

Why Syria's Christians Should Not Support the Assad Regime

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At the Dormition of Our Lady Greek Catholic cathedral in Old Damascus, Father Elias Debii raises his hands to heaven and prays for divine protection for embattled Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.[i] Bishop Philoxenos Mattias, a spokesman for the Syriac Orthodox Church said: "We are with the government and against these movements that oppose it".[ii]

Those among Syria's Christian clerics and civic leaders who publicly support the Asad regime are short sighted. They are courting long-term disaster for themselves and their congregations. Why? Because, the Asad regime will not remain in power forever; it is immoral to support non-representative unjust rule; the Asad clan's exploitation of Sunni Islam has emboldened Islamism and thwarted the development of secularism in Syria; and because scaremongering for blackmail legitimacy will not work forever. The following explains each reason.

The Asad regime will not remain in power forever

Since the March 8, 1963 military coup d'état against the democratically elected parliament and government of President Nazim al-Qudsi, an unelected minority of the Alawite Asad clan has been ruling Syria with an iron fist; notwithstanding, those seven uncontested referendums for the two Asad presidents.

In addition to impoverishing Syria; despite billion of dollars in oil revenues[iii], the regime has committed horrific atrocities—extra-judicial killings of hundreds of Muslim Brothers detainees in the Palmyra prison in 1980, mass murder in 1982 of between 3,000 citizens, according to the regime's apologists, and 38,000 [iv] in the city of Hama, let alone the torture of residents at the slightest suspicion and the disappearance of opponents. The killing of more than 1,000 demonstrators during the seven weeks since the March 26, 2011 popular uprising adds to the regime's grim catalogue of human rights violations.[v]

Such a system of governance is unsustainable. It cannot last forever. When the day of reckoning will come, the support that certain priests and civic leaders had given to the regime will place all Christians in danger.

It cannot be predicted when the Asad regime might fall. However, should the demonstrations become larger and spread to downtown Damascus and Aleppo, the demonstrators could overwhelm the security forces; rendering a Hama or a Palmyra type atrocity impossible. If the demonstrations get bigger, more Sunni clerics would join the uprising. Ultimately, even the Sunni palace ulama could turn against their benefactor president.

There is no love lost between Sunnis and Alawites on a religious level. Accommodation between the Asad regime and Sunni palace ulama is a matter of convenience. Orthodox Sunnis regard Alawites as heretics. Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328), condemned the Alawites as being more dangerous than the Christians, and encouraged Muslims to conduct jihad against them.[vi] Likewise, Alawites despise Sunnis. To Alawites, the howls of jackals that can be heard at night are the souls of Sunni Muslims calling their misguided co-religionists to prayer. [vii]

If parts of the army, which is a conscripted institution, would refuse killing demonstrators or if the army would stand up to the republican guards and the intelligence brigades, then the regime might very well collapse.

It is immoral to support non-representative unjust rule

That leading priests of certain Syrian churches publicly support the Asad dictatorship does not reflect well on the sense of justice, morality, or benevolence of the priests. It is not very Christian for priests to abandon their duty to stand up to oppression, corruption, and injustice.

There might be an argument in favour of tolerating an illegitimate dictatorship if the dictator were benevolent. But, Mr. Asad's dictatorship is neither legitimate nor benevolent.

For some priests and civic leaders to publicly embrace short-term convenience and abandon long-term security and defense of justice and human rights can be very expensive for the Christian community as a whole. Syria's Sunni majority will forever remember Christians' support of Mr. Asad's misrule. A thousand years later, the memories of Christian and Alawite support of the Crusades are still vivid in the collective consciousness of Sunnis.

The Asad clan's exploitation of Sunni Islam emboldened Islamism and impeded the development of secularism in Syria. Islamism has been gaining strength over the recent decades, thanks to the Asad clan's strategy of exploiting Sunni Islam to prolong their hold on power.

That the regime and its apologists and propagandists describe Mr. Asad's rule as "secular" is an exaggeration, if not false. The Asad regime is neither secular nor sincere in its promotion of the Sunni creed. Since their seizure of absolute power more than four decades ago, the Asad government did not secularize Syria in the slightest. Syria of 2011 is no less Islamic than Syria of 1963.

Exploiting Sunni Islam, together with the excesses of the ruling elite, corruption, abuse of human rights, poverty, and unemployment have been driving increasing numbers of young men and women to extremism. The longer this situation continues, the more fertile the ground will become for Islamism to grow.

Here is how the Asad dynasty has been impeding the development of secularism in Syria and exploiting Sunni Islam.

Article 3.1 of the Syria constitution makes Islam the necessary religion of the president. Christians are barred from the country's highest political office. Article 3.2 makes Islam as "a main source" of legislation.

Seventh century Shari'a laws and courts are in force in personal status, family, and inheritance affairs (Christians follow their own archaic religious courts). Shari'a law is the antithesis of the liberal laws of the modern age. It denies women legal rights compared with Muslim men. It impinges on women's human rights. Shari'a law reduces the status of women to that of chattel—a Muslim man can marry four wives, divorce any one of them without giving reason (with limited child custody rights, housing, or alimony), a Muslim woman is prohibited from marrying a non-Muslim man while the Muslim man is allowed to marry non-Muslim women, a woman cannot pass her nationality on to her foreign husband and children while the man can, "honour killing" of a woman by a male relative results in a light sentence for murder, and two women equal one man in legal testimony, witness, and inheritance. Such maltreatment of one half of Syria's society is in spite of the regime's energetic attempts to project an image of secularism, modernity, and equality between the genders.

The Islamic curriculum in Syria's elementary, middle, and high schools teaches Muslim Sunni Islam regardless of the Islamic sect to which they belong. The textbooks are discriminatory, divisive, and intolerant of non-Muslims.[viii]

More mosques, bigger congregations, and more veiled women than ever before have become the order of the day in Syrian cities. To flaunt his Islamic credentials, President Bashar Asad even ordered a special rain prayer throughout Syria's mosques performed on December 10, 2010 in order for God to send rain.

Following the March 2011 violent demonstrations, Mr. Asad acted to gain support from the Sunni palace ulama and mollify the Sunni street. The popular Sunni cleric Muhammad Saïd al-Bouti praised Mr. Asad's response to many of the requests submitted by a number of Sunni clerics. In his weekly religious program on April 5, 2011 on Syrian government television, Sheikh al-Bouti applauded Mr. Asad's permission to allow niqab-wearing (black face cover) female teachers; transferred in July 2010 to desk duties[ix], to return to classrooms. Sheikh al-Bouti had attributed the drought in December 2010 to the transfer from classrooms of the niqab-wearing female teachers. Sheikh al-Bouti also praised Mr. Asad for the formation of the Sham Institute for Advanced Shari'a Studies and Research, and for the establishment of an Islamic satellite television station dedicated to proclaiming the message of true Islam.[x] Also, the first and only casino, which had enraged orthodox clerics when it opened on New Year's Eve, was closed as well.[xi]

Why exploit Islam and fight secularism?

To rule Sunni dominated Syria, it would be helpful to the Asad clan to uphold the influence of Sunni Islam instead of wading in the muddy waters of Shari'a reform and secularization, even if that meant throwing the Baath Party's constitution away.

Islam is helpful to Muslim rulers. Not only in Syria, other Arab regimes (except Lebanon and Tunisia) exploit Islam to stay in power.[xii] Islam demands obedience of Muslims to the Muslim ruler.

The Quran, the Prophetic Sunna, and opinions of famous jurists enjoin Muslims to obey the Muslim ruler blindly. In 4:59, the Quran orders: "Obey God and obey God's messenger and obey those of authority among you." Answering how a Muslim should react to a ruler who does not follow the true guidance, the Prophet reportedly said, according to Sahih Muslim: "He who obeys me obeys God; he who disobeys me, disobeys God. He who obeys the ruler, obeys me; he who disobeys the ruler, disobeys me." [xiii] Abi Da'ud (d. 888) and Ibn Maja (d. 886) quote the Prophet as imploring Muslims to hear and obey the ruler, even if he were an Ethiopian slave.[xiv] Al-Bukhari (d. 870) quotes similar traditions.[xv] The palace ulama invoke one thousand year old opinions of famous jurists such as Al-Ghazali (1058-1111), Ibn Jama'a (1241-1333), and Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328). These men taught that the Muslim ruler must be obeyed blindly because even an unjust ruler is better than societal unrest.

Syria's palace ulama threaten the Muslim faithful with eternal damnation if they fail to obey Mr. Asad (waliy al-amr). In the

hands of the Asad clan, Islam has become a psychological weapon supplementing a brutal security machine.

Scaremongering for Blackmail legitimacy will not work forever

That certain priests and civic leaders subscribe to unsubstantiated scaremongering regarding future Islamist/salafi persecution of Christians is unwise. Those in the Christian community who warn of the slaughter awaiting Christians if the Asad regime collapses fall for the regime's Machiavellian practice of blackmail legitimacy. Neither historical precedence nor credible evidence today supports such scare tactics. Blackmail legitimacy, like the crying-wolf syndrome, does not work forever.

Islamists/salafis who might harbor violent intentions against Christians are a tiny minority of Syria's 23-million population. There are no accurate statistics or opinion polls to suggest otherwise. Syria's Islamists/salafis are not representative of Syria's Sunnis. The great majority of Syria's Sunnis, around 75% of the population, are moderate Muslims who have lived rather harmoniously with their fellow Christians for centuries.

During the first 15 years of independence and until the advent of the Asad clan, Syria's Christians enjoyed peace and shared whatever prosperity was available at that time with the Sunni majority. The suggestion that Syria's Sunnis would kill Syria's Christians is malicious misinformation to divide and rule. The regime's media, apologists, and propagandists who circulate such stories are wicked. Those who believe such tales are naive. Syria's Christian minority's best interest could not be separate from the interest of the Sunni majority.

That the options to Syrians today are reduced to either accepting the current poor state of affairs or contend with an Islamist/salafi rule; even civil war, is blackmail used by the regime to perpetuate its monopoly on power and avoid genuine reform. That genuine reform is not an option does not bode well for the country. That President Asad insisted in his address to the parliament on March 30, 2011 that Syria's protesters had been "duped" into damaging the nation on behalf of its enemies[xvi], and his infamous billionaire cousin, Rami Makhlouf, stated in an interview with The New York Times that, "Syria will fight protests till 'the end'" spell danger to all Syrians.[xvii] Like a pressure cooker, the longer a dictatorship stays in power the more violent the end will be.

Sunnis, like Christians, are threatened by Islamist/salafi ideology, violence, and seventh century way of life. While systematic long-term persecution of Christians by Sunnis will not happen in Syria, acts of revenge by extremist groups might occur during the chaotic days of a popular revolt against; not only Alawites and Christians, but also against non-Christian supporters of the Asad clan altogether.

To spare Syria a potential catastrophe, Mr. Asad should institute a comprehensive and genuine political reforms, in particular; multi-party parliament and contested presidential elections. Scaremongering priests can help. They must desist from misinformation and hypocrisy. They ought to become honest to the teaching of their churches. They should defend legitimacy, justice, and the rule of law.

Wise men and women; Alawites, Christians, and Sunnis must council the president and his immediate family that genuine reform; not cosmetic retouches, not the use of the tank, is the only way forward.

Hafiz Asad and his son, Bashar, have saddled the Alawite community plus the regime's supporting groups with a terrible burden, a potential disaster. The Asad family must understand that four decades of misrule are kifaya.

Bashar Asad has a rare opportunity today to become the hero who saved Syria from a frightening future. Would he? Or, indeed, can he?

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<http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=45958>

[ii] The Telegraph, Syria: President Bashar al-Assad has a staunch friend in the Church, April 21, 2011

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8466759/Syria-President-Bashir-al-Assad-has-a-staunch-friend-in-the-Church.html>

[iii] Elie Elhadj, A Question of Oil Accounting, October 2010,

<http://daringopinion.com/-----A-Question-of-Oil-Accounting.php>

[iv] Thomas Friedman, From Beirut to Jerusalem, (Harpers Collins Publishers, 1998, London) Chapter 4: "Hama Rules".

[v] Reuters reported Turkish Prime Minister Tayyep Erdogan stating that "more than 1,000 civilians had died in Syria's upheaval", Reuters, Syrian tanks shell towns with at least 19 killed, May 11, 2011,

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/11/us-syria-idUSLDE73N02P20110511>

[vi] Patrick Seale, *Asad, the Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1995), 10.

[vii] *The New York Review of Books*, Storm Over Syria, by Malisa Ruthven, June 9, 2011,

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/jun/09/storm-over-syria/?pagination=false>

[viii] Elie Elhadj, *Syria's Islamic Textbooks: Politics, Intolerance, and Dogma*, May 2011,

<http://daringopinion.com/-----Syria%27s-Islamic-Textbooks.php>

[ix] *Syria Today*, No Place for the Niqab, August 2010,

<http://www.syria-today.com/index.php/politics/11359-no-place-for-the-niqab>

[x] *Syria Steps*, The Leadership responded positively to the demands of the men of religion, April 6, 2011,

http://www.syriasteps.com/index.php?d=110&id=65907&in_main_page=1

[xi] *The New York Times*, Syria Tries to Placate Sunnis and Kurds, April 6, 2011,

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/07/world/middleeast/07syria.html?_r=1&hpw

[xii] Elhadj, To Prolong their Dictatorships, Arab Rulers Resort to the Islamic Creed, February 2010,

<http://daringopinion.com/-----Arab-Rulers-Exploitation-of-Islam.php>

[xiii] *The Six Books Sahih Muslim*, traditions 4746 to 4763, pp. 1007-1008 and traditions 4782 to 4793, pp. 1009-1010.

[xiv] *Ibid.*, *Sunan Abi Da'ud*, tradition 4607, p. 1561; and *Sunan Ibn Maja*, tradition 42, p. 2479.

[xv] *Ibid.*, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, traditions 7137 and 7142, p. 595.

[xvi] *The New York Times*, Syria Offers Changes Before Renewed Protests, March 31, 2011,

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/01/world/middleeast/01syria.html?_r=1&ref=global-home

[xvii] *The New York Times*, Ally of Assad Says Syria Will Fight Protests Till 'the End', May 10, 2011

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/11/world/middleeast/11makhlouf.html?_r=1&ref=global-home