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Author(s): Christoph Leonhardt

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THE GREEK- AND THE SYRIAC-ORTHODOX PATRIARCHATES OF ANTIOCH IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

CHRISTOPH LEONHARDT¹

Introduction

Oriental Christianity is not only a special part of global Christianity, but also its oldest one. The members of the ancient Christian community in the Hellenistic city of Antioch were the first to be called *christianoï* — Christians.² But with the recent developments of the Syrian Crisis, the deep-rooted Christians of the region see themselves as a threatened minority. Since the Islamist rebel militia, the so called *al-Dawlah al-Islamiyah* (“The Islamic State”) announced the establishment of a caliphate in parts of the region of northeastern Syria and northwestern Iraq, threats against local Christians have been occurring more frequently. Recently, Islamists have forced Christians to either convert to Islam, to flee, or in the case of refusal, they have even been killed (Gol 2014).

Despite their traditional roots, the Syrian Christians had hardly attracted attention in Western media. This fact has changed recently with the outbreak of the Syrian Crisis. Before the rise of the Islamists during the Syrian War, statements of the Syrian Patriarchs pledging loyalty to the Syrian State, triggered reactions in the Western media which varied between surprise and incomprehension. Although much of such pro-government statements

¹ The author is a Ph.D. candidate at Uni BW München with the focus on religious components of the Syrian conflict. This article is a modified English version of “Die Haltung rum- und syrisch-orthodoxer Christen in der Syrischen Arabellion – Zwischen der regierenden Baath-Partei und der Opposition”, in *Ostkirchliche Studien*, 63/2 (2014), pp. 193-242.

² Since 1939, Antioch is in Turkey and known as Antakya.

appeared in the media, academic studies investigating the attitudes of Christians in the Syrian Conflict are rare. While Christians only account for 8-10% of the entire Syrian population, the neighbouring country of Lebanon has a share of around 35%, which, on a percentage level, is the highest number of Christian minorities in the entire Arab world. Both Lebanon as well as Syria belonged to the League of Nations Mandate for Syria and Lebanon between 1923 and 1943, and the countries are historically, politically and socially deeply connected till today.

The current situation of the Orthodox Christians in Lebanon

The Greek Orthodox Church is also known as the Rum Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East, whereas the term “Rum” derives from the Arabic word for Byzantium, which used to refer to the (Eastern-) Roman Empire (Wessels 1995: 67). Since 2012, its head is John X. Yazigi (*1955). Its patriarchy has all in all about four million church members (Hage 2007: 79). Due to various waves of emigration throughout the 19th and the 20th century, today their smaller part is located in the Middle East, where their most numerous diaspora with up to 2.7 million believers is based in Central and South America (*Ibid.*).

In Lebanon, there are up to 200,000 officially registered Greek Orthodox believers (Hage 2007: 79). Their denominational majority is manifested in the rural area Kura, in the north of the country. However, the Greek Orthodox Church is the most decimated denomination by emigration and lacks solid communal cohesion (Panzer 1998: 22). It only holds secondary positions in Lebanon’s political setup. Historically, the Greek Orthodox congregation was already reduced to a minority in “Greater Lebanon”. Nevertheless it had constituted the second largest Christian denomination, and their interests lead to connect to the still secular groups of Arab socialism. They maintained closer relations to the Sunnis than most of the other Christian congregations and through their engagement for Arabism they even provided an important contribution to the “Arab Renaissance” (*nahdah*) and to Arab nationalism. As the Arabic folklore gives the Patriarchate the character of the “Arab Orthodox” Church, the Greek Orthodox Christians see themselves often as Arabs through acculturation (Zein Al-Din 2010: 118).

At the beginning of the long-lasting Lebanese Civil War, their synod recommended to their believers to refrain from any violence (Panzer 1998: 22). However, many of the Greek Orthodox joined the ranks of various militias. After the Israeli invasion (1982-1985), Orthodox institutions were no longer spared from the war, and many of the Greek Orthodox Christians considered themselves victims of a civil war, a conflict in which many of them originally wanted to remain uninvolved, as they had not formed an own confessional militia (Tamcke 2008: 168).

The Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch and All the East emerged from the Hellenistic centre of its title. It is rooted in the Aramaic-speaking Christian community of Syria and Mesopotamia, and presents a vehicle of one of the oldest cultures in the world. Since 2014, the patriarchy is headed by Moran Mor Ignatius Ephrem II. Karim (*1965). The Syriac Orthodox Church community amounts to around one million faithful, whose smallest part lives in the Middle East, in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon. It has approximately 30,000 believers in Lebanon, and constitutes the fourth largest denomination (Merten 1997: 212). The patriarchy is also known as the “West Syrian” or “Jacobite” (after J. Baradaeus († 578), former Bishop of Edessa) Church (Hage 2007: 130). After the genocide of the Armenians in 1915, which had also claimed many victims among the Syriac Orthodox Christians, most denominational members emigrated to the Lebanese capital Beirut.³

In this city, they mainly lived economically hedged; they also remained in the country during the Civil War. Despite the fact that their patriarch proclaimed neutrality, many Syriac Orthodox Christians fought under the Assyrian Movement whose aim was a Christian influenced Lebanon (Merten 1997: 212). As they were engaged in Christian parties, they initially received support from Syrian armed forces, which intervened in the Lebanese Civil War in 1976. Nevertheless, the Syriac Orthodox Christians still felt politically underrepresented. Even though a Syriac Orthodox managed to become a Member of Parliament for the first time in 1993 and even stood up for the interests of the disenfranchised majority of Syrians, the problem of stateless refugees among the Syriac Orthodox congregation in Lebanon is still present to this day (Merten 1997: 211-212).

³ Due to the many losses within the Syriac community, the Syriac Orthodox Christians refer to the year of the genocide as “*seyfo*”, the so called “Year of the Sword” (Tamcke 2009: 71).

The current situation of the Orthodox Christians in Syria

In the multi-ethnic and multi-religious mosaic of Syria exist a variety of Christian denominations.⁴ Under the ruling Baath party, freedom of religion was guaranteed through the Syrian Constitution of 1973 as well as through the constitutional referendum of 2012; Christians used to practice their faith quite openly. Therefore, Syria has not only a strong appeal among Arab Christians, but also had a long reputation of being the safest country for Christians in the entire Middle East (Awad 2012: 84).

As half of the two million Syrian Christians are connected to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East, it constitutes the largest church of Syria. Its important communities are in Damascus, in the northwestern city of Latakia and in the adjacent coastal region. An almost exclusively Greek Orthodox area represents the “Valley of the Christians” (*Wadi al Nasara*) near Homs. Basically, the Greek Orthodox Christians enjoyed favourable living conditions and their influence on the economy is present until today; some personalities held important state positions and were policy advisers. While politically underrepresented in regards to their numerical size, the Greek Orthodox Christians were often accused of being close to the country’s power system; but by and large, they have chosen to keep low a profile in terms of politics (Awad 2012: 82). For the Syriac Orthodox Church, which has only about 200,000 adherents in Syria, the country is still regarded as their historical centre. Up to 70% of their communities are descended from immigrants who mainly came to Syria in the aftermath of the “*seyfo*”. Most of the Syriac Orthodox Christians live in northeastern part of Syria, in the cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and in the province of Hassaka, where their ecclesiastical centre is based in the Syrian-Turkish border town of Qamishli. The Syriac Orthodox denomination benefited from the friendly attitude of the Syrian secular state towards minorities; the Syrian government even allowed them to teach in their traditional Syriac language⁵. On the other hand, the church was partly served as a basis for recruiting Christian candidates for the

⁴ Today, Syria is religiously composed of Sunnis (74%), Alawites (11%), other Muslims (2%), Druzes (3%), and Christians (about 8-10%), as well as other smaller groups of religious minorities (DoS 2012: 2).

⁵ The Syriac-Aramaic language is used for the liturgy of their Church and till today, their Christian tradition is adamant that the voice of Jesus can be heard in their ancient dialect (Kitchen 2012: 66).

Baath party (Beck & Collet 2010: 90). Whatever the case, their church had refrained from politics (Merten 1997: 209).

The development of the Syrian Crisis

Bashar al-Assad (*1965) came into power after the death of his father Hafez in 2000; he inherited a stable, but split system. Unlike the uprisings of other Arab countries, the protest movement in Syria erupted relatively slowly. The state apparatus discredited the protest movement as a foreign conspiracy, but government forces were confronted with escalating riots and became embroiled in violent repression. The militarization of the conflict led to an open power struggle between armed rebel groups of the so called Free Syrian Army (FSA) — which were increasingly joined by criminal gangs and religiously motivated groups — and government forces. (McElroy & Samaan: 2012). The increasing escalation fostered the disintegration of the Syrian institutions, its territory and its society (Rosiny 2013: 8). From 2013 on, the conflict became more violent and meanwhile the opposition more dependent on foreign funding which finally led to its radicalization, because financial flows of the main donors from Saudi Arabia and Qatar mainly reached radicalized opposition groups. This favoured the establishment of local, radical Salafist groups, such as *Harakat Ahrar ash-Sham al-Islamiyah* (“Islamic movement of the free men of the Levant“), as well as Islamist groups, as *Jabhat al-Nusra* (“Nusra Front”) or the so called *al-Dawlah al-Islamiyah*. The rebel groups received funding not only from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and Turkey, but also from the US, France and the UK, which was one aspect leading Islamist hardliners to declare jihad. The boost of these jihadist movements was accompanied by a seemingly ever-increasing confessionalisation of the conflict, while on the other side Iran and Russia strengthened its military, financial and economic assistance towards the Syrian government.

The increase of sectarian attacks as well as sectarian rhetoric simultaneously promoted the further influx of external sponsors. Since the majority of the opposition is Sunni and the state apparatus is disproportionately represented by the Alawite minority, these circumstances — at least at first sight — had paved way for a sectarian interpretation (Helberg 2012: 39). According to the logic of confessional mobilization this led to massive

spillover-effects on Lebanon and notably on Iraq, with both countries becoming important secondary theatres of the Syrian Civil War.

The attitude of the Orthodox Christians towards the Syrian opposition

In the interviews with the Greek and Syriac Orthodox Christians carried out by the author, the majority of both confessional groups have a critical attitude towards the Syrian opposition.⁶ According to the respondents, there is a serious political faction of moderate and secular forces within the opposition, but this group has only little influence on the opposition's agenda. Even Syrian Christians, such as G. Sabrah (*1947), one of the opposition's representatives, are not capable of achieving legitimacy and support among the Christians. Based on the conviction that large parts of the SCC itself reveal mafia-like structures, the Christians have serious doubts whether these political entities are trustworthy:

“The Christians don't trust the opposition, because it is an Islamist movement, they don't believe them anyway, not only in a political aspect, also in a social and religious one” (Davie 2013: 2).

Due to its strong fragmentation, the opposition does not have any common goal regarding its financial, political and military agenda, except the overthrow of the Syrian President. Since they were often entangled in contradictions in the past and do not debate about the integration of Christians in the present, the opposition's political concept does not provide a promising model for the Orthodox communities:

“But why should we support the rebels? (...) They don't have a clear agenda (...) The entire opposition is divided. The Rum-Orthodox don't see a promising regime to emerge out of this” (L. R. 2013: 2).

⁶ The interviewed Greek and the Syriac Orthodox Christians originate from a circle of scholars, theologians, clerics, priests, and (arch-) bishops of the respective local church. Due to the difficult security situation in the region, some of them hereinafter remain anonymous.

Besides, the kidnapping of the Greek Orthodox Bishop B. Yaziji (*1948) and the Syriac Orthodox Bishop G. Y. Ibrahim (*1948), presumably carried out by rebel groups in April 2013, constituted a clear turning point for the Christians (*Naharnet* 2013). Finally, such incidents led not only to an intensification of the exodus among the Christians, but further strengthen their refusal to adhere to the opposition's agenda.

“The rebels have kidnapped the Archbishop Ibrahim and also our Rum-Orthodox Archbishop Yazigi, God keep them alive (...) They make us suffer, violate us, and kill our people (...) Where is the promised alternative of this uprising; is this their promised alternative?” (S. C. 2013: 2).

A crucial aspect for their scepticism is not only the lack of endeavour towards a democratic transition among the oppositions groups, but also their lack of understanding of democratic principles. Although the secular forces indeed fight for political participation, a great part of the opposition rejects democratic dispositions. In contrast, the surveyed Orthodox Christians have the impression that the actual goal of the opposition is the overthrow of the secular system:

“The only reason of this conflict is to topple the secular regime and implement an Islamic state, and we can see this already now by what is going on in the areas without the control of the regime” (Saliba 2013: 2).

In this context, the opposition's understanding of democracy would be comparable with a rule of the majority. As the power distribution runs alongside confessional boundary lines, in this concept democracy would be equated with an exclusive Sunni rule. According to the interviewees, these convictions can be illustrated by the fact that none of the political parties belonging to the opposition has integrated the concept of equality of all citizens to their agenda. In contrast, large parts are supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, whereby the opposition's model offers no interesting alternative for the Christian minorities. Although more political participation in Syria would be desirable, Arab Christians have — at least according to their own

statements — never known a regime that respected the values of human rights or treated Christians as equal citizens. Due to this reason, the Orthodox Christians wish to preserve their religious freedom rather than achieving their political freedom:

“There is no guarantee at all for the Christians. We don’t care about free elections, about political freedom so much as about our religious freedom” (S. C. 2013: 3).

Their doubts are also fuelled by the divergence between the stated objectives of the opposition and reality in the so called “liberated areas”. The stated goals of the political opposition are being destroyed as they hardly have any control of the activities of rebel groups on the ground. Although the political opposition is debating about democracy, freedom and human rights, rebels groups terrorise the population. While Christians in government-controlled areas feel relatively safe, they mainly live in fear in rebel-held regions. For this reason, the opposition — by now being dominated by Islamist groups — does not embody liberation, but rather a real threat to the Orthodox Christians. These impressions can be confirmed by anti-Christian attacks in the “liberated areas”. In this regard, almost all the interviewed Orthodox Christians spoke about killings and kidnappings, as well as targeted attacks on Christians, their churches and possessions. These assaults bear the clear intention to either force the Christians to conversion or to displace or exterminate the Syrian Christians. As such, the new Islamist movement is a major threat for the entire existence of the Orthodox Christianity in Syria, which is why the jihadists are labelled as “enemies of the Christians”:

“Besides, the Syrian army is not an enemy to the Christians (...) But the Islamist rebels are an enemy to the Christians, because it is a threat to the existence of Christians in Syria” (Ibid.: 2).

Ever since the Islamists have become one of the most powerful combat units within the rebel groups, they have caused great anxiety among Oriental Christianity.

Also, the negative attitude of the Orthodox Christians towards the opposition is based on the experience of their coreligionists in Iraq and

Egypt. In the context of the sectarian attacks in Syria, parallels are drawn to the situations of Christians in other Arab countries that have been hit by political unrest. The US-led invasion of Iraq 2003, brought a strong growth of Islamist movements, which caused many Iraqi Christians to flee to Syria. There, the Iraqi refugees then fled to predominately Christian areas. Through the interviews it becomes clear that the negative experiences of their Iraqi coreligionists were already “in the heads” of the Syrian Christians even before the conflict had begun:

“The image of the Christians in Iraq was in our heads and the Christians were very afraid of that” (Ishac 2013: 1).

As comparable waves of refugees have also started in Syria, the local Christians are in fear of a “second Iraq” for their Christian heritage in Syria:

“The Christian heritage in Iraq is in danger and will probably vanish (...) we are afraid that Syria is going to turn into a ‘second Iraq’. I think, all the Christians in Syria are in fear of this scenario and it is likely going to happen, if al-Assad will fall” (S. C. 2013: 7).

Their anxiety is also caused by the situation of their Egyptian coreligionists after the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak (*1928). Although Orthodox Copts demonstrated with Muslims against the military dictatorship, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood during the uprising in Egypt in 2011 created anxiety (Herman: 2013). In the turmoil of the revolution’s aftermaths, members of the Muslim Brotherhood attacked not only churches, but also even Christians. This betrayal of confidence as well as the group’s dominance in the Syrian opposition raised the fear level of the Orthodox Christians: that they would be cheated by the Muslim Brotherhood and that the Orthodox Christians experience “another Egypt”:

“We were afraid that Syria turns into ‘another Egypt’ dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, because they also dominate great parts of the Syrian opposition” (L. R. 2013: 3).

Lastly, the surveyed Orthodox Christians are convicted that the living conditions for all Syrian Christians would look gloomier after a possible overthrow of the secular system. Due to the incidents in the “liberated areas”, there is a common view within the Christian congregations that the ultimate goal is in fact the founding of an Islamic state on all of Syria. This assumption is confirmed by implementation of the shari'a law, an indicator that rebels seek to introduce their fundamentalist system everywhere in Syria and probably even far beyond:

“They [the Christians] see no light at the very dark end of the tunnel. They think, if the opposition will win it would be an Islamic state in entire Syria and then it is the end of the story for the Christians (...) their Christian faith and their rights will not be preserved in Syria and maybe even beyond” (Ephrem 2013: 4).

Due to this threat, many Syrian Christians have already left their homes — not only because of the civil war, but also because of the threat of the Islamists, who attack, kidnap, or even kill them just because of their religious affiliation:

“Many Syriac Orthodox Christians have left not only because of the war, but also because they have been threatened, kidnapped or injured by the Islamists” (A. M. 2013: 3).

The application of the Islamic law also underpins their fear that they will have to live under a *dhimmi* status and that they will be second-class citizens, e.g. just as it happened under Ottoman rule.⁷ The Orthodox representatives are convinced that not only the Christians, but also even the moderate, non-fundamentalist Sunnis are in fear of an Islamist's rise to power:

“There is no room for other minorities and they [the Islamists] reinterpret Islam in the way it favours them (...) The fear now is really in

⁷ According to the Qur'an, Christians are People of the Book (*'ahl al-kitab*), and as such, they are under the protection (*fi dhimmat*) of Muslims. However historically, Christians under the *dhimmi*-status were often deprived of privileges that the Muslim community (*ummah*) used to enjoy (Malik 2010: 13).

the heart of all the Syrian Christians and even in the heart of all the Druzes and the Alawites and moderate Sunnis, too” (Davie 2013: 2).

It has to be emphasized that there is a real threat that massacres against the Christian minorities could take place in the case of a complete political vacuum after a possible overthrow of the secular system.

The attitude of the Orthodox Christians towards the Syrian government

According to the interviewed Greek and the Syriac Orthodox Christians, the majority of the Christians still support the Syrian government. The guarantee of religious freedom reveals that it is one of the main pillar regarding their supportive stance. The secular system guarantees the free exercise of religion. Christians are neither discriminated by the secular state, e.g. by an extra tax such as the *jiziyah* under the *dhimmi* status, nor by the Syrian society:

“The Christians felt as free as the Sunnis or Alawites, which was a really rare situation in the Middle East. There was no difference on the social level between the churches in their organization and publication (...) due to the secular orientation of the Baath-regime” (Wahbeh 2013: 4-5).

The constitutional right to build churches, to acquire additional land, and to receive financial support by the Syrian state, is viewed as positive by the Orthodox Christians. Moreover, the secular state guarantees Christian holidays and their Holy Masses are broadcast on television and radio. Furthermore, all Syrian citizens have the opportunity to appear freely in public, without being veiled, which gives the Syrian Christians an additional sense of freedom in the usually very traditionally oriented Arab world. Finally, the Christians are able to freely express and develop their cultural and religious identities in a quite liberal society:

“You, as a Christian, have the total right on having your religious freedoms. When it comes to social behaviour you had the total right to

do your customs (...) Syria has a regime, when you compare it, it is by far much better than a lot of the other Muslim regimes that do not see the Christians as equal” (Ephrem 2013: 1).

Some of the Greek Orthodox Christians even managed to hold prominent positions in the government: Baath party does not exclude Christian minorities. Due to the fact that the tolerant attitude of the Syrian state towards Christians is additionally appreciated in the context of the genocide of 1915, the loyalty of the Syriac Orthodox seems to be even more pronounced. According the majority of the surveyed Orthodox Christians, the secular system of the Baath party is the best possible option for the Christian minorities in Syria, and this is why the Christian majority feels a strong allegiance towards the Syrian state:

“We accept the Syrian regime and we have no problem with it. Maybe this regime is one of the best we have seen in Syria for 50 years (...) Then these new people came to the yard and raised slogans that there is no democracy in Syria. But we used to think that this is the best democracy, the best regime in the entire region” (Saliba 2013: 1).

Although some of the Orthodox Christians criticize the government, the vast majority of the respondents assessed the developments since Hafez al-Assad’s rise to power, as positive. While corruption, the lack of political participation and the abuse of human right are seen negatively, the stability and safety under the al-Assad rule are praised. Through a Gallup poll, conducted before the crisis erupted, concerning the inhabitant’s personal assessments of the security situation in the country, Syria indeed used to be viewed as one of the safest countries in the world (*RealClearWorld 2009*). Additionally, Christians enjoyed free education, a stable economy and a relatively high standard of living. On the other hand, there is an impression among the Orthodox representatives that the Syrian army is protecting the Christians from the rebels during the on going fighting. According to the interviews, the secular alignment of the state even creates a common ground for all religious communities. In contrast to the exclusive concept of political Islam, its separation of state and religion makes it possible to gather all Syrian citizens under one banner of cultural freedom:

“The regime gave Syria a secure common living of all different religious sects and harmony together (...) Under this regime, the state and the religion are divided and all of the different sects can share a cultural freedom all together in Syria. The Rum-Orthodox Christians don’t expect social, cultural and more important religious freedom from radical Islamism from which the regime is protecting us (...) actually it serves as a bulwark against Islamism” (S. C. 2013: 3-4).

Thus, the Syrian government serves not only as a bulwark against an Islamisation of Syria, but also even as a protector of Christian minorities. In this regard, the religious affiliation of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad would play a clear role as the Alawite minority has a deep interest in protecting other religious minorities:

“We [Syriac Orthodox Christians] stick to the Syrian regime, because a Syrian state that is run by Alawites is much better for the Christians (...) For the Christians, they like the Alawites more than the Sunnis, because they are much more moderate (...) the secular system serves the Christian’s interests” (D. B. 2013: 2).

In the context of the protective function of the Baath party, not only the religious affiliation, but also the reputation of the President plays a decisive factor. Even though the Orthodox Christians are aware of the negative aspects of the ruling party, its majority nevertheless tends to emphasize Bashar al-Assad’s reputation. Even after the outbreak of the uprising, the President reached out to the opposition, by implementing reforms, banning the state of emergency law, allowing political parties, and realizing a broad salary increase. According to the surveyed Orthodox Christians, these efforts would in fact have revealed al-Assad’s willingness for political reforms:

“The regime provided a plan to reform, but the people of the uprising were demanding too radical changes (...) the President was ready for change (...) But al-Assad was moving a bit too slowly in this context. The President even initiated reforms” (L. R., 2013: 1).

Since Bashar al-Assad has not always been in control over all the activities of the intelligence and military services, he is not held fully responsible for the crackdown on the protest movement:

“The security started to shoot in the air to disperse the crowd, but they attacked them and killed over 50 policemen (...) the policemen started to shoot to prevent being killed by the crowd. They rejected the command of the President (...) At that time he wasn't in control of the security” (D. B 2013: 3).

While individuals in military circles, but especially the Islamists, are to be blamed for the escalation of the Syrian Conflict, the President still enjoys a high reputation among his people. According to the interviews, the Christians are viewed by Bashar al-Assad as the cornerstone of the Syrian society, and they would thus represent an integral part for him:

“The life will look gloomier for Christians after al-Assad. He believes that Christians are the cornerstone of the society; owners of the land and a welcomed guest. This gives us protection” (L. R. 2013: 3).

Since the Alawite President — like the Syrian Christians — belongs to a religious minority, it is a widespread Orthodox position to feel rather connected to him than to any other leader of the predominately Sunni opposition. Due to the fact that the political alternative of the opposition will probably be an Islamic one, Bashar al-Assad and the Baath party represent the best possible option for the Christians in Syria. As even more popularity has been attributed to the current President than to his father Hafez al-Assad:

“What serves the regime is that Bashar al-Assad is much more popular than his father, because he is very close to the Syrians, who like him” (D. B. 2013: 1).

The loyal attitude of the Christians towards the Syrian government is embedded in a wider regional context. Unlike Syria, many of the Christian minorities in the Arab world have been discriminated due to their religious affiliation. While Christians rarely seek protection from Arab states, the Syrian Christians are not subjected to repressive measures by their government.

Whereas the entire Christianity of Iraq is threatened by total disappearance — with nowadays many of the Iraqi Christians wishing the return of the ousted Saddam Hussein : (1937-2006) — the friendly policy of the Baath party towards religious minorities provides an important protection for the Syrian Christians. Therefore, most of the Orthodox Christians come to the conclusion that, in comparison to almost all other Arab countries, Syria's secular system is one of the safest for the preservation of the existence of Oriental Christianity in the Middle East:

“We as Christians felt very safe in Syria. You could not compare Syria to the rest of the Middle East (...) in the entire region, Syria was the best country for the Christians” (Saliba 2013: 5).

While the Greek Orthodox Christians mainly emphasize regional aspects, the Syriac Orthodox's focus is on the historical context, with a clear reference on the *“sejfo”*. The genocide in Armenia that led to the disappearance of their confessional group has been solidified in their collective memory. As Christians could enjoy a secure life in Syria until the beginning of the crisis, the surveyed Christians explained this fact to the friendly attitude of the ruling Baath party towards the Christians, which enabled them to preserve their “sacred heritage”:

“For the Syriac Orthodox it was so important to live a life in security, we felt safe for over 40 years (...) There is a historical heritage to keep (...) this Holy history is in danger to get destroyed and even the historic monasteries and churches are in danger to vanish (...) [the Syrian government] gave us the protection and the possibility to keep our religious heritage” (A. M. 2013: 2).

As the early 20th century genocide occurred at a period of political uprisings, the Syriac Orthodox community is in fear of a fundamental political change in Syria. They prefer to live in peace under a stable system, albeit the authoritarian order of the Syrian government:

“Even Christians who are neutral think in this way, because they believe that a further existence of the Syrian regime is good (...) First of all, they are afraid of the chaos that could break out [after its fall]” (Kattan 2013: 7).

The attitude of the Orthodox Christians towards the Syrian Conflict

Concerning the outbreak of the Syrian Crisis, the Greek and Syriac Orthodox Christians initially had a positive attitude. As shown in the interviews, they did not only understand the need for reforms, but had sympathy for the protester's demand for political participation as the basic right of the People:

“All the people of the world have a right to change their country that they are belonging to (...) At the beginning of the revolution in Syria the opposition had good aims for a change” (A. M. 2013: 1).

Some of the Christians had even taken part in the emerging protests. Regardless of this fact, a reluctance to actively support the movement dominated among the Christians, and their majority kept distant from the demonstrations. The reasons for this passivity were on the one hand the satisfaction and the loyalty to the ruling Baath party and on the other hand it was a lack of political alternatives and the uncertainty of the movement's possible outcome. Not only their minority status, but also their lack of opportunities as a coherent political entity played a significant role for the reluctance of the Orthodox Christians to join the protest movement. Generally, the initial sympathy regarding the outbreak of the uprising seems to apply much more to the Greek than to the Syriac Orthodox Christians.

While their sympathy for the uprising only refers to the very onset of the demonstrations, the majority of Christians soon tended to take a more distant attitude. Many of the surveyed Orthodox Christians are convinced that the protest movement was Islamic from the very beginning. In the interviews, this assumption is justified by the theory that imams initiated the demonstrations during the Friday prayers. This impression was triggered by the fact that most of the demonstrations came from the mosques and Islamic flags and slogans, such as “*Allahu Akbar*”, quickly emerged:

“The uprising was religious from the very beginning on. It started from the mosques, from the Sunnis. You couldn't see the Islamic elements at first, but if you looked after only two or three weeks (...) they started to carry flags of Islam and shouting like 'Allahu Akbar' and all these Islamic slogans. At this time, I thought that this is the real intention of it, they want a Sunni-Shari'a Islamic State in Syria” (S. C. 2013: 6).

Based on their assessments, the Orthodox Christians classified the protests as religiously motivated, which at the same time evoked increasing fear among them. Other reasons for the distancing of the Christians from the protests were several incidents of violent riots. Some of the interviewees experienced such clashes in Syria as direct eyewitnesses:

“The demonstrations turned violent pretty fast (...) and I saw the demonstrations (...) in Hama (...) the demonstrators started to throw stones on them [the policemen] and even shot at them (...) they really slaughtered them in Hama and then they threw them into the river” (D. B. 2013: 3-4).

Their personal experiences gave them the impression that the violence was started by the demonstrators and therefore the uprising was not only Islamic, but also violent. These changes in personal opinions seems to have also affected the general attitude of the Christians. Argumentatively, the Christian principle of non-violence plays a key role and this pacifist position has led to the circumstance that few Christians formed militias or defended themselves by the force of arms:

“In the area of Wadi al-Masara the regime has armed the Christians and used them as shabiha (...) there are Christians who took up arms (...) These Christians think that the regime protects them from an increasing Islamism” (Kattan 2013: 6-7).

Irrespective of the actual date of the initial outbreak of violence and rise of radical Islamism in the ranks of the opposition, these two factors turn out to be the main reasons why the initial sympathy of the Christians has shifted to a predominantly negative attitude towards the Syrian Crisis.

There is also a widespread rejection among the Orthodox Christians of the process of internationalization and confessionalisation of the Syrian Conflict. Although they are aware of the socio-economic divisions among the population, the sentiment among the Christians is that the protests were initiated by foreign forces. In this theory, parts of the poorer population were bribed to organize a protest movement or at least to actively sponsor its expansion. According to the Orthodox Christians, the crisis has therefore little to do with a popular movement:

“This [the uprising] is not a popular movement (...) it is a Qatari-Saudi-American soup to just remove al-Assad and to make Syria a pro-American country” (Davie 2013: 3).

As Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey supplied the Islamists with large sums of money, their radical agenda would fall on fertile ground due to the lack of education and the high unemployment rate among the young generations in the rural and poor areas of Syria:

“The Takfiris and Salafis were founded by Saudi Arabia and Qatar (...) these Gulf States brought in the religious aspect by founding mainly people who are in a lack of education, [who live in] poverty and unemployment (...) due to this fertile ground the Islamists (...) could hijack the revolution” (Wahbeh 2013: 1-2).

After they were able to introduce their Islamist thinking among the Syrian people, they exclusively supported Islamist militias and paid corrupt imams to pronounce *fatawa* for their fight against the Syrian government, which has finally led to an exacerbating of the conflict, boosted by sectarianism.

“Because Saudi Arabia, as Sunni, and Iran, as Shiite, are involved deeply in the Syrian War and some imams are using an escalating language and announce horrible fatawa for the war, it has become more sectarian (...) and we as Christians disappear between these huge players and their provocative fuelling of sectarianism” (A. M. 2013: 4).

According to the interviews, this sectarian level can be seen by attacks on Shiite shrines as well by religiously motivated reprisal attacks against predominantly Sunni areas. While sectarianism has not played a significant role in the Syrian society, this hateful thinking against other confessional groups has now become a major question in the conflict. This political manoeuvring, which was originally initiated by external powers, aimed to disempower the Alawite President Bashar al-Assad and to weaken Syria's ally, Iran. Therefore, the Syrian Conflict has become a proxy war with a sectarian dimension:

“Today, the war in Syria is a kind of proxy war between Saudi Arabia, which is Sunni, and Iran, which is Shiite, and their conflict is taking place on Syrian territory” (Ibid.).

In this context, there is a deep disappointment among the Orthodox Christians about the role of the Western powers. Even the US, the EU, and Israel would be indirectly promoting the Islamist movement in Syria by showing a clear anti-Assad stance. The Orthodox representatives come to the conclusion that the actual goals of the conflict are the overthrow of the Syrian government, the destruction of the last powerful Arab Army, the territorial division of Syria, and the weakening of hostile states in the region. Contrary to their support of the opposition, the West should rather insist on a political solution of the Civil War. This solution should be handled by the Syrian people only, regardless of the geopolitical interests of the super powers:

“[The Syrian Crisis is] a war of the superpowers on Syria (...) But it should be the Syrian people, the majority of the people, that have the right to choose their policy” (L. R. 2013: 5).

Lastly, there is a large disenchantment concerning the lack of support for the Syrian Christians by the West, which the Orthodox representatives still consider to be “Christian”. But since their appeals for help have been rejected by Western diplomats, the Christians have gained the impression that their ancient heritage in the Middle East has no meaning at all for Western powers:

“[As long] we have bad European leaders who do not care about the Christianity as much our future will be dark (...) They do not care about the Christianity in the Middle East rather they are all slaves of Israel” (Saliba 2013: 7-8).

Critical analysis of the Orthodox Christian attitude towards the Syrian opposition

In the context of the critical analysis of the interviews with the Middle East experts, the reality of the Syrian society has to be taken into consideration.

The outbreak of the Syrian Crisis was primarily lead by young activists, who were composed of the “Local Coordination Committees” (LCC) and the “Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC)”, uniting different affiliations. A second movement established under the umbrella of the NCC (The National Coordination Committee for the Forces of Democratic Change), was created from several parties and organizations. It received limited financial support and was often considered as pseudo-opposition group in Syria, and therefore was soon rejected. A third movement emerged out of several opposition meetings and conferences and was formed abroad as the SNC. However, since many representatives officially expressed their personal opinion, contradictory positions and statements appeared:

“But now the problem in Syria is that the Sunni community is very fragmented. Not even the exile government [the SNC] is indeed united or speaks with one voice” (Hanf 2013: 4).

Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey firmly supported the Muslim Brotherhood in the SNC (Syrian National Council), which boosted this fraction to the most powerful force. The Council was replaced by the “National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition forces” (NCR) in November 2012. Although it was established under the leadership of the Christian G. Sabrah, this fact neither led to trust by the majority of the Syrian people nor by the Christians.

“George Sabrah (...) knows nothing, no one respects him actually in Syria and the problem is that the Germans, the Europeans and the Americans know that these people of Istanbul and Doha have no chance of winning anything in Syria in a free vote. This is why they want al-Assad out” (Awad 2013: 4).

Disputes over alliance partnerships and funding sources led to its fragmentation and increasing conflicts of interest finally prevented a unified military and political strategy.

Furthermore the opposition has shown increasing shortcomings in terms of democratic endeavours. The lack of understanding of democracy was also disclosed through the opposition’s dealing regarding the Kurdish

issue. Overall, the inability of the opposition to unite its branches under a define policy agenda, is reflected in the legitimacy deficit among the Syrians as well as the Syrian Christians (Helberg 2012: 98).

On the other hand, the lack of understanding of democracy reveals habits gained under the authoritarian rule, under which the Syrian population has been living for decades. Although there are several hints in the interviews that even the Christians would welcome more political participation, their criticisms of the opposition also show their fear of a political majority concept, simply due to the fact that they would need to refrain from some comfortable benefits:

“I think that these statements [against the opposition] clearly reflect the fear of many Christians, as they as a minority are afraid of a majority concept” (Hanf 2013: 4).

After all, the church hierarchy can hardly be described as democratic, as it has itself adopted certain authoritarian structures:

“The church preferred their good position and probably the stability as well as law and order. If you look at the history there is a tradition of the church to support dictators in many places of the world. Even the Orthodox Church itself is not really a democratic institution with its hierarchal structure” (C. Y. 2013: 1).

While Christians are not the only victims of sectarian violence, the fact that they are the only non-Muslim religious community in Syria makes their situation even more precarious. Since the Christians — like the Alawites — are being denounced as infidels, anti-Christian attacks are on rise. Incidents, such as the kidnapping of the two bishops (*Naharnet* 2013), the murder of the former Syrian Minister of Defence D. Rajiha (1947-2012), who was also an Orthodox Christian (*El-Bashara* 2012), or the sectarian attacks against predominantly Christian areas in opposition-controlled territories (Open Doors 2013), has increased the fear among the Orthodox Christians.

Despite these negative developments, certain factors have to be considered, according to the surveyed Middle East experts. For example, Iraqi Christians had close relations to Saddam Hussein (1937-2006) and as

a result they were regarded as former collaborators after his fall. Moreover, the fleeing Iraqi Christians primarily searched refuge in Christian-dominated areas in Syria, which had a decisive impact on the local Syrian Christians' perceptions. In a *YouGov* poll conducted in December 2011, 55% of surveyed Syrians supported the Syrian government, of which 46% explained that their loyalty was based on the fear of a "second Iraq" (*Doha Debates* 2012: 8).

Critical analysis of the Orthodox Christian attitude towards the Syrian government

Basically, the pan-Arab ideology, the secularism with its friendly attitude towards religious minorities, stability and safety are the main pillars of the Baath party's rule.

The Greek Orthodox Christians share an ideological affinity with this secular party. Not only the Greek Orthodox Antoun Sa'adeh (1904-1949) was one of the architects of Syrian nationalism, but also even Michel Aflaq (1910-1989) — the ideological founder of the Baath party — was a Greek Orthodox. Historically, the "Syrian Social Socialist Party" (SSNP) was regarded as the only party that was able to handle the problems of Syria's ethnic and religious differences after the fall of the Ottoman Empire (El-Beshara 2011: 341-343). These two conceptual foundations were regarded as providing a common ground to unite the Sunni majority with the religious minorities under a national banner of a Syrian-Arab identity.

In contrast, the Syriac Orthodox Christians might not connect the ideology of Arabism with the support of the Baath party. Since their patriarch held a meeting with Syrian officials in 2009 and members of the "Syrian Universal Alliance" praised the governmental efforts for the Syriac culture (Al-Tamimi 2012: 24), the government's support for the threatened Syriac heritage might be one of the main reasons for the loyalty of the Syriac Orthodox's loyalty. Lastly, the military and political integration of Christians explains their supportive attitude towards the Baath party.

Bashar al-Assad's legitimacy is also based on his father's political legacy, which had been transferred to the former, and who seems to be further popularized, especially by the Syriac Orthodox Christians. He benefits not

only from his liberal orientated Sunni wife Asma al-Assad (*1975), but also from, for an Arab leader rather atypical, proximity to the Syrian people:

“He [Bashar al-Assad] is always with the people (...) they saw in him a different type of President. No other President in the area does things like he does (...) he is very close [to the people], he and his wife” (Awad 2013: 11).

Since the President often receives Christian Patriarchs covered by media attention during interreligious dialogue forums, the secular government likes to portray itself as a mediator of different religions. But despite the tolerant attitude, there is a lack of inter-religious dialogue, due to the prohibition of political and religious discussions. According to the Middle East experts, the government even deliberately initiated tensions among the religious minorities in order to consolidate its “patronage”:

“The religious, social, cultural, and ethnic tensions were there and were fuelled, were used and were politicized, but before the conflict they were controlled and also manipulated by the regime (...) keeping it under its control, its patronage (...) They [Syrian officials] sometimes created even tensions between the religions on the micro-level, that both of them need to go to the regime to solve their problem” (Nseir 2013: 5-6).

This strategy claims to show that the Syrian government is not really interested in an inter-religious dialogue, but rather has an interest in a commitment of the religious minorities towards itself:

“The regime is more protected by the minorities, but it is not protecting the minorities in Syria. The regime is using the minorities to protect itself (...) the major or important elements that are protecting the regime are the minorities, including its own community, the Alawites” (Ibid.: 2).

While the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch still publically supported the government in 2012, the oppressed “Assyrian Democratic Organisation” (ADO) allied itself with the opposition in a relatively early stage of the Syrian

Crisis. The subsequent raid of the ADO offices in Qamishli by the Syrian security forces revealed that opposition forces are suppressed, whatever their religious affiliation might be. Further reports of attacks on Christian protesters, the murder of the priest Basil of Homs (1983-2012), and the detention and beating of Christian activist Hadal Kouky (*1991) served as a warning to the Christian community (Syrian Christians for Democracy 2011). In this respect, there is certainly not only a fear of the opposition's rule of Syria, but also anxiety around the existing rule. Only the superficial solidarity by a state protector seems to convince the Christians of the idea, that religious minorities in key positions might protect other minorities. In conclusion, the Christians state is to prefer rather the safe option of ensuring a pluralistic identity in a national state — which masks the minority status of their own group and ensures protection by loyalty — than the unsafe option of a path towards a democratic change with more political participation for all groups — which in the end could bear the danger of an establishment of an Islamic state in the entire Syrian territory.

Anxiety among Christians can also be spread through press reports: the loyalist website *Syria Truth* reported that 90% of the Christians in Homs had become victims of an ethnic cleansing by militant Islamists (*Syria Truth* 2012). Shortly afterwards, the loyal channel *Russia Today* reported that 10,000 Christians have fled the city (*Russia Today*: 2012), and the Vatican news agency *Agenzia Fides* published the same headline without even giving a reference of its source (*Agenzia Fides* 2012).

It can be argued that the Syrian government is using its allies to purposefully spread fear among Christians with the aim to strengthen their ties. Although the government invested heavily to intertwine its fate with the fate of the Christians, its dealing with the Christian activists discloses that its tolerance quickly reaches its limits in case of a deviation from loyalty; as a purely pragmatic regime it could take all kind of measures to secure its political survival.

However, foreign influence and a clear Islamization of the protests, with slogans like “Christians to Beirut and Alawites in the coffin” (*Al-Alawi a la tabut, wa al-Masihi a la Beirut*) occurred during the early stages of the conflict (Staudinger 2013: 57). Finally, several attacks on Christians, such as the ones in Jaramana in August 2012 (Al-Tamimi 2012: 22), indicated that sectarian attacks by rebel groups posed indeed a real threat to the

Christians. Since sectarianism is being used as a resource for mobilization and legitimization, religious differences are fuelling the conflict's expansion as a crucial accelerant (Hasenclever & De Juan 2007: 12). By the enrichment of religious symbolism, the Syrian War tends to be increasingly violent which is further marginalizing the Orthodox Christians.

Conclusion

The solidarity of the Christian Patriarchs seems to reflect the attitude of the majority of the Greek and the Syriac Orthodox Christians. In spite of differences of opinion on details, there is a consensus across the denominations. While the Christian Patriarchs officially announced at the very beginning of the crisis that they stood behind the Syrian state, the interview results show that a significant part of the Orthodox people were silently sympathetic for the demands of the demonstrations in March 2011. However, this initially positive attitude was not transformed into an active support of the uprising. On the contrary, the reluctance to join the protests dominated among the Christians in Syria. To the Orthodox Christians, the Syrian opposition did not provide any promising integrated policy approach. The militarization and perceived Islamisation at a very early stage of the Syrian Crisis, led to their dissociation of the protest movement. By its internationalization and the resulting sectarian tendencies, their fear of the imposition of an Islamic State in Syria fuelled their reluctance, which finally led to their full rejection of the opposition. As a result, the Orthodox Christians try to navigate between the Syrian government and the opposition in a rational decision-making process. The majority of the Greek and the Syriac Orthodox interviewees came to the conclusion that the stable Syrian state with its Alawite President is preferable, because it guarantees the preservation of their Christian heritage though its guarantee of religious freedom. Against the backdrop of the genocide of the Syriac Orthodox congregation in 1915, as well as the ideological proximity of the Greek Orthodox Christians with the Baath party, both groups are convinced that the secular system has a protective role for the Christian minorities of Syria.

Although this choice might be surprising given the persecution of individual Christians opposing the government, the Orthodox Christians indeed benefit in an ecclesiastical, institutional, religious and social way from

the Syrian State — just as the government benefits from them. Ultimately, the Christians really seem to be supportive of the Syrian government based on a quite sober analysis, not necessarily due to an absolutely sincere loyalty to the Syrian State, but rather due to their legitimate rejection of the opposition with its dominance of Islamists. Although the Christians would have welcomed a political opening in Syria, their majority rejects it in the face of the danger of sectarian attacks and the threat of an establishment of an Islamic state, which would likely include a *dhimmi* status for the Christians (Leonhardt 2014: 19). Not only the current rise and military success of the so called *al-Dawlah al-Islamiyah* in Syria and Iraq, but also the rise of Islamism in Lebanon, is perceived as an existential threat by the Christians. In regard to the establishment of the caliphate in parts of the region of northeastern Syria and northwestern Iraq and the latest sectarian attacks against Christians, their fear can be considered as more than understandable: Although the leader of the so-called *al-Dawlah al-Islamiyah*, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (*1971), “offered” — or better said imposed on — Christians the *dhimmi* status according the prophetic model of Islamic law in Raqqa on February 2014, this unilateral contract was combined with the clause that the Christians have to refrain from any hostile act against the so-called *al-Dawlah al-Islamiyah*. This most probably deliberately vague clause in reality led to a completely arbitrary handling of the Christians by the hands of the Islamists. As seen during the conquest of Mosul, only a very few Christians were “offered to be able to arrange themselves” with the *dhimmi* status. In contrary, the Islamists have forced most of the local Christians to either convert to Islam or to flee. In many other cases, they have not only robbed them, but punished the Christians with death by the sword (Inforadio 2015). Comprehensibly, the Orthodox Christians of Lebanon and especially of Syria — in addition to their tendency for political silence — show an increased desire for stability, security as well as law and order.

With the tendency of political silence on the one hand, there seems to be nevertheless a stylization of Christians as victims of the civil war on the other hand:

“They used to say that Christians are so important to the Arab society, but they will be destroyed in the Middle East. Every community uses this language to speak in alarm to keep the ranks unified” (Rabah 2013: 6).

Although most of the conflict's victims are Syrian Sunni Muslims, this tendency of stylization existed also in the aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War among the Greek Orthodox Christians (Panzer 1998: 21). Given the destructive chaos of the Syrian Civil War, a political solution might be the only solution; it is therefore necessary for the Christians — as they are inevitably part of the conflict — to attempt to work out options for the future, as demonstrated at the congress of the “Orthodox Youth Movement” (OJB) in 1970 during the Lebanese Civil War (Kuderna 1983: 313). Contrary to this ambiguity, it is might be useful for the Christians to act as a political entity, especially with regard to their minority status in the Levant:

“The Christians in Lebanon and also in Syria, they are divided (...) they remain diverse in their political stance (...) This is also the case on the Syrian Conflict (...) for the political scene the division would be good, but because we have this crisis in Syria it would be better to be united for them, because they lose power and come more apart among their own sects” (Ibid.: 2-3).

Therefore it would be important to make their moderate, non radical, but reconciling voice heard more effectively in the context of the increasing sectarian rhetoric. Despite the historic rivalry, the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate can also be integrated into this intermediary role of the Christians: the kidnapped Syriac Orthodox Bishop of Aleppo G. Y. Ibrahim had already demanded a dialogue. In 2012, he called for an end of the killing in Syria in his “Seven-Point Program” (Katholisch-Info 2012). Another important approach was the Rum Orthodox Patriarchate's statement highlighting the forgiving nature of Islam and declaring Christians and Muslims “two lungs of one Eastern body” (Orthodox Christian Channel 2014). As the media have a significant role in the awareness of the Syrian Civil War, the position of Christians in *an-Nahar* with its Greek Orthodox founder J. Tuwaini (*1957), as well as the newspaper *al-Anwar*, who also had a Christian publisher (Panzer 1998: 23), could provide a base to initiate the beginning of a moderate discourse in the Syrian Conflict.

However, since the emigration of Christians from the Middle East is increasing, it can be assumed that the traditional Christianity — not only in the Levant — will continue to further decrease in future:

“Christianity in the Middle East is going to disappear (...) The reasons for this emigration are a mix of the bad economical and political situation and the feeling of being not secure (...) Another problem for the Christian community in Lebanon is their division. They would never confirm this by themselves, but their division weakens them a lot” (C. Y. 2013: 4).

Without cohesion among all Christian denominations, by making real efforts for a political solution of the conflict and by pushing forward for a secular system, Oriental Christianity world could sooner or later loose its birthplace as the cradle of the worldwide Christianity.

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