

67 April
2013

The Syrian Revolution and Future of Minorities

Akram Al-Bunni *

Somewhere between civil citizenship and dangerous thoughts on sectarian and ethnic apportionment, divisions and isolation, minorities in Syria are trying to configure their political future. Syria's minorities are beset by fears of the growing influence of Islamist currents in the Revolution and an eventual Islamist takeover of the country. These fears are motivated by the threat some Islamists trends pose to the civil nature of Syrian society and its diversity and the risk of alienation of the different other groups and repression of religious and political freedoms.

This paper analyzes the potential repercussions of the Syrian Revolution's shift towards political Islam and all the challenges that might entail in terms of pushing other societal groups towards sectarian and ethnic entrenchment to the detriment of Syrian national identity.

Given the particular nature of Syria's pluralistic society and the nature of the Syrian revolution, a question imposes itself regarding the country's ethnic and religious minorities' future, their fears and their attitude towards change. Those minorities have fears from an eventual state of chaos, a retreat in the state, the spread of hard-line jihadist groups and an eventual Islamists takeover of power. This might result in a government that tries to impose a certain way of life and culture on society, which poses a threat to the minorities' identity, rights and way of life.

Ethnic and religious minorities in Syria account for around 40% of the population. These minorities include all non-Sunni

Muslim denominations, such as the Alawites, Druze, Ismailis and various Eastern and Western Christian denominations. The country also has a variety of ethnic groups of different sizes, each with its own cultural characteristics that differ from Arab culture, including the Kurds, Circassians, Turkmen, Armenians and Assyrians.

Syria's long history of civilisation and coexistence is known to all, as are the structural reasons behind the triumph of this melting pot in the face of all the discrimination and assiduous efforts to divide and dismember the country. These reasons include:

* Syrian writer

1. Historically, the Syrian people have rallied round a wide array of patriotic and national causes, including the Palestinian cause and Arab unity. This helped promote internal solidarity and integration, and eroded the traditional structures of fanaticism;
2. All Syrians, regardless of their ethnic and religious background, have taken part in the struggle for liberation and independence, and in efforts to build their state and forge its modern history; this made the principles of citizenship and equality the main common denominator among them;
3. There is no history of rancour or serious confrontations that one can exploit among different groups in the country; this is due to its particular demographic mosaic and population overlap, whereby it is hard to find any ethnically pure or isolated region in the country that one minority or the other could claim as its own;
4. The majority in Syria is itself diverse and disunited both culturally and politically, just like the minorities are. What puts it together is a religious tie and traditional, spontaneous piety; however, among this majority's predominant characteristics are its nationalist sense and wide array of affiliations. It is also divided in its understanding of the relationship between religion and daily life, and its loyalty to a wide array of social and political affiliations, such as the liberal, nationalist and communist currents, with some preferring to turn in the regime's orbit and support it.

It is also well-known, however, that at no time since its independence did Syria have a strong and all-inclusive national identity based on a social contract that everyone agrees on, a contract on which to build a solid and well-established nation that everybody believes in. Moreover, successive regimes, especially the autocratic ones, have distorted the country's national identity and caused society to regress into primordial relationships easy to dismantle, let alone the top-down repression and discrimination on the basis of religion, sect and tribe, all at the national spirit's expense. Furthermore, the growing religious influence over the country has exacerbated the situation in the past two decades, dug deep fault-lines within a Syrian society already in crisis, and created distances between cultures that have always been tolerant and lived peacefully side-by-side. Conditions have become so dire that, today, sectarian and ethnic polarisation is a normal and familiar occurrence, an unfortunate turn of events that sows division among Syria's Arab population based on religion or sect, and distinguishes Kurds and other groups based on ethnic lines.

In other words, terms like majority and minority would not have become so widespread in Syria had it not been for the frequent incidents of national and sectarian discrimination, designed to guarantee loyalty at the expense of national ties, politics and standards of ability and impartiality, and had it not been for the regime's encouragement of such reactions and expressions of loyalty. Prior to that, Syrians of all backgrounds and affiliations formed a single, cohesive social fabric, enjoyed their daily lives and political unity, took part in social life and everyday activities, developed their society and built their state naturally and without discrimination. Syrian patriots from a variety of backgrounds struggled together against the French occupation and held high political and military positions, including Ibrahim Hanano,

Saleh Al Ali, Sultan Pasha Al Atrash, Fares Al Khoury, Fawzi Silo, Said Ishaq, Husni Al Zaim, Adeeb Al Shishakli and many others. The modern Syrian political scene, and also the Syrian jails have known many Kurdish, Arab, Muslim and Christian members of the opposition, from all backgrounds, who valiantly resisted the policies of despotism, alienation and discrimination, and called for a democratic civil and pluralistic country.

The Syrian Revolution was not the making of a single group; it was, as everyone admits, a spontaneous popular intifada against injustice and discrimination, and a reaction by a new generation of alienated youth that had nothing to do with partisan politics, ideology or identity slogans. Moreover, although the major bloc of the revolution is Muslim –as Islam is the religion of the majority-, there is remarkable variety and diversity within the revolution. Alongside Arabs, Kurds, Circassians, Turkmen and Assyrians, members of various sects and communities have considerable contributions to their name, albeit to varying degrees depending on the social makeup of each region.

Nevertheless, and despite the participation of some minority group members in the revolution, albeit in small numbers, there is a palpable sense of anxiety and fear among these minorities regarding the period that will follow the regime's downfall. The situation becomes clearer when we hear talk about the Islamisation of the revolution in tandem with acts of alienation and marginalisation by some opposition groups. Some even say that certain groups intentionally sideline the minorities' role to give the revolution an Islamist dimension, even if such efforts coincide with the regime's own efforts to spread the idea that the revolution is Islamist in nature. The regime uses the presence of Al Qaeda and its affiliates to mitigate outside pressure on it, and ensure the continued loyalty of vast swathes of Syria's minorities, or at least ensure their silence. This is

particularly true in the case of groups which benefit from the status quo, the groups that the regime claims representing and fights in their names. Sadly, this makes the relationship of these minorities with the revolution seems like turning in an ominous vicious circle. The increase in violence coupled with the growing Islamist influence within the Revolution reinforces the minorities' fear and makes them shy away from joining a revolution that they believe is alimeted by religious zeal; this accentuates the revolution's Islamist dimension and, in turn, reinforces the minorities' fears once again. This situation opens Syria's minorities to a wide variety of options that vie for their future and aspiration for full citizenship rights, and the protection of their particular characteristics.

I- The idea of dividing Syria into ethnic or sectarian cantons

Unfortunately, this idea has begun to attract interest given the existence of a favourable environment. Several factors contributed to this including the severity of the growing political and security conflict and the methods of violence being used. Another factor is the regime's provocative actions and attempts to distort the patriotic nature of the revolution, reduce it to the sectarian dimension and turn the conflict into a battle for survival and destiny. These efforts are designed to push this human fabric that lived side-by-side for so many years towards enmity and dismemberment, and promote the return the country's social groups to their original ethnic, religious and sectarian roots, and thus ensure a measure of protection and security. The fact is that given the current entrenchments and the way the battle is unfolding on the ground, the country's division is already underway, whether in the areas that went out of the regime's control into the opposition's hands or those that

remain loyal to the regime and are now enjoying special attention and treatment.

He who cannot control the whole does not leave the part; thus, if re-establishing control over the entire country proves impossible, one could eventually be content with a homogenous seaside strip. Some of the regime's supporters promote this idea, perhaps to allay their fear of an eventual total defeat or because it is the only way the regime can survive, even in a small defensible part, if it fails to keep control of the whole. Another reason is perhaps the fact that it is the regime's last available option, and why not since it provides it with a refuge it can escape to and avoid accountability and retribution. There are also various foreign interests to consider, mainly Russia and Iran's, who for their own reasons encourage the division of Syria as the final option. Iran's leaders do not want to let go of Syria regardless of the consequences, since it is a vital link in their eastern sphere of influence, even if it is reduced to a thin strip of land by the sea, and despite all the efforts and logistics required to sustain it. On the other hand, Russia perhaps does not care about changes to the map of the region as much as it does about keeping the Syrian card alive, and maintaining its advanced military base in Tartous, to boost its negotiating position with the West.

On the other side of the equation, many believe that any talk about the division of Syria into statelets is a mere illusion and unrealistic. It was the Syrian people themselves who thwarted attempts by the French mandate to divide the country into five statelets, and kept it united until independence. It was the Syrian people who strengthened their united country and forged their geographic and political image into a comprehensive national entity, surpassing in that even their own nationalist tendencies, sympathies and yearning for a single Arab State. It was also the Syrian people who

always managed to avoid being dragged into a civil war when they encountered difficulties, succeeded in safeguarding their union and defeat all attempts at dismemberment and dispersal, and who overcame the pain, violence and blood to coexist peacefully in a united political entity. More importantly is everyone's wariness and the international and regional reluctance to see change take place in any of the interconnected Arab Mashrek countries, since this would open the door to redrawing the map and borders of the region and thus gravely destabilise its security, particularly Israel's. It would also mean dealing a blow to the status quo that has been in place for decades, and seriously harming the regional and international strategies and interests of the many concerned parties.

II- The sectarian apportionment

Today, certain minorities float the idea of a "Syrian Taef Agreement" similar to the agreement that has ruled the Lebanese political life since 1989, to ensure their protection and rights, which in effect means the adoption of a power sharing system that apportions power on a sectarian basis. This idea rests on the premise that Syria and Iraq's similar societal composition will lead to similar outcomes in terms of the rebuilding the state and the political system.

Worse yet is the fact that a sectarian apportionment system was being implemented covertly in almost all Syrian state institutions, over the past several decades, since many know that high state positions in Syria are unofficially apportioned among officials from government institutions, the army and the security services, not to mention granting each sect a share of power commensurate with the regime's estimate of its weight and relevance. What complicates the matter even further is the behaviour of the Syrian opposition which does not seem to

have left the regime's tactics behind, since it filled its leadership positions based on a similar apportionment system. It over-exaggerated the number of positions granted to Kurd, Alawites, Christians and Druze to give the impression, both at home and abroad, that it represents all shades of Syrian society and is therefore a worthy replacement for the regime.

Experience shows that the sectarian apportionment system is an unhealthy form of consociational democracy which is adopted to allay the fears of certain elements in a pluralistic society. It has been confirmed that Syria's minorities are indeed fearful and that their fear is not caused by past experience of repression and persecution, but because of what is happening in other countries where religious forces have come to power and relied on the Sunni majority to islamise the state and society. However, no other option but full citizenship could satisfy everyone and safeguard their rights.

There are people who believe that the apportionment system is the least bad option to stop the slide towards civil war and avoid dividing and dismembering the country or, at least, change the familiar and usual setting where one sect dominates the state and its economic, military and security institutions; there are also those who believe that this is an inevitable option and a natural outcome of the long years of repression that voided the country of its civilisational mainstays, and that it would only be a transitional stage for a society not yet culturally and politically mature enough to establish a citizenship state and equality. But in both cases, those people are overlooking the system's negative aspects and the dangers lurking within it. The system spontaneously opens the door to unhealthy competition and compels each sect, or ethnic group, to try and boost its own relative position within a backwards context, instead of working to improve it. The situation gets even worse when each sect, or ethnic group,

begs its powerful foreign allies to help it strengthen its presence and position within the system. We should also not forget that apportionment will put an end to the principle of citizenship when each Syrian is introduced by the sect, or ethnic group, that has been forcibly imposed on him as a political and social reference point. The apportionment of power system also creates a regime with many heads, or one pulled by several horses each heading in a different direction, and this hampers the state's public presence and its ability to perform its duties. We should also not forget that one of the system's main dangers is that it promotes conflicts and disagreements round the weight and role of each sect, or minority, round its rightful representation and share of power, the size of this share in the allocation of positions, and the parameters of what the constitutional says in this regard.

In fact, sectarian apportionment is rejected not only on account of a healthy citizenship society or the special attributes of Syrian society and its enduring all-inclusive identity and national state, but also based on the expectations of living a democratic life and trusting pluralism, equality and the rule of law to help the Syrian people transcend the destructive impact that blind violence has had on them. There is also the trust that these would help establish the right equilibrium that allows the peaceful management of conflicts among Syria's different social elements and civil and political forces, even if this stage lasts too long and encounters several obstacles.

III- The civil state

It is the choice on which all opposition groups agree although it is also the most difficult given the legitimate fear of the Islamists' influence on the revolution and their credibility, since they are expected to play a significant leadership role in the transitional

period, perhaps as compensation for the long years of persecution, due to the sectarian nature of the regime or the pious nature of Syrian society. It does not change the fact that these Islamist groups, who appointed themselves representatives of the majority, never tire of making promises and offering guarantees to allay the minorities' fears regarding their rights and respect for their particular characteristics. The reason is that there is doubt and apprehension regarding their real intentions, a growing sense that they hide more than they reveal and that they will not deliver on their promises. In fact, there are many reasons for doubting their word and credibility, starting with the Iranian experience and ending with the events currently unfolding in Tunisia and Egypt, not to mention the experience of Sudan, Afghanistan and Palestine, among other.

Therefore, the minorities should not be blamed for their fear or for staying away from the revolution. We also cannot address this fear by denouncing and blaming them, but rather by showing sympathy and through courageous efforts towards overcoming the obstacles that prevent contacts between the minorities and the majority, and erode the trust between the opposition and the public. In this respect the following need to be taken into account:

1. Matching words with deeds to dispel the negative image that some have of the revolution, due to the actions of some extremist groups, reinforced by a general sense that the religious other does not respect the right to differ, and has no political options but to kill, disfigure and exact revenge;
2. Promoting the role and responsibility of the opposition in safeguarding the spirit and values of the revolution, away from

apportionment of power systems and narrow calculations;

3. Encouraging the establishment of civil and popular committees that combat sectarianism and discrimination, spread the culture of citizenship and strengthen the mainstays of peaceful coexistence, tolerance and solidarity. They should help protect people's lives and property, and stem the tendency to divide or discriminate on ethnic, sectarian and confessional bases.

It is the responsibility of the Islamist opposition groups to try to win the trust of a pluralistic and diverse society; this can be accomplished by promoting their role in defending the principles of citizenship and democracy, and by changing the stereotypical image that people have of Islamist political parties and groups, namely as people who renege on their promises and, as soon as they can, turn their backs on human rights and the rotation of power. Islamist groups should also take a clear stand on the civil nature of the state in a manner that leaves no room for misunderstanding. The civil state is not a slogan designed solely to keep religion and the military away from the centres of power; it is a state that safeguards the central authority's independence in matters of governance and legislation, and stands at an equal distance from each and every citizen regardless of gender, religion, ethnic affiliation or belief.

Based on the above, and to dispel all confusion and ambiguity, the Syrian Revolution needs to clearly and collectively define what it means by civil state to allay the fear of ethnic and religious minorities, and draw them closer to the Revolution. Such a definition should unequivocally clarify the relationship between the state and politics in a manner that prevents the sort of misguided violations that have recently escalated. It should also put an end to the religious

extremism that denies equal citizenship rights to non-Muslims, and alienates those who hold different opinions or adhere to different beliefs; it will also end the sectarian religious discourses that deliberately stoke sectarian conflicts instead of putting their trust in civil rights that leave nobody out.

There are still those who use the concept of civil state and as a manoeuvre and tactic to temporarily allay the fears of secular groups and minorities. They try to mitigate the latter's anxiety about taking advantage of Islam as the majority religion, when all they think about is the eventual Islamic Caliphate and Sharia Law, and are waiting for the right moment to make an announcement to that effect, as soon as the regime falls, totally disregarding all the slogans about freedom, dignity and diversity that the people have raised and sacrificed for. But it is important to note in this context that new Islamist groups have emerged on the scene who, despite their small size and weight, have taken advantage of political Islam's regression and the many defeats it suffered, over the past two decades, to arrive at the conclusion that they would be better off reconciling themselves to the civil state concept that respects human rights, without contradicting Islam's core principle. They came to this conclusion perhaps because they did not want politics to turn religion into an object of controversy, and open it up to various interpretations that distance it from its spirituality and sanctity, and throw it into the realm of earthly matters. Today, these groups need everyone's support to make their views public and defend them. They also need to be empowered not only to dispel any ambiguity, but also as an important step on the long awaited path towards religious reform.

Although it is correct, in principle, to say that minorities should realise that despots only protect their own interests, and that the best way to dispel their fear is to become active in efforts to make change possible and affect its outcome, it is also correct that it is incumbent

on the revolutionary forces, in general, and in light of the current complexities, to help dispel this fear. They can do that by placing the national vision above everything else and acting accordingly, and by developing a valid democratic alternative that does not rely only on slogans but delves into the details of how the impact of the bloody stage could be overcome, how the civil state would be established and governed, and how the constitution would ensure equality, rights and freedoms.

The minorities' participation in the revolution is guaranteed to hasten the regime's overthrow, ensure the well-being of any future change and root equal citizenship rights regardless of belief, affiliation and background. This is why it is important to reassure all parties that everybody's rights will be protected, to motivate the minorities and encourage them to become active in the Revolution and, through that, real partners in determining their country's future. This could be done by clearly spelling out their rights in a national document that everyone would commit to respect, and make it an integral part of the constitution. It would help if this document is given added value by drafting it under the aegis of the United Nations and other international institutions, to make it part of the country's continued commitment to civil and political rights, based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; this would prevent any return to autocracy and make a clean break from the theory regarding the tyranny of the majority.

We should admit that not only ethnic and religious minorities fear from the future of the Syrian Revolution, but also vast swathes of the middle class from different religious affiliations, as well as intellectuals, writers and people in the creative arts. However, rather than allowing this legitimate fear to go to the other extreme, it should be garnered and used as incentive to encourage the naysayers to become more active in the public

arena, and engage others in a climate of freedom through political and constitutional avenues. Politics is a struggle, a process and horizons, and the success of the revolution will unleash a process and open up horizons that will propel Syria forward towards democratic and pluralistic nationhood.

In a nutshell, there is no fear for Syria's minorities, but as the Syrian saying goes, "he who does not go to the market shall neither buy nor sell". It is futile therefore to talk about a better and more secure future for the next generations, or commit to democracy and citizenship rights, if all sectors of the population do not take part in making change possible or help in the demolition and reconstruction process. Extricating ourselves from the present situation does not happen by safeguarding the status quo, but by tearing it down. Likewise, a neutral, fearful or hesitant position on the part of Syria's minorities, and allowing themselves to be swayed by provocative and exaggerated claims against the revolution, will only lengthen the birth process, bring more pain and suffering and distort the revolution's future and its dreams of a dignified and free nation.