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“The Syrian People Are One” The Protection of Ethnic, Sectarian and Religious Minorities in Syria



Social Studies Unit

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FOR CONTEMPORARY STUDIES

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Table of Abbreviations

	Abbreviations
Universal Declaration of Human Rights	UDHR
United Nations	UN
Internally Displaced Person	IDP

Introduction

The conflict in Syria has been devastating as much on Syria's material wealth as it has been on the country's social fabric. The war, largely fought along ethnic, sectarian, and religious lines has had a devastating effect on all Syrians, but cast into sharp relief the situation of the countries plethora of minority groups that remain, to some, the key to building sustainable and long lasting peace. In order to build such a peace, it is important that the position of Syria's minorities and the way that have behaved during the conflict are effectively analysed to counter claims that Syria's destiny is one of continued extremist violence and conflict. The ways in which minority groups have been utilised, targeted, and represented is of great importance, and yet, has remained sadly generalised and understudied.

This paper will analyse and discuss the meaning of minority, analyse the legal instruments that can protect minorities in international law and picture the different minority ethno-religious groups currently present in Syria. Furthermore, this paper will look back on the French mandate in Syria and on Bashar al-Assad's rule and assess how they both used the tactic of "divide and rule" to control the country and maintain political power. Moreover, this paper will discuss the ways in which the Syrian conflict has impacted minority groups in Syria. Finally, this research will give recommendation on how to address these sectarian divisions deliberately created by the Syrian regime in order to unify Syria and reconstruct the country based on a solid and united civil society.

1. Protecting Ethnic and Religious Minorities

a. Definition of the Term Minority

While there is considerable scholarly debate over the definition of “minority”, in their 1992 Minorities Declaration, the United Nations defined the term “based on national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity”. The Declaration explains that states should protect all minorities. However, while this is perhaps a useful definition, there is no international fixed definition for the word minority and it is often interpreted differently.

It has been argued that minority groups must have both objective and subjective criteria. Objective criteria would be sharing, for example, a common language, ethnicity and religion. Subjective factors mean that the individuals belonging to the group must identify themselves as a minority.⁽¹⁾ Minority rights can apply to members of, for example, a religious, sexual, racial, ethnic, sect or class group. On the other hand, a minority group can also be a group of people that differs from the majority in the society. As a result, Minorities can be subject to discrimination and/or exclusion from society.

According to Francesco Capotorti, the Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities in 1977, a minority is:

A group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members—being nationals of the State—possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion or language.⁽²⁾

⁽¹⁾ United Nations (2010), *Minority Rights: International Standards and Guidance for Implementation* (HR/PUB/10/3)

⁽²⁾ Capotorti F. (1977), *Study on the Rights of Persons Belonging to Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities*, United Nations, E/CN.4/Sub.2/384/Rev.1, para. 568.

However, not everybody agrees on the nationality aspect of this definition. Indeed, some minorities have not received the nationality of their country of origin due to discrimination caused by the fact that they are minorities. For example, the Rohingyas in Myanmar are not considered as an “original” ethnic group in the country and therefore, are not granted the Burmese nationality.⁽³⁾ However, they still represent a minority in Myanmar and deserve to be protected even if they are not officially nationals of the country. The Commentary on the United Nations Minorities Declaration by the Working Group on Minorities states that “citizenship as such should not be a distinguishing criterion that excludes some persons or groups from enjoying minority rights under the Declaration”.⁽⁴⁾ Therefore, non-citizens and stateless individuals should not be excluded from the minority definition.

In some cases, a group that is the majority in a state, can still be a minority in a certain region or city. This is often the case for Somali clans that are considered as majority clans by the international community due to the fact that they are superior in numbers. However, these clans can be minorities in certain regions of the country where they are lower in numbers and therefore, can also be subject to discrimination. Situations also arise where a numerically majority population in numbers is treated like a minority and being discriminated, such as during the Apartheid in South Africa. The same happens in Syria, where religious minorities might become the majority in a certain region or due to their allegiance to a certain political group. According to the United Nations, all countries have at least one minority group characterised by its language, culture, religion, ethnicity etc.

⁽³⁾ Aljazeera. (2018). *Myanmar: Who are the Rohingya?*. [online] Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/08/rohingya-muslims-170831065142812.html> [Accessed 24 Mar. 2018]; Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, *Myanmar*, 1 December 1991, BUR9569, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6ad458.html> [accessed 24 March 2018]

⁽⁴⁾ United Nations (2005), *Working Group on Minorities – Eleven Session*, E/CN.4/Sub.2/AC.5/2005/2, paras. 10–11.

b. Protection of Minorities in International Law

According to the Commentary of the Working Group on Minorities, minorities should mainly be protected against crimes against humanity and the crime of genocide. During the 2001 United Nations Durban Declaration, it was stated that “the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of minorities, where they exist, must be protected and that persons belonging to such minorities should be treated equally and enjoy their human rights and fundamental freedoms without discrimination of any kind”.⁽⁵⁾ Special attention should be given to minorities in periods of conflict, where they are at greater risk of being discriminated or abused. This includes populations that have been displaced such as internally displaced persons (IDPs), asylum seekers, and refugees outside of their country of origin. According to Kofi Annan, a former United Nations Secretary General, minorities are the groups most vulnerable and the most frequent targets of the inhumane crime of genocide.⁽⁶⁾

For these reasons, several legal instruments have been created to protect minority rights in times of peace but also in times of civil unrest. These instruments aim to give minorities fundamental human rights no matter the circumstances. In 1992, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities which is the only document that focus specifically on minority rights. The Declaration largely focuses on emphasising states obligation to protect minority fundamental rights and allow them to perform freely their religion, culture etc. Thirteen years later, the Working Group on Minorities adopted a commentary to help understanding and the application of the 1992 Minorities Declaration. Moreover, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that entered in force in 1976, also mentions minorities and actually inspired the United Nations to create the Minorities Declaration. Article 27 of the covenant states that “In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied

⁽⁵⁾ United Nations (2001), *Durban Declaration*, World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, para. 66

⁽⁶⁾ United Nations (2004), *Press release SG/SM/9126/Rev.1*, 11 February 2004.

the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language”.⁽⁷⁾

Moreover, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states in article 2(2) that “the States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to guarantee that the rights enunciated in the present Covenant will be exercised without discrimination of any kind as to race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status”.⁽⁸⁾ This implies that the covenant and its rights must be applied upon every individual, including minorities. However, the words “minority” and “ethnicity” have not been mentioned in the key instruments of international law; the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).⁽⁹⁾ Nevertheless, articles 1, 55, and 65 of the UN Charter state that everyone is entitled to human rights and basic freedoms without discrimination race, gender, language, or religion, implying that these criteria apply to minorities as well.⁽¹⁰⁾

c. Minorities in Syria

In Syria, there is a large number of diverse ethno-religious groups. In terms of religion, approximately 75% of the country are Sunni Muslims and the remaining 25% are mainly Druze, Ismailis, Christians, and Alawites. In terms of ethnicity, the Kurds are the largest minority group in the country, representing almost 15% of the total population. Kurds in Syria consider themselves to be discriminated on a social, cultural, and political basis. For many years, tens of thousands of Kurds were stateless in Syria due to the country’s nationality laws. Moreover, even before the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, many Kurdish activists were jailed in Syria and the Kurdish Popular Union Party was banned in the country. Syrian

⁽⁷⁾ United Nations (1979), *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 1979, article 27

⁽⁸⁾ United Nations (1976), *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, 1976, article 2(2)

⁽⁹⁾ United Nations (1948), *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948

⁽¹⁰⁾ United Nations (1945), *UN Charter*, 1945, articles 1, 55 and 65

Democratic Forces, which are mainly Kurdish fighters, currently fight against the Syrian regime in Syria.

On the other hand, Shia Alawites represent the largest religious minority in Syria and make up between 8 and 15% of the Syrian population. They are currently the most powerful sect in Syria due to the reign of the Alawite al-Assad family since 1971 that ensured Alawite individuals held positions at the top of the government to give power to the Alawite religious group. However, if the Syrian regime was to lose the conflict, the Alawites will most probably become the most vulnerable minority in the country since most of the Alawite community in Syria support Bashar al-Assad or were coerced to do so. According to the International Crisis Group, “the regime in effect, took the Alawite minority hostage, linking its fate to its own. It did so deliberately and cynically, not least in order to ensure the loyalty of the security services which, far from being a privileged, praetorian elite corps, are predominantly composed of underpaid and overworked Alawites hailing from villages the regime has left in a state of abject underdevelopment”.⁽¹¹⁾

Furthermore, 10% of the Syrian population is Christian. Christians do not seem to have been extensively discriminated against under the al-Assad regime and some of them even hold high position within the government. According to Salam Kawakibi, before 2011, Christians in Syria found it difficult to profess Christian faith, but at the same time were grateful for the regime’s openness to religious minorities. This reassured them, especially in a region where Islam represents the majority, that their rights and very existence was being respected. At the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, Bashar al-Assad met with Christian religious leader and coerced them to defend him by telling them that he will protect them and that they would be more at risk if Sunnis were to take control of the country. This combined with what happened to Christians in Iraq after the American invasion, resulted in almost complete support from the Christian community for the al-Assad regime in the hope for

⁽¹¹⁾ International Crisis Group (2011), *Uncharted Waters: Thinking Through Syria’s Dynamics*, p.2

protection. However, it must be noted that the number of Christians in Syria decreased from 15% in 1970 to 7% in 2006. ⁽¹²⁾

Another important minority group in Syria are the Shia Ismailis, who number approximately 200,000. This group appears to be very divisive in terms of support to the Syrian regime and it is believed that approximately half of them are in favour of Bashar al-Assad.

Finally, the Druze, who are approximately 600,000 in Syria and who do not consider themselves as part of Islam, are another crucial minority in the country. The Druze played an important role in the revolt against the French and in the foundation of the Syrian Arab Republic. Bashar al-Assad also focused on gaining the Druze support during the conflict, promising them protection. ⁽¹³⁾

2. Syria's Ethno-Sectarian Make Up: The "Divide and Rule" History of Syria: from the French Mandate to Bashar al-Assad

a. Divide and Rule During the French Mandate

Syrian history has been characterised by "divide and rule" strategies that started after the end of the First World War, when France was occupying Syria. The French mandate in Syria was supported by two main powers: the French colonial lobby that was in favour of occupying Syria for trading and financial reasons, and the Catholic lobby that wanted the presence of French in Syria to protect the Christian minorities such as the Maronites and the Uniates. The French argued that they needed to be in Syria for the long term to prevent conflict between

⁽¹²⁾ Kawakibi S., *National Reconciliation and Protection of Minorities*, in M. Akgün, S.Tiryaki (Eds.), F.Gaub, S. Kawakibi, J.Quero, E.Soler, E.Woertz, *Future of Syria*, EUROMESCO joint policy study 7, April 2017, p. 97-98

⁽¹³⁾ BBC News. (2011). *Guide: Syria's diverse minorities*. [online] Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-16108755> [Accessed 11 Mar. 2018].

the different sects. However, from 1920 to 1946 during their mandate, the French were mainly focusing on getting rid of Arab Sunni nationalism.⁽¹⁴⁾

To achieve this, they decided to give more autonomy to non-Sunni minorities such as the Druze and the Ismailis. For example, in 1922 the regions of Latakia, predominantly Alawite, and the region of Suwayda, predominantly Druze, were encouraged to be as independent as possible and to separate themselves from the rest of Syria. In that way, French divided the country in several semi-autonomous regions that even had their own government within Syria. This reinforced regionalism instead of uniting the different ethnic groups present in Syria.⁽¹⁵⁾

Moreover, the French settlers deliberately refrained from allowing Syria to establish a central government by giving power to local and religious leaders in the different regions of the country. This resulted in a lack of national security and also reinforced strong affiliations to a region and/or an ethnicity. They intentionally discouraged people from uniting behind Syrian nationalism in order to dampen the Arab movement, which constituted the vast majority, and made sure to put an end to the Arab Kingdom of Syria. As a consequence, Syria became a very divided country. This also reinforced discrimination against the Syrian Christians that were, sometimes, on the side of the French authorities.⁽¹⁶⁾

The Alawites also suffered a lot under French colonialism. Most of them were farmers, struggling to make enough money to survive under colonial rule. Partly because of their difficult economic situation, a significant number of Alawites joined the military group created by the French authorities called Army of the Levant. This is how the Alawites managed to gain power within the military system and, when the French lost power, the Alawites were able to climb the social ladder even faster. After 1946, the Alawites continued to climb the military ranks until Hafez al-Assad managed to seize power in the country through a military coup in 1970. Even before that, multiple coups d'état prevented the country to have a stable democracy, which reinforced ethnical and religious divisions in the country. Until now, the al-Assad family has been ruling through a system based on the maintenance of Alawite power,

⁽¹⁴⁾ McHugo J. (2014), *Syria: A Recent History*, The New Press, Chapter 2

⁽¹⁵⁾ McHugo J. (2014), *Syria: A Recent History*, The New Press, Chapter 2

⁽¹⁶⁾ McHugo J. (2014), *Syria: A Recent History*, The New Press, Chapter 2

and has not been focusing on the overall welfare of the entire country. Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, Bashar al-Assad has benefited from the divisive character of the opposition due to ethno-sectarian issues. It is clear then that, the Assad regime is responsible for keeping these divisions and deepening the fractures within Syrian society and consequently the opposition since it allows the regime to remain in power. ⁽¹⁷⁾

b. Divide and Rule Under Bashar al-Assad

Bashar al-Assad has mirrored the French divide and rule technique to control the population and remain in power. Al-Assad promised protection to minority groups in order to gain support but also created radicalisation in Syria in order for him to be pictured as the saviour from radical Sunni Islam.

This started with the American's involvement in Iraq in 2003. Al-Assad felt threatened by the United States and was scared that Syria would be the next country on the list of American invasions. Therefore, he promoted and facilitated the trafficking of weapons to Iraq in order to defeat the Americans. ⁽¹⁸⁾ The Syrian regime went as far as legitimising suicide attacks against the United States and even trained jihadists in Iraq to fight against American soldiers. ⁽¹⁹⁾ Moreover, Bashar allowed foreign extremist fighters to pass through Syria on their way to Iraq. ⁽²⁰⁾ He used a similar technique during the current sectarian conflict taken place in his country by creating ungoverned territories in Syria where radicalism could emerge. Indeed, Bashar created this idea of fighting against radicalism in Syria, ⁽²¹⁾ legitimising attacks against

⁽¹⁷⁾ Taylor C. (2015) "*Why Bashar Al-Assad Remains in Power*," Global Tides: Vol. 9, Article 8. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/globaltides/vol9/iss1/8>, p.2-3

⁽¹⁸⁾ Abdul-Ahad G., "*The Road From Syria: On the Trail of Iraq's Insurgents*", *The Guardian*, June 7th 2005, accessed on 18/7/17, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/jun/08/iraq-al-qaida>.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Lister C., *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, p. 44.

⁽²⁰⁾ Central Intelligence Agency Cable, "*Syrian Intelligence Chief Attends CT Dialogue*", *Wikileaks*, 2010, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10DAMASCUS159_a.html.

⁽²¹⁾ Interview with Bashar al-Assad, "*Barbara Walters interview with Bashar al-Assad*", *ABC NEWS*, Youtube, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yL9h9vSOHDk>.

civilians and third party's interventions on the part of Russia and Iran, further stoking sectarian tension. This became worse with the atrocities committed by the Syrian regime: the more crimes committed, the more violent radicalism took hold.⁽²²⁾

Furthermore, by reinforcing sectarian disputes in the country, al-Assad has weakened the opposition and reinforced the creation of radical groups in the country.⁽²³⁾ The regime has created these ungoverned territories by preventing opposition groups forming democratic forms of authority. This practice is widely seen as one of the most propitious factor encouraging radicalisation and terrorism.⁽²⁴⁾ The regime and its allies have intensely targeted opposition areas by conducting severe airstrikes and artillery bombardments and using siege tactics to exterminate a population, but also to force them to leave the area. Because of mass displacement, the opposition was unable to unify and created a structured system of governance.⁽²⁵⁾ Bashar used the excuse of targeting these areas to fight against terrorists but actually he created terrorism by leaving these areas uncontrolled and thus, propitious to radicalisation. The regime also targeted civilian infrastructure in order to deny the opposition the opportunity to form a structured coalition with a unified form of authority.⁽²⁶⁾ By destabilising the opposition, Bashar has managed to divide the opposition and therefore, remain the most powerful party of the conflict.

⁽²²⁾ Nader Hashemi interviewed in Katarina Montgomery, "*Understanding the Drivers of Radicalisation in Syria*", *News Deeply*, December 2014, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2014/12/11/understanding-the-drivers-of-radicalization-in-syria>.

⁽²³⁾ Al-Shami L., "*The Sectarianization of Syria and Smearing a Revolution*", *Al Araby*, October 2016, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2016/10/30/The-sectarianization-of-Syria-and-smearing-a-revolution>.

⁽²⁴⁾ See Angel Rabasa et al, *Ungoverned Territories: Understanding and Reducing Terrorism Risk*, Rand Corporation: Santa Monica, 2007. See also Omer Taspinar, "*Fighting Radicalism, not Terrorism: Root Causes of an International Actor Redefined*", *SAIS Review*, vol. XXIX, no. 2, 2009.

⁽²⁵⁾ Kozak C., "*An Army in all Corners: Assad's Campaign Strategy in Syria*", *Institute for the Study of War Middle East Security Report 26*, April 2016, p. 10

⁽²⁶⁾ Khaddour K., "*Survival through Destruction*", *Carnegie Middle East Center*, November 2017, www.carnegie-mec.org/diwan/74842.

Still in an attempt to increase the rise of radicalisation and extremism, the Syrian regime released in 2011 Islamist prisoners that were well known for their extreme religious ideas.⁽²⁷⁾ Those included notorious figures such as Abu Mohammed al-Julani, a former chief in the Islamic State of Iraq who is currently one of the most powerful Syrian Jihadists of the terrorist group Fatah al-Sham.⁽²⁸⁾ Additionally, it has been argued that the Syrian regime might even have some control over Daesh's operations in Syria and abroad. Mufti Ahmad Hassoun of Syria suggested in a Youtube video that al-Assad controls Daesh's attacks abroad and that any attack against the regime would result in terrorist attacks in the West.⁽²⁹⁾ It is clear then, that the Syrian regime has facilitated the creation of terrorism in Syria to (1) spread terror and be seen as the protector of minorities, and (2) to use the pretext of fighting against terrorism to conduct horrible war crimes and crimes against humanity against rebel-held areas.

In addition to promoting radicalisation as a tactic to divide Syrian society, the Syrian regime promoted sectarian conflicts by staging incidents in ethno-religious mixed areas of the country to put the minority groups in a vulnerable and insecure position. This technique was successful especially with the Alawites that were marginalised and economically excluded during the French mandate and that feared being discriminated again. According to the International Crisis Group, at the beginning of the Syrian conflict, the Syrian regime distributed weapons and bags of sand to Alawites population for "protection", promoting sectarian violence and the formation of barbaric Shabiha militias who have been accused of brutal sectarian massacres.⁽³⁰⁾

The Syrian regime invented or exaggerated sectarian incidents to create fear and gain the Alawites unquestioned loyalty. This created a deep feeling of hatred against Alawites among the anti-regime protesters. Al-Assad has also trapped the Alawites by giving them high rank

⁽²⁷⁾ Lister C., *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, p. 51.

⁽²⁸⁾ Ambassador Addullah Alazreg, *ISIS: Management of Savagery*, 2016, Dorrance Publishing: London, p.33.

⁽²⁹⁾ Mufri Ahmad Hassoun, "*Syria Mufti Ahmad Hassoun Threatens Europe and America*", Youtube, October 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8lHZxZOgA0>.

⁽³⁰⁾ International Crisis Group (2011) *Uncharted Waters: Thinking Through Syria's Dynamics*, p.2

positions in the military, security services and the government to ensure their loyalty but without investing in the rest of the community that lives in extremely poor conditions. Currently, a significant number of people picture the Syrian regime and the Alawite community as one single entity, putting the Alawites in an extremely vulnerable position if al-Assad was to be defeated in the Syrian conflict.⁽³¹⁾ However, Alawites are not the only minority that benefited and/or were manipulated by the Assad regime. Other ethno-religious groups such as Druze, Christians and Sunnis have decided to pledge allegiance to Bashar. According to Salam Kawakibi, these groups altogether, who are mainly minority groups, form the “minority of the power” and not the power of a minority. It is clear then, that the Syrian regime controls minorities by privileging them and giving them a feeling of protection in exchange for total domination.⁽³²⁾

On the other hand, the Assad family attempted to portray themselves as secular. However, this is far from the reality. The Assad regimes have used the excuse of secularity to crush progressive religious reformists with the help of the army. This prevented religious reforms, which reinforced even further the sense of belonging to a community, region or ethnicity rather than belonging to an entire nation. This resulted in an augmentation of the expression of faith. Indeed, before 2011, we observed an increase in the number of women wearing the hijab and an increase of the number of religious books being sold. Consequently, the secular idea was only presented in public discourse but was never present in laws and the regime was quite happily to let Muslim conservatism rise. During that time, religious political groups such as the Muslim brotherhood took the advantage to gain in popularity in Syria, further scaring non-Muslim minorities such as Christians.⁽³³⁾ Once again this benefited the Assad regime: “the

⁽³¹⁾ International Crisis Group (2011) *Uncharted Waters: Thinking Through Syria's Dynamics*, p.2

⁽³²⁾ Kawakibi S., *National Reconciliation and Protection of Minorities*, in M. Akgün, S.Tiryaki (Eds.), F.Gaub, S. Kawakibi, J.Quero, E.Soler, E.Woertz, *Future of Syria*, EUROMESCO joint policy study 7 , April 2017, p. 99-100

⁽³³⁾ Kawakibi S., *National Reconciliation and Protection of Minorities*, in M. Akgün, S.Tiryaki (Eds.), F.Gaub, S. Kawakibi, J.Quero, E.Soler, E.Woertz, *Future of Syria*, EUROMESCO joint policy study 7 , April 2017, p. 100-102

Islamic danger might devastate them: the hell of the regime is therefore better than the paradise of democracy”.⁽³⁴⁾

Therefore, despite Bashar using minorities to remain in power, being targeted or being protected in Syria is not related to ethno-religious or sectarian issues like the regime wants the West to believe. Being vulnerable in Syria is simply related to pledging allegiance to the regime or not. Sadly, the Western world has fallen into the Assad trap and portrays the Syrian conflict as “another Middle East ethno-religious conflict” instead of realising that the only major problem in Syria is the brutal and inhuman dictatorial regime in power since 1970. Bashar is perceived as the saviour of minorities while in reality he has condemned them, like every other Syrian, to his brutal reign of domination and has turned them against each other. He is perceived as the only power able to destroy terrorists in Syria while, in reality, he is the creator of these extremist groups. He is perceived as the moderate secular power in the region while, in reality, he has himself allowed religious radicalisation to create terror. Thus, it is clear that minorities in Syria should be protected but not only from Daesh or other extremist groups like the West believes, but simply from Bashar al-Assad himself.

3. Impact of the Conflict on Syria’s Ethno-Sectarian Minorities

Even if Bashar al-Assad continues to emphasize that the Syrian conflict was started in 2011 by Jihadists and terrorist groups, we know that in reality the Syrian people were simply protesting and asking for equal human rights for all.⁽³⁵⁾ According to Dr Hazem, Syrians started the revolution to protest against the corrupt and tyrannical regime and were not influenced at all by predominant religious personalities such as al-Bouty and Hassoun.⁽³⁶⁾

⁽³⁴⁾ Al-Ghadban, M. (2006). *Les chrétiens de Syrie : n’ayez pas peur de la démocratie sur votre destin dans la région*. *levantnews*. Retrieved from www.levantnews.com

⁽³⁵⁾ ICG (2011), cited by Cockburn, P (2015) *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution*. London and New York: Verso, p83; FGDs conducted for NCA 2016.

⁽³⁶⁾ Dr Hazem Nahar (2012), *The Discourse And Performance of the Syrian Opposition Since the Beginning of the Revolution*, Heinrich Boll Stiftung Middle East Office, p.22

At the beginning of the uprising in 2011, the Syrian regime facilitated pro-government demonstrations in Christian neighbourhoods of Damascus to create a narrative that both Alawites and Christians were supporting al-Assad. On the other hand, the opposition groups used the pro-regime demonstrations to prove the divisive character of the Syrian regime.⁽³⁷⁾ Throughout the conflict, both the opposition and the regime have supported and used minorities groups as a strategic warfare tool, allowing them to accuse their adversaries of sectarianism. Since 2011, ethnic cleansing procedures have been reported in order to portray to the rest of the world the conflict as a purely ethno-sectarian dispute. For example, Sunni Muslims were killed in Alawite majority areas and the other way around.⁽³⁸⁾ The technique was apparently successful since, in 2012, the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic reported that the conflict “became overtly sectarian in nature”.⁽³⁹⁾ In 2013, there was a strong increase in attacks by rebel groups against the Alawites, which were, at this point, already fully associated with the Syrian regime.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Meanwhile, the involvement of external actors in the conflict reinforced the religious and sectarian perception of the conflict. Assad’s supporters from the Middle East; Hezbollah, Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards, and Shia fighters from Iraq were all Muslim Shia, giving a feeling of war against the Sunnis.⁽⁴¹⁾ This had a horrible effect on the population. Syrians were

⁽³⁷⁾ US State Department (2011) *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011*. US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, p.7

⁽³⁸⁾ Thomson, Al (2012) ‘*Was There a Massacre in the Syrian Town of Aqrab?* Alex Thomson’s View’. Channel 4 <https://www.channel4.com/news/by/alex-thomson/blogs/happened-syrian-town-aqrab>; *The Huffington Post* (9 December 2013) ‘*Report: Extremists Shoot Dead Women, Children And Elderly Men In Syrian Village*’, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/12/syria-massacre-nusra-front_n_3912376.html

⁽³⁹⁾ UN News. (2012). *In latest update, UN independent panel finds more breaches of human rights law by parties to Syrian conflict*. [online] Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2012/12/428822-latest-update-un-independent-panel-finds-more-breaches-human-rights-law-parties> [Accessed 20 Mar. 2018].

⁽⁴⁰⁾ United Nations Permanent Commission of Inquiry for Syria (2013) *Fifth Report*, June 2013.

⁽⁴¹⁾ Jasser, Z (June 2013) *Religious Minorities in Syria: Caught in the Middle*. Expert statement, for Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations and the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa. US Commission on International Religious Freedom, p.5.

forced to choose a side and sometimes did not have a choice due to their religion. This also led, like often in non-international armed conflict where the country is partly controlled by the state and partly by the opposition, to people being targeted because of their religion, despite their support to a particular group.⁽⁴²⁾ Syrians were trapped in this craft-made ethno-religious conflict. For example, Alawites and Shia Muslims were often threatened at university or a work by Sunnis because the Sunnis assumed that they were pro-regime due to their religion.⁽⁴³⁾ Moreover, other religious minorities not taking sides in the conflict were still subject to suspicion, pressure to choose a side and sometimes even violent attacks.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Both the regime and the opposition also used misinformation and rumours about fake attacks against specific ethno-religious groups in order for them to ask for protection and join one side of the conflict or the other.⁽⁴⁵⁾

In 2016, opposition armed groups launched an offensive against the regime to stop the siege in Aleppo. The offensive was called Ibrahim al-Youssef, the name of a captain of the Aleppo Artillery Academy who, in 1979, killed 32 and injured 54 Alawite students. The narrative of opposition groups has also reinforced the hatred between the different sect-ethno-religious groups in Syria.⁽⁴⁶⁾ When Russian airstrikes targeted areas controlled by Al-Nusra in 2015, the immediate response of the non-state armed group was to call for attacks against Alawite villages in Latakia. Al-Nusra therefore used Alawites as a mean to pressure

⁽⁴²⁾ Forum on minority issues (2014) *Preventing and addressing violence and atrocity crimes targeted against minorities*. Contribution of the UN Network on Racial discrimination and Protection of Minorities, seventh session, 25–26 November 2014, paragraph 14.

⁽⁴³⁾ US Department of State (2015), *International Religious Freedom Report*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

⁽⁴⁴⁾ UN General Assembly (2015) *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*. A/HRC/30/48.

⁽⁴⁵⁾ World Council of Churches and Norwegian Church Aid (2016), *The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq*, p.20

⁽⁴⁶⁾ World Council of Churches and Norwegian Church Aid (2016), *The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq*, p.21

Assad and its Russian ally. Once again, civilians were targeted because of their religious beliefs.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Finally, minorities also suffered from the violence of war and extremist groups. Daesh, for example, committed the crime of genocide in Iraq and Syria by conducting a campaign of extermination against the Yazidi minority population.⁽⁴⁸⁾ In 2015, Daesh also attacked Assyrian villages in the region of Khabour, almost eradicating the Assyrian population from Syria.⁽⁴⁹⁾

4. Reflection and Suggestions on the Future Protection of Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Syria

According to the above analysis, the division of Syria created by Assad has, not only led to sectarian violence, but has also become the main threat for the future of the country in a post conflict scenario. It is therefore crucial to bring the different ethno-religious groups together in an attempt to stop the violence and focus on accountability. Identifying perpetrators and bringing justice to the country is the only way to unite the country again and at the same time protect minorities who, at the moment, are vulnerable because they are not united.

It is obvious then, that the notion of sectarianism must disappear to avoid a rise to power of radical religious groups that benefit from religious disputes. Let's not forget that, at the start of the Syrian revolution, "the Syrian people are one" was one of the most famous slogans in the streets of Syria. This is where the media will play an important role. It is crucial that the media stops portraying the opposition as jihadists and Salafists that mainly focus on making Syria an extremist Muslim country, which is frightening for the international community but also for minorities in Syria.

⁽⁴⁷⁾ Human Rights Council (2015), *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, Thirtieth session, A/HRC/30/48, para. 56

⁽⁴⁸⁾ Human Rights Council (2016), *"They came to destroy": ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis*, Thirty-Second Session, A/HRC/32/CRP.2, 15 June 2016

⁽⁴⁹⁾ World Council of Churches and Norwegian Church Aid (2016), *The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq*, p.21

Moreover, it is clear that, in the case of Syria, international law has failed to protect minorities. It is obvious then, that new legal instruments based on ethnicity and religion must be created by the international community in order to protect minorities. Also, minorities must be included in International Humanitarian Law, since they are the most targeted during times of conflict.

Based on the above reflections, the following recommendations can be drawn to ensure the best protection of the sectarian, ethnic, religious groups in Syria, mainly in a post-conflict scenario. It is important to take in consideration the fact that the below suggestions can only be implemented with a minimum level of stability in the country. These recommendations must be implemented by the future government of Syria with the help of the international community, international NGOs and national civil societies.

- Change the narrative of the Syrian conflict in the West. Remind the citizens of western nations what the conflict was in 2011: a fight for democracy and equal human rights for all different ethno-religious groups in Syria.
- Focus on transnational justice and accountability in the country and remind Syrians that al-Assad is targeting every Syrian that is against his regime and not on a specific minority in particular. Therefore, minority groups have a common enemy. This will help them recover from the atrocities of the conflict together, united as a recovering nation.
- Promote a democratic culture and a federal system that will connect all Syrians together despite allegiance to sect, ethnicity and/or religion. It is crucial to create a sense of democratic nationalism that would go beyond the feeling of belonging first to a community rather than to a country. It is also extremely important to explain that it is possible to belong to a certain region of the country while still be part of the democratic process of the country as a whole.
- It is also crucial that the West understands that Bashar al-Assad is anything but a secular leader fighting imperialism. He is just a brutal dictator that uses religion, ethnicity, sects or any other criterion he could find to dominate the Syrian population and remain in power. He is fighting for power and money and not at all for secularity and against imperialism.

- Diversity in the Middle East must be managed. Unfortunately, the Sykes-Picot colonial agreements, that determined the borders of the different countries of the region, have not respected the wishes of the people from the area. For example, the Kurds were not given their land as promised and ended up being divided throughout four different countries. They are currently fighting for their independence instead of uniting with the rest of the countries they were “assigned” to. This has led many of the Middle East countries to be divided, which is extremely dangerous for peace keeping. Moreover, the recent and present dictatorships in Iraq and Syria have not contributed to re-establishing a sense of unity. Managing diversity must then be the priority of the current and future leaders of the Middle East.
- Strengthen, reconstruct, and invest in the educational system. Education, especially religious education, has often been a mean to divide the Syrian population. Currently, with more than half of the population being displaced, investing in education will be crucial when IDPs and refugees return. Displaced persons often do not have the opportunity to be educated and therefore, will have to catch up when returning home.
- Include religious and ethnic classes in educational curriculums for the students to learn about the different religions and cultures present in Syria and their origin in the Middle East region. It is important to promote diversity and demonstrate how it can be a strength for the country, rather than a weakness. This will favour religious tolerance and ethnic pluralism. This will also prevent discrimination, prejudices and racism.
- Focus on civil society organisations that have been created during the Syrian conflict. Those structures, including those of minority groups, will be the basis to empower the different ethno-religious groups in Syria. It is important to advertise ethno-religious mixed civil societies in order to create unity.
- Promote communal reconciliation, especially in ethno-religiously mixed areas and where minorities have been targeted due to their religion and/or ethnicity. The

various sectarian groups will need to learn how to co-habit together again, like it mainly was before the revolution.

- Create and allow dialogue sessions between the different ethno-religious and non-religious groups. It is important to facilitate communication so that the different communities can talk to each other and understand that the hatred between their religions, for example, was created by the Syrian regime and they were only part of a strategy. This is crucial for reconciliation. Syrians must understand that all ethno-religious groups have been used and manipulated during the conflict and they are all victims of the Assad strategy to control the country.
- Support initiatives that encourage religious tolerance and collaboration between different ethno-religious groups.
- Mention minorities in the UDHR and the UN Charter to give them importance in society and show they should be respected.
- Create a special legal instrument in international law that would protect minorities specifically in times of conflict, which is when they are the most vulnerable.

Conclusion

If such recommendations are followed in post conflict Syria, the country has a chance to reconstruct a meaningful idea of national identity. If barriers are to be brought down, and Syria's diverse ethnic, sectarian, and religious communities are to reconcile and build a sustainable peace as one united nation, then the protection of these minorities will play a crucial role. With minority protection and an appreciation of the country's diversity as a keystone in any post conflict peace agreement and constitution, Syria stands a chance of repairing the great tears in its historical social fabric. If Syrian parties and the international community continue to allow minorities to be used as a tool by both regime and radical opposition groups, one of the key drivers of conflict in Syria will continue to be used as a weapon, devastating minority groups and resulting in a fundamental restructuring of Syria's social make up, if not its geographical unity. It is therefore imperative that minorities in Syria are protected effectively under international and national law for the good of the country's people, and the security of the world at large.



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