails. The video recorded by the al-Nusra Front during the nuns' detention and prisoner swap showed the nuns expressing satisfaction with the prisoner exchange and spoke of their contribution in striking the deal.[58] The nuns also recorded their news conference after their release to praise the lenient way in which they had been treated. This led the regime's media to accuse them of committing an act of treason.[59] The recording immediately halted the regime and pro-regime's extensive coverage of the nuns' case while they were in captivity.

Not all prisoners have been granted their freedom so easily, though. In early August 2013, opposition groups' armed brigades burst into the 'Alawite coastal areas. The al-Nusra Front kidnapped a group of women and children. On March 12 of the following year, the kidnappers posted a video in which the 97 kidnapped women pleaded with Bashar al-Asad to release prisoners in his jails in return for their freedom, following the example of the abducted nuns, Lebanese, and Iranians. As of this writing, the kidnapped women and children have yet to be released.[60]

Christian Armenian populations, both a religious and ethnic minority, have been targeted by the opposition. On March 18, 2014, opposition armed brigades began to attack Christian Armenian-dominated border town of Kasab. This was followed by reports of brutal massacres carried out against Armenians as well as attacks targeting their churches. The attacks were met with a worldwide condemnation campaign. Kasab's Armenian mayor, however, denied the allegations in a later interview with an Armenian newspaper.[61] And on September 21, 2014, IS jihadists booby-trapped and then blew up Armenian Martyrs' Memorial Church in Dayr al-Zur's al-Rashidiyya district, which led to its complete destruction.

Jihadist groups affiliated with al-Nusra Front and Islamic State organization intensified their attacks on both Christian and 'Alawite communities in 2015. On April 5, IS jihadists blew up, and destroyed, the Church of the Virgin Mary in the town of Tal Nasri in the al-Hasaka countryside. The date coincided with the celebrations of Easter by Christians who follow the Western calendar. On April 20, IS fighters set fire to Saint Simeon Stylites Church in the village of Abu Tina in al-Hasaka's Tal Tamr al-Gharbi countryside.

On June10, al-Nusra jihadists fired at Qalb Luzah village in Idlib, killing twenty-four Druze villagers after they tried to prevent the seizure of the house of a collaborator with the regime.[62]

On November 1, Jaysh al-Islam, one of the main opposition armed brigades, paraded a

convoy of lorries carrying cages in Damascus Countryside's Duma city. Every cage contained several captive 'Alawite families. Jaysh al-Islam threatened to parade a hundred similar cages, which it said it was using to prevent the regime's warplanes from targeting the city.[63]

Several reports indicated that in February 2015, the IS gave the Christians in areas under its control, particularly in the al-Hasaka province, the options to convert to Islam or pay Islamic tax.[64]

The Status of Minorities in International Discourse

The issue of Syrian minorities has generated keen interest in international discourse even before Syria's media endeavored to use the issue in its anti-opposition propaganda. For instance, as a Syrian regime ally, Russia used the minority card to champion al-Asad's regime. The Russian government carried the same messages delivered by the al-Asad regime, particularly by boasting that the regime is the protector of minorities and the guarantor of their security. It claimed that al-Asad's regime had prevented Syria turning into a country impossible for minorities to inhabit.[65]

The Russian discourse also highlighted that groups opposing al-Asad threaten minorities.

It is along these lines that Russian Permanent Envoy to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva, Alexey Borodavkin, stated that "religious minorities in Syria, including the Christian minority, are being threatened by the armed groups which made their intentions clear that they will establish a [political or religious] entity of their own choice in Syria." He went on to say that the armed groups "carry out brutal attacks against ethnic and religious minorities, demolish their mosques and churches, and pile pressure on them to flee their historical homeland."[66] In an unprecedented and controversial statement, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared in March 2012, "I have no doubt that if the current regime falls, some states in the region will signal an overwhelming desire and apply frantic pressure to establish a Sunni regime in Syria. We are worried about the fate of Christians and other minorities, such as the Kurds, the Alawites, and the Druze."[67]

Minorities have a commanding presence in Western discourse, particularly in that of the French government, given the fact that Syria had been under French mandate for twenty-three years in the first half of the last century. The French were among the first to raise the issue of protecting Syrian minorities despite their anti-al-Asad discourse. On March 27, 2015, France hosted a conference on the victims of attacks perpetrated on ethnic and religious bases in the Middle East. The conference was chaired by France's then-Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius.[68]

France proposed to set up a humanitarian fund to reinstate minorities in their regions in the Middle East, where they had been displaced by force, and to provide them with military protection.[69] The US and British governments also sought to take up the issue of minorities, albeit not as enthusiastically as the French. On several occasions, officials of the two countries expressed their devotion to protect minorities in Syria and the need to take their interests into

account, but took no further action to this effect. In an interview which he conducted with Dubai-based pan-Arab al-Arabiyya TV in 2014, US Secretary of State John Kerry said, "The world will protect the 'Alawites and other minorities in Syria after al-Asad's downfall."[70] Indeed, joint international statements have sought to deal with the issue of Syrian minorities, their rights, and their secular identity, and the joint statement which was issued following the Vienna negotiations on Syria pointed out that "Syria's unity, its independence, its territorial integrity and secular identity are paramount issues" and also stressed the need "to protect the rights of all Syrians regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation."[71]

Casting a Searching Glance at the Future of Minorities in Syria

The future of minorities in Syria looks frighteningly bleak. No local, regional, or international party can confidently predict how the crisis will develop even in short or medium terms. On the bright side, the documented passionate interest of nations seeking practical arrangements for a political or even military solution to the Syrian crisis can possibly lead to the preservation of protection of Syrian religious minorities. Despite what has been said about certain religious minorities' backing of the Syrian regime, all minorities, except for the 'Alawites, have generally observed neutrality and have not effectively participated in the development of the crisis, as reflected in the opposition's neutrality towards them as a whole. For all these reasons, minorities are not expected to face hostile attitudes after the resolution of the Syrian crisis. On the contrary, it is possible for them to play a key mediation role in future political and military moves, being parties without clear blood on their hands. Such an opportunity would change the state of marginalization to which these minorities have been subjected since the Ba'th Party seized power in the early 1960s.

Acceptance and protection, however, may not be the case for the 'Alawite community. Most opposition groups tend to accuse the sect of taking part in crimes and violations perpetrated by the Syrian regime. they propound, for instance, that no important 'Alawite groups or even prominent personalities took part in the opposition movement. Importantly, though, by virtue of the international equilibria which have been a dominant factor in Syria's civil war and which prevent the total domination of any particular party by focusing on the policy of "no victor and no vanquished," it is not expected of any particular religious minority to ultimately establish its dominance. The equilibria will be reflected in the provision of effective protection to the 'Alawite minority, as it is not possible to contemplate revenge actions against it or any other minority or majority group as a whole. Of course, 'Alawite or Sunni individuals may still be brought before criminal courts as part of the need to administer transitional justice, but the many will not be punished for the crimes of the few.

Demographic issues will also be brought up in the Sunni, 'Alawite, and Shi'i areas, as these areas will need special security measures

similar to the measures produced in Sarajevo to separate Muslims from Serbs. Populations may be moved from one area to another, particularly in villages such as Kafariya, al-Fu'ah, Nabal and al-Zahra in the Idlib provinces; in the Sunni and 'Alawite districts in Homs city; and in contact and demarcation areas in the Latakia countryside.

In the event of reaching an internationally-sponsored political solution, it is expected that the 'Alawite community will continue to dominate the military hierarchy and security, as well as intelligence services, albeit not at its current rate. A political settlement is likely to enable the Sunni community to play a more important and effective role in the country's political life. In the past, members of the Sunni community were associated with the service sector activities. Even though many Sunni community officials assume important political positions, such positions have no impact on the country's sovereign issues.

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(21) See, for instance, Lebanese NVN TV: "Television Interview with Patriarch Luke al-Khouri", [in Arabic], https://www,youtube.com/watch?v=1dP5xjxa9ps. Also see "Quotes from Patriarch Luke address at the de la Croix Church", [in Arabic], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7yXEqNIWZ.

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