

SYRIA: Recent concerns

1. Background

The people of Syria face a very uncertain future. Civil war has engulfed the country for the past two and a half years, leaving at least 125,835 dead and five million internally displaced, and causing a mass exodus of two million Syrians to other countries. The seven million affected represent a third of Syria's population. According to monitoring group the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, those killed include 41,000 civilians (including 6,000 children and 4,000 women), 41,000 government fighters and 23,000 rebel fighters. It is believed that 5,000 people were killed in September 2013 alone, underlining the fact that international efforts to destroy Syria's chemical stockpile cannot stem the bloodshed adequately, since the majority of casualties are caused by conventional weaponry.

Syria is a mosaic of ethnic and religious groups, with a Sunni majority. The ruling family is from the Alawite minority sect; and the Assad regime, whose initial brutality against unarmed protestors precipitated the descent into full scale civil war, has not been averse to playing on the sectarian fears of ethnic and religious minorities as and when it suited it, in order to manipulate other minorities into supporting it. The civil war began as a bid by rebel forces to oust Assad, but an increasing number of militant Islamist groups have infiltrated the country. This has led many to fear that the conflict has not only become the arena of preference for international jihadi elements, but is also increasingly becoming subsumed into a wider conflict between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims in the region. The November 2013 bombing near the Iranian Embassy in Lebanon, in which 23 lost their lives, including the Iranian Cultural Attaché;¹ and the subsequent firing of mortars into Saudi Arabia by an Iraqi Shi'a Al-Mukhtar Army militia;² have further stoked these tensions.

2. Jihadi infiltration

The opposition forces remain essentially disparate militia groups under no formal or structured control. While the war against the Syrian regime was initially led by the western-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA), hard-line Islamists and jihadis - many linked to al-Qaeda - presently account for nearly half the anti-government forces in the conflict.³

¹ *Guardian*, 'Beirut suicide blasts raise tensions in Lebanon as Sunni militants target Iran', 19 November 2013
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/19/beirut-bombings-iran-embassy-sectarian-tensions-lebanon>

² Al Jazeera America, 'Iraqi Shia group fires warning shots into Saudi Arabia', 21 November 2013
<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/11/21/iraqi-shi-ite-groupfireswarningshotintosaudi.html>

³ *Telegraph*, 'Syria: nearly half rebel fighters are jihadists or hardline Islamists, says IHS Jane's report', 15 September 2013
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10311007/Syria-nearly-half-rebel-fighters-are-jihadists-or-hardline-Islamists-says-IHS-janes-report.html>

Increasing numbers of Islamist extremists from around the world, some of whom have fought in Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya and other arenas, have joined with rebel forces; and constitute the most effective anti-Assad fighters. Their aim is not only to wipe out the Assad regime, but also to recreate the Muslim Caliphate. Accordingly, they have been targeting religious and ethnic groups, including Alawites, Shi'as, Druses and Christians.

After Sunni jihadis began attacking Shi'a religious sites and communities - including the revered Shi'a Bibi Zainab Shrine in Damascus in July 2013, killing its respected caretaker, Anas Romani - Shi'a jihadis began arriving in the country to fight on the government's side. Both the Lebanese Shi'a group Hezbollah and the Syrian Shi'a militia Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas have had an influx of Iraqi Shi'a, and are actively participating in the conflict. Consequently, foreign jihadis from the two main Islamic sects are also confronting each other on Syrian soil. In the midst of it all, Syrian civilians are suffering greatly, both as a result of the actions of Sunni extremists and from indiscriminate bombings by government forces.

A study by the defence consultancy IHS Jane's found that there are as many as 1,000 different Syrian rebel groups. Of these, 10,000 fighters are linked to al-Qaeda and include foreign jihadis; 30,000-35,000 are hard-line Islamists who share the former's outlook but whose focus is purely on Syria, as opposed to an international jihad; and 30,000 rebels belong to moderate Muslim militias, leaving a minority of rebels from secular or nationalist groups.⁴

The two main Sunni jihadi groups fighting are the al-Qaeda affiliated groups, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)), and Jabhat al-Nusra. ISIL and al-Nusra have large numbers of foreign fighters from surrounding Islamic countries and beyond. Many arrive through the Turkish border. Thus there is not only an influx of foreign fighters from regional countries arriving to fight against the government in Syria, such as the estimated 600 Saudis, but fighters are also arriving from European countries such as the UK, France and Germany. On 25 November 2013, the *Independent*, a British newspaper, reported that there were an increasing number of radicalised Muslims from Europe travelling to Syria to fight alongside Islamist rebels. This includes citizens from the following countries: France (400), the United Kingdom (350), Belgium (200), and Kosovo (150).⁵ An estimated further 220 German citizens are currently fighting in Syria. The actual number is now thought to be higher, following a recent call by jihadis for reinforcements. German intelligence chief Hans-Georg Maassen observed that "for young people wanting to wage jihad, Syria is very interesting...it is easy to get to; you only need an identity card, a flight to Turkey then a domestic flight to the border."⁶ Around 500 Turkish citizens are also thought to be fighting for al-Nusra and ISIL, some of whom are reported to have received training in al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁷

⁴ *Telegraph*, 'Syria: nearly half rebel fighters are jihadists or hardline Islamists, says IHS Jane's report', 15 September 2013 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10311007/Syria-nearly-half-rebel-fighters-are-jihadists-or-hardline-Islamists-says-IHS-Janes-report.html>

⁵ *Independent*, 'Gateway to terror: British Islamic preacher Anjem Choudary 'sent hundreds to join al-Qa'ida in Syria'', 25 November 2013 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/gateway-to-terror-british-islamic-preacher-anjem-choudary-sent-hundreds-to-join-alqaida-in-syria-8960883.html>

⁶ Yahoo! News, 'Syria conflict draws rising numbers of German jihadists', 13 November 2013 <http://news.yahoo.com/syria-conflict-draws-rising-numbers-german-jihadists-141833498--sector.html>

⁷ *Ahram Online*, '500 Turks join Qaeda fighters in Syria: Ministry', 27 November 2013 <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/87620/World/Region/-Turks-join-Qaeda-fighters-in-Syria-Ministry.aspx>

The arrival of fresh jihadis comes at a time when the government army is planning to push past Aleppo Airport to Base 80, a key military base. By advancing beyond this base, the Syrian Government hopes to cut off supply lines to Turkey through which rebels have been able to access weapons, food and fresh recruits.

3. Infighting between rebel groups

The excessive violence employed by some of the international jihadi factions, including the killing of religious and ethnic minorities and moderate Muslims, and the desecration of religious property, has led to tensions with the FSA, whose sole focus is the overthrow of the authoritarian dictator Bashar al-Assad. These tensions have resulted in fighting between the groups, and even the execution in September of several FSA leaders by al-Qaeda affiliated jihadis. Earlier this year, the town of Raqqa was seized from the FSA by ISIL following fierce gun battles. On 29 September, a coalition of 50 rebel groups came together under the banner of the Syrian Islamic Army and refused to recognise the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), on the basis that the Syrian Islamic Army seeks to create a Syria that has Islamic law as the basis of legislation. This further exacerbated the bad relations. Subsequently, on 22 November 2013 the Islamic Front was created, bringing together seven Islamic rebel groups (namely Liwa al-Tawhid, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, Soqour al-Sham, al-Haq Brigades, Ansar al-Sham, Army of Islam, and the Kurdish Islamic Front). In its statement the Islamic Front described itself as "...an independent military and social force that is aimed at bringing down Assad's regime in Syria and at replacing it with a just Islamic state."⁸ However, unlike the Syrian Islamic Army, the Islamic Front promised to work with all groups opposing Assad, including the SNC.

In November 2013 an online video showed two ISIL members holding the head of a fellow rebel fighter whom they had mistakenly beheaded. Mohammed Fares Maroush, the rebel commander of the rebel group Harakat Ahrar al-Sham had been wounded while fighting against government forces near Aleppo. Soon after being taken to hospital, and in a drug-induced state, Maroush mentioned 'Ali' and 'Hussein', the names of two revered Shi'a imams. This prompted those present to conclude that he was a Shi'a fighting alongside the Syrian Government, and they summarily executed him. Maroush's identity as a Sunni commander was only discovered after members of Harakat Ahrar al-Sham recognised him in the online video.

4. Sectarian violence

An infamous war cry of many Sunni extremists has been 'Alawites to the grave, Christians to Beirut'. It is now estimated that approximately 450,000 Christians have already left the country. However, many more have chosen to remain in their homeland, and are increasingly vulnerable.

⁸ Al Jazeera, 'Major Syrian rebel groups join forces', 22 November 2013
<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/11/major-syrian-rebel-groups-join-forces-20131122141129975421.html>

Archbishops abducted

In April 2013, Archbishop Boulos (Paul) Yazigi of the Greek Orthodox Church and Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim of the Syriac Orthodox Church were abducted by gunmen as they returned from a humanitarian mission to the volatile Syria/Turkey border. During the kidnapping the gunmen murdered their driver, who was also a priest. In October 2013 Syrian Grand Mufti Ahmad Hassoun Badreddin claimed that the archbishops were alive and in Turkey;⁹ however, the Turkish Government denied this claim, and their whereabouts remain unknown.

Catholic priest killed

In June 2013 Father François Murad, a Catholic priest, was executed by Islamist forces in the village of Ghassaniya. Initially, a video circulating online appeared to show Father Murad being beheaded by jihadists; however, according to later credible reports, it was not him in the video. Witnesses informed the *Daily Telegraph*¹⁰ that Father Murad had in fact been shot dead on 23 June after taking refuge in his church, the Convent of the Holy Land, following the bombing of the monastery of Saint Simon in his village. A Franciscan Order verified reports of Father Murad's death in a statement issued two days after his death: "Islamists attacked the monastery, ransacking it and destroying everything...when Father François tried to resist, defending the nuns, rebels shot him."

Disputed drive-by shooting

On 11 August 2013 rebel gunmen were reported to have killed eleven people - nine of whom were thought to be Christians - in a drive-by shooting, as they celebrated a feast day. Sana news agency, the state-run news service, described the attacks as a 'massacre' and reported that women and children had been killed. However, activists claim many of those killed in the attack were pro-government militia who had been guarding security checkpoints in the area. The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports that rebels killed five government militiamen and six civilians, including two women, and confirmed that nine of those killed were Christians. The attack took place in the early hours of the morning, on the road linking the two Christian villages of Ein al-Ajouz and Nasrah, in the province of Homs. It has been reported that many of those killed were refugees who had fled the city of Homs, as a result of the deadly fighting between government and opposition groups since the start of the civil war.¹¹

Maaloula

In September 2013 the historic village of Maaloula was invaded by rebel groups including Jabhat al-Nusra, which killed eight soldiers trying to defend the village. Maaloula had 3,300 inhabitants, the majority of whom were Christians, many of whom still speak the ancient Aramaic language. Reports state that ten Christians were executed, some for refusing to convert to Islam. Six young Catholics were taken prisoner and two ancient churches were strafed with bullets, including the Greek-Catholic monastery of Saints Sergius and Bacchus, which had its crosses destroyed. The leader of the local Muslim community,

⁹ Al Alam, 'Syria's Grand mufti: Abducted bishops are in Turkey', 28 October 2013 <http://en.alalam.ir/news/1528584>
Daily Star Lebanon, 'Abducted bishops in Turkey, Syria's grand mufti says', 28 October 2013
<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Article.aspx?id=236000#axzz2IOv0I5Yo>

¹⁰ BBC, 'Vatican confirms Catholic priest was killed in Syria', 2 July 2013 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23138679>

¹¹ *Guardian*, 'Syrian gunmen shoot dead 11 people', 17 August 2013
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/17/syrian-gunmen-shoot-dead-11>

a sheikh, tried to stop the targeting of Christians, stating that, “Violence cannot be carried out either in the name of Allah or Mohammed”; but his protestations fell on deaf ears.

The rebels are reported to forcibly convert some male residents. However, one woman reported that when she telephoned her fiancé, Atef, to ascertain his whereabouts, his mobile phone was answered by a rebel fighter. The fighter said that Atef was a government militiaman and announced that they had slit his throat following his refusal to convert to Islam, and added mockingly, “Jesus didn’t come to save him.”¹²

Many Christians fled Maaloula, leaving behind their homes, businesses and other possessions. Others remained locked in their homes fearing imminent attack. Many of those who fled are receiving food and medical help from churches in Damascus, but there are worries that this may not last long. It is estimated that 5,000 Christians and 2,000 Muslims fled the village and have not returned, turning the village into a ghost town. “Entire families have left their entire lives in Maaloula. They do not need only material goods such as food, water, a bed to rest but also spiritual support, especially the elderly, women and children.”¹³

It remains unclear whether or not the Syrian Army has retaken the town, which is situated in a key strategic area on the border with Lebanon.

Sadad

In November 2013, 30 dead bodies were found in mass graves in the Christian city of Sadad after forces from Jabhat al-Nusra had invaded the town on 21 October. As the invasion loomed, many of the town’s inhabitants fled. Many who were unable to flee, such as the elderly, disabled, women and children, experienced torture and murder at the hands of the jihadis before the town was retaken by the government a week later. Atrocities included the murder of six members of the same family, including a 90-year-old grandmother who had been tied up and blindfolded before being thrown down a well. *Independent Catholic News* has since reported the number killed to be 45, with many more residents missing or unaccounted for.¹⁴

In another case, a Christian man named Fouad was used as a human shield by members of Jabhat al-Nusra. Members of the group stormed his house and after confiscating his money, mobile phone and ID card, threatened him, saying, “We kill *Nasara* [Christians].” They then forced him to travel with them as a human shield: “Two of them took me with them to walk down the street, walking on either side of me until we passed the [government] sniper, so he wouldn’t shoot. And then they left me. When we were walking, the sniper didn’t shoot at us.”¹⁵

¹² *Daily News*, ‘Syria Christian forced to convert at gunpoint [sic]’, 12 September 2013

<http://www.iol.co.za/dailynews/news/syria-christian-forced-to-convert-at-gunpoint-1.1576324#Uo-7qdj7Jl4>

¹³ *AsiaNews*, ‘Maaloula: rebels break into the village homes, kill three young Christians’, 9 September 2013

<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Maaloula:-rebels-break-into-the-village-homes-kill-three-young-Christians-28958.html>

¹⁴ *Independent Catholic News*, ‘Syria: Bodies of massacred Christians found in mass grave’, 4 November 2013

<http://www.indcatholicnews.com/news.php?viewStory=23532>

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, ‘Syria: Opposition Abuses During Ground Offensive’, 19 November 2013

<http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/11/19/syria-opposition-abuses-during-ground-offensive>

The Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan of Homs and Hama, Selwanos Boutros Alnemeh, described the events in Sadad as the "most serious and biggest massacre of Christians" since the conflict began in March 2011. He went on to say, "45 innocent civilians were martyred for no reason, and among them several women and children, many thrown into mass graves. Other civilians were threatened and terrorized. 30 were wounded and 10 are still missing."¹⁶ The Metropolitan also described how inhabitants of Sadad returned to find their village without electricity or water, their homes destroyed and looted, and business, churches, and even schools, the clinic and the hospital completely destroyed.

Deir Atieh

Islamist factions are reported to have invaded the town of Deir Atieh, north of Damascus, on 22 November. During the attack on the town the local museum, which was home to numerous archaeological relics, was severely damaged; as were mosques and churches. Militiamen reportedly entered the municipal hospital, taking patients as hostages, and examined the identity documents of members of the local population as they attempted to flee the area, detaining any with Christian names. According to the Catholic news agency Fides, a Greek Orthodox priest pretended to be married and fled in the company of a woman. He was able to leave because he had an Arab name and no traceable Christian ancestry¹⁷.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The independent international Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic established by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights released a report on 16 August 2013, containing the following summary which remains relevant:

"The Syrian Arab Republic is a battlefield. Its cities and towns suffer relentless shelling and sieges. Massacres are perpetrated with impunity...Government and pro-government forces have continued to conduct widespread attacks on the civilian population, committing murder, torture, rape and enforced disappearance as crimes against humanity. They have laid siege to neighbourhoods and subjected them to indiscriminate shelling. Government forces have committed gross violations of human rights and the war crimes of torture, hostage-taking, murder, execution without due process, rape, attacking protected objects and pillage.

"Anti-government armed groups have committed war crimes, including murder, execution without due process, torture, hostage-taking and attacking protected objects. They have besieged and indiscriminately shelled civilian neighbourhoods.

"Anti-government and Kurdish armed groups have recruited and used child soldiers in hostilities.

¹⁶ *Independent Catholic News*, 'Syria: Bodies of massacred Christians found in mass grave', 4 November 2013

<http://www.indcatholicnews.com/news.php?viewStory=23532>

¹⁷ News.va, 'The village of Deir Atieh invaded by Islamists: Christians identified and detained', 25 November 2013

<http://www.news.va/en/news/asiasyria-the-village-of-deir-atieh-invaded-by-isl>

“The perpetrators of these violations and crimes, on all sides, act in defiance of international law. They do not fear accountability. Referral to justice is imperative.

“There is no military solution to this conflict. Those who supply arms create but an illusion of victory. A political solution founded upon tenets of the Geneva communiqué is the only path to peace.”¹⁸

CSW recommends that members of the international community, and particularly permanent members of the Security Council:

- Overcome ideological differences and exhaust all diplomatic means to bring the Syrian Government and the rebels to the negotiating table. In this regard:
 - Continue to renew bilateral relations with Iran, which has close ties with Syria; and/or
 - Seek to influence the Iranian Government's Syria policy via nations with which it maintains cordial relations, such as Brazil and Venezuela;
 - With regard to the rebels, influence must be exerted via and over Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey to ensure greater compliance.
- Continue to leverage all intelligence available to ensure continued and full cooperation by the Syrian regime to ensure compliance with regard to the abandonment of chemical supplies and weapons. The same effort should be brought to bear to ensure acceptance of a peace initiative;
- Carefully vet elements of the Syrian opposition with a view to the creation of a coalition that can form the basis of a transitional and inclusive government of national unity. This will also entail considering which elements within the existing political structures can be preserved (eg sourcing a moderate Sunni from the military to act as interim ruler); and drawing from lessons in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Somalia, where events have underlined the importance of preserving elements of the state structure in order to achieve an effective return to stability and a semblance of the rule of law;
- Maintain the threat of military action, as this undoubtedly led to the Syrian Government's change of heart. However, it is important that if intervention is needed, it is seen to be an international effort that has support from influential regional powers that can intercede with their respective blocs. It is also important to recognise that any intervention designed solely to weaken the Assad government will inevitably strengthen the hand of the strongest of the opposition forces, namely the largely foreign Islamist extremists that constitute a threat to peace and security both in Syria and the wider region;

¹⁸ Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Documentation
<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/IIICISyria/Pages/Documentation.aspx>

- Proactively coordinate a multilateral response to Syria's refugee and IDP crisis. This will involve increasing and sustaining support for neighbouring countries which are struggling to support the continuing influx; and formulating a plan so that NGOs can provide adequate support to IDPs in areas which the NGOs can access, and which are controlled by moderate factions. To this end:
 - Proactively seek and organise a consensus on an international response to meet the full humanitarian aid quota;
 - Spearhead international investigations into the feasibility of establishing a safety zone for IDPs.
- Finally, all policy should be formulated on the basis of whether it will improve the plight of the Syrian people, and assist in bringing an end to their suffering.