

Syria's Christians: A Personal Story of a Stolen Legacy

by [Lamis Khalilova \(/experts/lamis-khalilova\)](/experts/lamis-khalilova)

Jun 1, 2017

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/almsyhywn-fy-swrya-qst-shkhsyt-n-alarth-almsslwb\)](/ar/policy-analysis/almsyhywn-fy-swrya-qst-shkhsyt-n-alarth-almsslwb)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Lamis Khalilova \(/experts/lamis-khalilova\)](/experts/lamis-khalilova)

Lamis Bartuskova Khalilova is a non-resident fellow at Middle East Alternatives.



Brief Analysis

Depending upon whom you talk to, anywhere from six to sixteen ethnic groups constitute the Syrian population, with the main six groups being: Sunni Muslim; Shiite Muslim (Alawite and Ismaili); Christian; Druze; Kurd; Circassian; and the stateless Palestinian refugees and their descendants. The Christians are not foreign to the Syrian land; they have not been imported; they are, in fact, the founders and original inhabitants. The name “Syria” is derived from the Assyrian and Syriac Christian denominations, which constituted eighty percent of the country’s population before Islam arrived in the seventh century.

Syrian Christians are survivors no matter which other group is in power, although they have suffered at the hands of most who have ruled or invaded Syria over time. Syria’s Christians pride themselves on their national identity, patriotism, and participation in the struggle for Syria’s independence and their role during the formation of the modern Syrian state. Their support of the Palestinian struggle against Israel’s occupation and their Pan-Arab identity prove their unwavering connection to the region’s peoples and their struggles toward independence.

In the past six years, several theories have emerged to explain the caution and silence of Syria’s Christians towards the regime’s increasing brutality. They are afraid of the jihadi opposition, and it is easy to single Christians out because they are concentrated in urban areas. They also tend to follow the line dictated by the leadership of their respective churches. And despite some token commanders, they are underrepresented in Syria’s military machine, for reasons ranging from a personal dislike of violence to preference for civilian careers, to the meticulously calculated sectarian policy of the Assad regimes that have ruled the country for nearly five decades. The plight of Syria’s Christians stems from the fact that, while they have been used for show, they are actually marginalized by the regime and maligned by the opposition.

To better understand their dilemma, some brief modern historical background is helpful. Syria’s Christian elites were instrumental in forming the Syrian Arab Republic. Michelle Lutfallah, a Lebanese-Syrian politician, businessman, and intellectual led the negotiations for Syria’s independence and participated in the Paris conference of 1919. Fares Al Khoury, another Christian leader, was at the forefront of the Syrian nationalist, secularist, and Pan-Arab national movements and served as Syria’s prime minister. The Church too had its share of selfless acts. During the infamous famine of 1915-1918, there is a story that the Patriarch of Damascus sold his patriarchal crown to buy food for the people of the city. On hearing of the Patriarch’s act, a Muslim businessman bought the crown and gave it back to the Patriarch -- who proceeded to sell it again to feed more people, irrespective of their religious affiliation. A

prominent Syrian academic has often said, “Do not ask me about the number of Syrian Christians in the Syrian army, but rather ask me about their contribution towards the building of factories, hospitals and schools; I can list many.”

But with the 1963 coup d'état of the Baath Party's military council and then Hafiz -alAssad's second coup against Salah Jadid in 1971, a clear and calculated policy of divide and rule ensued. Gone were the days of national coexistence and community building as they were gradually replaced by policies that supported division across sectarian, socio-economic and urbanization practices. Rural Alawite farmers were catapulted to the cities and encouraged to join the army, rising in their socio-economic status from an earlier history of marginalization and discrimination. Christians were told to remain in their place or face retribution. To succeed in anything meant joining the Baath Party and pledging allegiance to the regime. The secret service (mukhabarat) were was omnipresent. Some Christians remained prominent in business or other professions, but the Christian population as a whole was increasingly and purposely isolated from the Sunni majority.

It is also no secret that the Church was infiltrated by the mukhabarat, much like every other institution. Priests, like imams, were encouraged to report on their parishes and communities, and were rewarded for doing so. They were instructed to deliver specific pre-printed messages during their respective sermons on Fridays and Sundays, and on significant religious occasions or holidays.

Thus, Syria's Christians cannot claim they enjoyed any great privileges under Assad rule. Instead, they were allocated just one minister in every cabinet, who had to be from Hawran or Latakia, never the elite from Damascus. Their villages were marginalized, underfunded, lacking in any significant infrastructure, and their youth were encouraged to migrate. Meanwhile, Alawite villages have enjoyed state-of-the-art infrastructure since the 1990s.

Indeed, at the onset of the peaceful and unarmed mass protests in March 2011, Christian activists were involved in the many logistical aspects of the revolution, employing their journalistic, documentary, photographic, and linguistic skills to participate in a hopeful dream of reforms, an end to the brutal impunity of the regime and its cronies, and the right to live in a modern society respectful of the rule of law. These activists at first resisted the regime's attempts to push them towards armament. For example, when the sieges of Daraya took place, the Christian communities rose to the challenge and responded with what they did best: humanitarian aid, as babies were left to starve by the regime while the rest of the world mostly just looked on.

Perhaps the most prominent Christian face of the revolution was Basel Shahada, who was killed by the regime in Homs in 2012. He was a young and promising Christian Syrian film producer and engineer who dropped his Fulbright scholarship in the United States to return to Syria as an activist, providing humanitarian aid and documenting what he saw as the Syrian people's legitimate and peaceful struggle against the Assad regime. After he was killed, it took days for his body to reach his family in Damascus in the Christian quarter of Bab-Touma. As the mourners, most of whom had been pro-revolution, filled the streets, the Church's leadership obliged the regime's instructions to cancel the funeral in fear that the protest would spread across the Christian quarter. “The silence was deafening,” said a friend who was there, “and the shame we all felt as Christians was incredible. Our church had let Basel down and it let his mourning family and friends down at a time when it had a responsibility. It was typical of the cowardly and corrupt leadership.”

Some local Christian clerics nevertheless defied the regime, at great personal peril. Whenever Christian priests held both sides of the conflict responsible for the death, displacement, and destruction of the Syrian people, they disappeared under mysterious circumstances, and were said to have been “killed or kidnapped” by the radical Islamist militias. The most prominent was the Italian priest Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, who described himself as Syrian by choice and spoke perfect Syrian Arabic. Others included Father Francis, killed in Homs, where he was involved in providing aid and breaking the siege; and Father Haddad, who was kidnapped in Qatana after criticizing the regime's

use of force against the civilian population.

To preempt such grassroots Christian opposition, the regime has historically responded with a deliberate strategy of alienating Christians from Muslims. The most grotesquely symbolic of such measures is the now notorious prison in Saidnaya, a military prison where political prisoners are tortured and executed by the thousands; these numbers have spiked since the uprisings. The prison's location is no coincidence: twenty-seven kilometers from Damascus in one of the most religiously, culturally, and historically significant Christian towns in the country, where the original inhabitants still speak Aramaic. A Christian pilgrimage site was successfully associated with the most inhumane and terrible practices of the Assad regime, where tens of thousands of lives have ended.

Even worse, the perverse and shocking contrast of the prison's existence at what many consider a holy site is carefully choreographed with visits to the Saidnaya monastery performed by Assad and his wife Asma on various occasions, where they are shown all smiles, kissing and hugging the Orthodox nuns and orphans in a show of support to polish their image as progressive supporters of minorities. Once again the Christians are exploited, paraded around as the regime sees fit. In this propaganda campaign, a Lebanese nun became the regime's mouthpiece. Mother Agnes, over the course of almost three years, gave interview after interview and travelled the world giving speeches defending Assad and the Syrian army as the protectors of minorities.

Another significant example is the use of Orthodox Christians as a way to appeal to Russian public opinion, with Putin's Russia depicted as the new savior of Eastern Christianity. The rumors and propaganda got to a point where Orthodox Christians believed and were heartened by "news" that they would all be granted asylum in Russia. Such rumors are belied by the reality of the Syrian and Iranian regimes' plans to change the country's demographic makeup, with Sunni Muslim and Christian families forced to leave their homes only to be replaced by Shia Muslims from Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon in calculated population swaps. Much of the historic old city in Damascus, which was inhabited predominantly by Christian - and at one time also Jewish - families, has been, in effect, sold off to Iranian businessmen, in yet another attempt to change the demographics and reap the spoils of war while erasing the Christian character that has survived for centuries. Yet at the same time, the regime selectively offers some Christian areas an increase in infrastructure investment, such as better and cheaper internet access, modern telecommunications, highways and asphalted roads, and better sanitation. This is only to buy their support - or at least silence - in contrast to the barrel bombs and other means of death and destruction that have affected the rest of the country.

Overall, it is simply false to claim that the Syrian conflict has spared the Christian population. Of the many millions of Syrians forced out of the country and internally displaced, and a total of fourteen million requiring humanitarian assistance, one and a half million are Christian. A few still support the Assad regime as the lesser of many evils. But most simply survive in silence, with a strong desire to immigrate in pursuit of a safer life in the West that has abandoned them and their fellow countrymen and women. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)