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Under Threat

We Must Stand Up for Syria's Christians

By Julie Lenarz and Michael Miner – *Human Security Centre*

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The Arab Spring has turned into an Orwellian Winter for the ancient Christian communities of the Middle East. Persecution has reached unprecedented levels and throughout the region Christians are being killed, displaced, tortured, kidnapped, enslaved, and forced to convert. In the weeks after former President Morsi's downfall in Egypt, Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated protesters and other Islamist groups destroyed almost as many churches as were destroyed in Iraq in the eleven years since the United States led invasion in 2003. The overall situation of Christians in Iraq – only 400,000 remain of a population that numbered 1.5 million prior to the first Gulf War – provides a sense of what a devastating picture this comparison draws.

Nowhere is the danger more acute than in Syria. Once a safe haven for Middle Eastern Christians, long before the rule of the Assads, the country has turned into an abattoir. 500,000 people – roughly a third of Syria's total Christian population – have already sought refuge in neighbouring Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan or are internally displaced as a result of the on-going civil war. The trend is rising by the day.

Prior to the start of the on-going conflict, Christians lived in relative but fragile and superficial peace under the Assad dictatorship. Their privileged position was based on their unconditional compliance with the regime. Assad himself belongs to the Alawite sect and his government heavily depended on the support of minority groups to control the Sunni majority in Syria. Against that background, Christians are generally regarded as being in favour of the Assad's survival, as they see him as their best hope for the protection of minorities in the chaotic, sectarian-ridden aftermath of the brutal conflict.

However, this rather oversimplistic analysis of the Assad-Christian relationship is flawed and outdated. Since the beginning of the uprising, the balance of power in the country has shifted and so have important alliances. The Assad regime is now more closely and inextricably tied to the clerical regime in Iran and its proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon. No longer is it as much an

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allied relationship to balance against Saudi Arabia much as Tehran is an arbiter for survival of the regime. Alongside Russia, they are the most significant players in the preservation of the Assad rule with thousands of Hezbollah forces and Iranian insurgents in the country fighting on behalf of the Assad and Khamenei partnership.

If we consider the abhorrent and inhumane treatment of Christians in Iran and under Hezbollah's brutal treatment, the thesis that Assad and his backers will safeguard the long-term security of Syria's Christian community becomes highly problematic. In 2012, a Christian pastor who converted from Islam was sentenced to death for apostasy; last year, four Iranian Christians were condemned to 80 lashes for drinking communion wine; and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Iran estimates that hundreds of Christians have been arbitrarily arrested. There is little indication there will be any assurances for Christian security. The narrowing of space on the side of the regime is increasingly limited and as the opposition continues to radicalise, there may be nowhere left for Christians to turn to with little or no support on either side of the growing regional conflict.

Syria's Christians are unlikely to find much comfort in the Islamists-ridden opposition. Over the last two years, the country has become a hotspot for jihadists from all over the world and especially the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front. Former partner organisations like the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) have imposed a Sharia reign of terror upon the areas they control. In recent weeks the treatment of civilians by ISIS has become so horrendous that even AQ has kept its distance and forsaken the relationship. While they mercilessly slay everyone who gets in their way, religious minorities are often hit the hardest. Gut-wrenching reports ranging from mass-beheadings to the destruction of entire neighbourhoods are reaching us on a daily basis. Out of the 4,000 inhabitants of the Christian village of Ghassanieh, no more than ten people remain.

There is yet another layer to take into consideration. Evidence indicates that, in the old fashioned way of "divide and rule", the Assad regime is deliberately targeting civilians, including Christians, in an attempt to draw away attention from its own crimes and present itself to the West as an insurance policy against Islamists. Some reports even go as far as to suggest that Assad secretly boosts al-Qaeda to rally international support behind his regime, preying on the logic of "better the devil you know" and Arab intelligence asserts that ISIS is in fact an Assad asset. While somewhat incredulous and potentially in the face of conventional

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thought, it is yet another eye-opening indication that Assad can no longer be entrusted with the protection of Christians, as he appears to happily sacrifice them on the altar of extremists to foster and protect his own interests.

There is less and less room for the forces of moderation in Syria. We have to accept that the Christian community in Syria is caught between Sunni radicals and an embattled regime supported by Shia extremists. Both present an existential threat to the remaining Christians in the country. If we are serious about protecting them – and civilians of all different religious and ethnic backgrounds – our public policies must continue to shift from limited engagement to a proactive approach. What Syria needs more than anything is hope for a future that will neither be spearheaded by al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorists nor the disgraced Assad regime. At a minimum, Western allies should begin to more readily support the moderate forces of progress best able to confront and stand in opposition to extremism and repression.

Limited airstrikes on key extremist targets are one method that merits the most serious consideration, as are targeting critical points of regime support with asymmetrical operations. Removing aid and tacit support for the most extreme opposition to the regime provides a mechanism for encouraging more diverse and inclusive forces of moderation. These are methods of increased engagement that do not necessitate large scale mobilisation of American and British troops, yet present a proactive method of shaping internal dynamics in order to more effectively protect persecuted minorities in Syria. Leading the international community to better support the humanitarian crisis with food, aid, and shelter for refugees is simultaneously not only the right thing to do, but an opportunity for our leadership to send clear message to the people of Syria they are neither alone nor forgotten in the struggle for peace.

A free and democratic world based on the rule of law requires the protection of minorities from the tyranny of the majority. Acts of genocide, persecution, and brutality not only represents the worst nightmares of failure in governance and morality, but the very failure of civilised humanity to stand in defence of one another. Regardless of how the on-going conflict turns out, it is increasingly likely that neither the Assad regime nor Sunni plurality will show much care or respect for the storied Christian tradition and people in Syria. President Obama and Prime Minister Cameron have an opportunity to pursue increased engagement and take a stand against tyrannical forces that show little regard for diversity and freedom.

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Purposeful, unmitigated persecution against peaceful individuals has no place in our world, and it is high time our leadership made it clear that action speaks louder than words, for the consequences of inaction are too great a tragedy to bear.

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