

Assad Is Not a Protector of the Church

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May 17, 2019

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Hadeel Oueis is a writer and journalist focusing on the Middle East. She majored in political studies and in 2011, at the age of 18, was arrested by the Assad regime for playing a key role in the early days of Syrian protests. In 2012, the United States delegation in Geneva met with Oueis and helped her relocate to the United States. She currently analyzes U.S. policies in the Middle East for major Arabic networks. Oueis reported for years through the @JIMENA platform about Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews and has been an active voice in calling for peace in the Middle East.



Brief Analysis

The hate speech of groups that play on religious sentiments, poverty, and need has become a real threat not only to the region but also to European and American cities. In the age of the internet, ISIS's gelatinous ideas are able to penetrate the minds of young people regardless of location—motivating them to adopt radical thinking and to perpetrate the most horrendous crimes. Nevertheless, the peoples of the region face a grim selection of governance alternatives, not least where ISIS gained its largest foothold—Syria.

As a young woman who belongs to a Syrian minority group—a Syriac group with an independent language, religion, and culture—I ended up as part of a community of displaced persons when ISIS invaded northern Syria. We were forced to vacate our land for fear of killing and persecution. These fears were realized when ISIS abducted over 220 Syriac-Assyrians, especially girls, from my region of northeastern Al-Hasaka... Assad's soldiers were only a few kilometers from the scene; they did nothing to help these girls. This was just one instance of the regime's intentional neglect of terrorism—the expansion of ISIS was the fundamental pretext upholding the Assad regime. Only while the ISIS threat existed could Assad claim he protected against it.

However, it is imperative to remember that there are alternative ways of living. After detention in Assad's prisons, I escaped and traveled to a number of Western cities, finally arriving in America. And despite living in a number of different locations, I attach a distinct status to the United States. I believe in America's ideals—being here has given me hope for humanity. I have a new life here, where I can experience equality, freedom, and individuality in ways that were impossible in Syria. There, my potential would have been lost. This reality motivates me to reflect on the fate of those I left behind, especially given my current knowledge of the magnitude of American influence on the region and its potential to encourage the true American values of tolerance and diversity.

As Assad tightens his grip on Syria and directs his troops to Idlib, his supporters have begun to spin new stories to justify the regime, presenting a distorted narrative of 'religious tolerance' under his rule. Despite the crimes he has committed against his people, his supporters are now expounding on his 'tolerance' and 'openness to the other,' and claim that these traits date back to his upbringing and education. According to these stories, Assad frequented the Saidnaya Monastery as a youth and was educated by the nuns of the monastery.

In fact, both Assad the father and Assad the son have had a much darker legacy in terms of their approach to religion. Both barred Muslims from letting their beards grow or from showing any public manifestation of religiosity. This ban guaranteed that Syria's prisons were filled with religious people, jailed for expressing their beliefs. Ironically, prisons were a point of radicalization, and some who were unexpectedly released during the war joined extremist groups such as ISIS, Jaysh al-Islam, Nusra, Fastaqim Kama Umirt Union, and Nour al-Din al-Zenki. Thus, even if one believes that Assad is a 'friend of the church,' it must be remembered that he has been happy to subjugate religious people for their beliefs and all Syrians for their desire to be free.

Unfortunately, the regime's narrative of 'tolerance' was initially bolstered by U.S. and Western legitimization. The U.S. government played a major role in consolidating Bashar Assad's rule when it blessed the younger Assad's succession after his father's death in 2000. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright participated in the inauguration ceremony, where she said that she was optimistic about Assad the younger in the "age of the internet." Back in the United States, the new Syrian ruler was promoted as being tolerant and progressive, which helped solidify his image as legitimate heir to his father and the republic. Assad succeeded in drawing Secretary of State John Kerry to Syria, was keen and enthusiastic about this Western attention and his image as a "modern" Syrian president, with French photographers taking romantic photos of him and his wife in Paris neighborhoods.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, Assad has consistently attempted to improve his image in the West, arguing that terrorism and extremism would be the only alternative to his rule while attempting to project an image of tolerance. Of course, the regime's failure to control the protests against it and its use of chemical weapons against its own people should have decisively condemned that narrative, and yet it continues to gain traction in some circles. And the United States recognized this reality, announcing its support for the Syrian people's revolution, demanding Assad's ouster, and supporting the Free Syrian Army in northern Syria militarily and financially to contain Assad.

How much easier and more frequent it is today to hurl charges of extremism in our region. In fact, the solution to extremism lies in part in convincing Western governments of the danger of patchwork solutions that expel Christians from the country of Bashar, whose supporters call him the "protector of minorities." It is imperative that the United States operates on the understanding that repression is not a solution to combating extremism. Rather, extremism is now in the service of the tyrant, Assad, and will become a tool for him to fall back on when he cannot find solutions for his people when they once again ask for their rights.

Assad the father resorted to the use of extremist and destructive religious tools, exploiting religion locally to promote intimidation and repression. Assad the son is now using Syrian churches as a veil to disguise and conceal behind crosses his crimes against the Syrian people. With a little care and contemplation of the faces of the young victims of this oppression, and a little consideration of their past, you will find them believers in the values of individual and personal freedom, freedom of expression, creativity, the pursuit of happiness, success, peace, and recognition of different peoples.

It is thus the powerful and creative aspects of his country that are Assad's ultimate enemy. How much is contained in the sayings of Jesus Christ about what is happening in our days in the name of his religion, which originally gave precedence to the enemy over the friend, the poor over to the rich, and the weak over the strong: "My house is a house of prayer, and you have made it a den of thieves!" ❖

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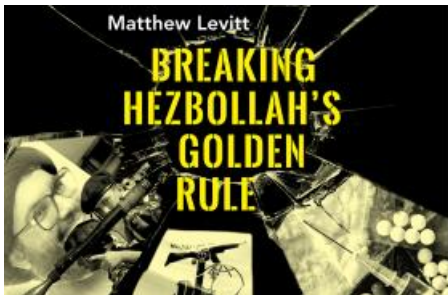
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