

# Syria's minorities in fear



## Publication details

**For human rights. Worldwide.**

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## 1. Introduction

According to UN estimates, at least 100,000 people died in the Syrian Arab Republic during the more than two years of ongoing clashes between regime opponents and Syrian forces.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon announced this on July 25th 2013.

In March 2011, the protests against the rogue regime of the Baath-party and the Assad-clan began with peaceful demonstrations which were, however, brutally suppressed.

In the past two years, the national uprising and the pursuit of freedom has turned into a bloody civil war which is threatening more and more people and gradually starting to have an impact on the whole region. The “Arab spring” has become a “winter” in Syria which threatens to last for a while.

The respective conflicting parties receive support from abroad.

The Syrian president Bashar al-Assad receives support from the neighbouring states of Iran and Iraq, which are both predominantly Shiite, and also from the Hezbollah militia, which is closely associated with Iran. Furthermore, Assad receives diplomatic support, above all in the UN Security Council, from Russia and China. In addition to this, Russia supplies the Syrian Regime with weapons.

In contrast, the supporters of the Syrian opposition, who are pre-eminently made up of the Sunni majority of the population and are dominated by the Islamist Muslim brothers, are Turkey and the Arab Gulf States Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Important medial support is provided by the television channel Al-Jazeera and ideological support comes from the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS), which is headed by Yousef Al-Qaradawi. Al-Qaradawi is regarded as the unofficial chief ideologist of the worldwide Muslim-Brotherhood movement. Moreover, foreign Al-Qaida fighters and other Islamist groups fight on the side of the Free Syrian Army, the military arm of the Syrian opposition.

But several western governments are also regarded as supporters of the Syrian opposition. While Russia represents Assad's Regime before the eyes of the world, the opposition receives backing from western governments. For example the USA, France, Great Britain, and also Germany. Since, for instance, the arms embargo of the European Union ended at the end of May, arms deliveries for the opposition are again being discussed. In particular France and Great Britain support plans to this effect. Likewise many western governments quickly agreed that the Assad-Regime was responsible for the use of chemical weapons near Damascus in August 2013.

The Society for Threatened Peoples as a human rights organisation which advocates the rights of persecuted or threatened ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities is particularly concerned about the fate of the non-Arabic and non-Sunni population of Syria. At least 45 per cent of the Syrian population consists of members of ethnic and religious minorities. Under the Assads, who pursued a rigorous Arabisation policy, minorities in Syria were already being exposed to oppression, attacks and expulsions. Thus, for the minorities, the beginnings of the protests were also connected to hopes. Now, however, the ethnic and religious minorities have reason to believe that their situation in a new Syria will hardly improve. For today, the Syrian minorities are confronted with a new threat, namely the totalitarian Islamist ideology which Jihadists from all over the world want to establish by force, and which partially falls on fertile ground within the Syrian opposition.

The majority of the 20 million Syrians are Arabic and adhere to Islam. However, the population is mostly of the Sunni persuasion.

Druze, Ismaelites and Alawis, the latter to which president Bashar al-Assad also belongs, are part of the Shia minority. The non-Muslim population consists primarily of Christians; the Yazidi form the smallest religious minority in Syria with only a few thousand members. Two years after the beginning of the protests, which were initially linked to many hopes of an improvement of their living situation, these religious minorities now live in fear and uncertainty. The creeping radicalisation of the opposition is a big threat for religious minorities, as the radical Islamists regard members of such population

groups as “infidels”. Islamist massacres have already been reported where the victims were of different faiths. Tens of thousands of Christians have already fled the civil war out of fear of keep being caught in the crossfire. But the Muslim Alawis have also to fear for their lives, precisely because they belong to the same denomination as the Syrian president, whom the Sunnis hate.

However, Syria is also a multiethnic country, although the vast majority is Arabic. The biggest ethnic minority is the Kurds. The Kurds have also become an independent party in the conflict, as many of them only have Kurdish interests in mind, and are striving for home rule in their areas of settlement, following the example set by the autonomous region Kurdistan in Iraq. The Syrian Kurds are largely militarily organised, yet they predominantly do not fight on any side in the civil war. In past decades they have been oppressed by the regime and are therefore not allies of President Assad. Neither, however, will there be an alliance with the rest of the Syrian opposition, as they are being supported by Turkey, and the relationship between Kurds and Turkey is handicapped by the fight between the Turkish government and the radical Turkish Workers’ Party Kurdistan (PKK).

The remainder of the ethnic minorities also face the future with uncertainty. Many Christian Armenians and Assyro-Arameans are threatened by flight and displacement, despite both ethnic groups having a long past in Syria. Many even regard the Assyro-Arameans as indigenous. Furthermore, many Circassians are fleeing from the civil war and its effects. The Turkmen, many of whom live in the war zones in the northwest of the country, also experience clashes daily. Hence all minorities in the country are already affected by the war directly or are at least threatened by its possible consequences. After the end of the civil war, which is becoming increasingly remote as long as the conflict wages, all minorities have to receive the same rights so that the country can find peace.

## **2. Radicalisation of the Syrian opposition**

Before the outbreak of the uprisings there was no organised opposition in Syria, as it was not allowed and suppressed by the regime. However, after the first peaceful protests

were quelled, an opposition was formed united by its will to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad and his regime.

The longer the conflict wages, the more splits within the rebellion are revealed. Three major political-oppositional alliances have thus emerged since March 2011 which, however, only seldom find agreement. The biggest group is the Syrian National Council (SNC), which is also regarded by many states in the world as the most important representative of the Syrian people. The SNC was founded in Istanbul as an opposition in exile at the beginning of October 2011. The president of the Council is elected every three months to guarantee democratic structures.

Although some members of the minorities, such as Christians, Kurds, Assyro-Arameans, Alawis and Druze, are represented in the SNC, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood plays the most dominant role there. In effect, almost no important decision can be made without the approval of the representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood. They coordinate their decisions with the Turkish government, as well as with Qatar and Saudi-Arabia. Despite the constant denials, the SNC is both financially and logistically dependant on its host country Turkey. Furthermore, the SNC receives support from countries such as the USA, France and Germany.

The objectives of the Muslim Brotherhood remain in the dark. Will it demand the implementation of the Sharia in the event of a victory, or might it acquire a taste for democratic reforms and for the idea of a secular Syria.

The members of the Syrian National Council are without exception all in exile and in fear of arrested as soon as they set foot on Syrian soil. The objective of the SNC is to overthrow the Syrian regime in their own means. But in view the growing brutality of the Assad-regime, it has also requested international military intervention.

Furthermore, the SNC has addressed appeals to the two veto-states of the UN Security Council: it hopes for support from Russia and China against the “killing machine” of the regime, in order to protect civilians and prevent an escalation as in Libya. Moreover, the SNC demands the imposition of a no-flight zone in Syria. However, concerning the

international intervention the Syrian National Council is divided: some only want material and financial foreign help, others demand a military intervention by the international community.

The SNC repeatedly emphasises that the “new” Syria will be democratic and pluralistic. According to them, religious and ethnic minorities will get the same rights as all the others. The fear of persecution would be therefore unfounded. Nor would there be attacks on Alawis, because Syria would not be a “Syria of revenge” after the change of regime.

For some time now, the reality has looked different. More and more Jihadists from different countries are fighting in the Free Syrian Army (FSA) which, at least sporadically, cooperates with the SNC. Even before this trend set in, the FSA had been accused of severe human rights violations. The threat for Syria’s minorities has become very real now, where, apart from the FSA, the Islamist Al-Nusra-Front – the Syrian extension of Al-Qaida – and other Islamist groups also support the armed struggle. The situation will become particularly threatening for Christians and Alawis, because many Islamists consider violence against dissenters as legitimate. Officially, both the SNC and the FSA reject any cooperation with Islamist terror groups. Yet in many places Jihadists and the FSA fight side by side and the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated SNC maintains the best relationships to the Islamists.

On the other hand armed conflicts between FSA-units and Islamists continue. This is where the internal division of the opposition becomes apparent. In addition, there are many in the population who do support the SNC, but speak out against an Islamic influence in the opposition. They point out that the protest against the regime was originally linked to demands for freedom and participation. The objective of the Islamists to turn Syria into a theocratic state would therefore endanger the success of the revolution.

The second biggest opposition group is the National Council for Democratic Change (NCC), one of the secular opposition groups within Syria.

The NCC, which was founded on 17th of September 2011, consists of 13 different left-wing parties and several Kurdish parties, including the Party of Democratic Union (PYD), which is closely linked to the Kurdish PKK. Many Marxists of Alawi background and Arab left-wing nationalists are represented in the NCC. Many members are former political prisoners who suffered under the structures of the state, and who were detained and humiliated by the government.

Since the beginning of the protests, most of the members of the NCC have stayed in the country, which distinguishes them from the SNC opposition in exile. The NCC advocates nothing more than a peaceful change of government to democracy within the country. This often results in tensions between the opposition groups the NCC and the SNC. The NCC demands stronger economic and political sanctions instead of military ones. Unlike the SNC, the NCC continues to seek for a possibility to enter into a dialogue with the government. This, however, can only happen under the following circumstances: the military must withdraw and cease the violent attacks on the population. Furthermore, all political prisoners must be released.

The members of the committee strictly reject any foreign military intervention. They fear that an intervention would ultimately result in similar conditions as in Libya or Iraq, and would only aggravate the civil war. This position of the NCC has already led to conspiracy theories in Syria: the Committee is either an institution created and funded by the regime or it is directed by its intelligence service. Critics see further indications for this theory in the fact that, unlike the members of the SNC, the members of the NCC can often enter and leave the country without being arrested. Besides, they claim that the NCC is too indulgent to the regime.

A third, important group is the Kurdish opposition. Even though the SNC tried to win the Kurds around by electing the Kurd Abdel Baset Seida as their head in the summer of 2012, cooperation between both camps was not achieved. Based on the dominance of the Muslim Brotherhood in the SNC, it can be assumed that Seida was intended to serve as a marionette.

So the most important organisation of the Kurds, the Kurdish National Council (KNCS), does not want to join the SNC, and the less influential Kurdish association, the People's Council of Westkurdistan (VWK), also refuses any cooperation with the National Council because of the close relations between the SNC and Turkey. Meanwhile, the SNC accuses the VWK of cooperating with the regime in Damascus. The VWK works closely together with the Syrian-Kurdish party PYD, who, however, is regarded by Turkey as the Syrian branch of the Worker's Party Kurdistan PKK. In mid July 2012, the VWK and KNCS founded the so-called Kurdish Superior Council (KHR). It already controls several areas of the Kurdish region in Syria. The creation of the KHR came about under the mediation of the Iraqi-Kurdish president Masud Barzani. Now the KHR is attempting to enforce Kurdish interests in the face of the Arabic opposition. As a reaction to the creation of the KHR, Turkey has redeployed hundreds of tanks, missiles and heavy artillery to the Syrian border. The Turkish government declared that it would use military force, if necessary, to fight the creation of Kurdish self-government in Northern Syria; a scenario which would make the already insecure situation even more explosive.

On November 11th 2012, a new opposition alliance, the National Council of the Syrian Revolution and Opposition forces, was founded in Qatar. The SNC is part of this alliance. The foundation of the SNC (not to be confused with the old SNC) was a new attempt by the so-called friends of the Syrian people to unite the enemies of the regime and the mutually hostile opposition. This attempt failed pretty much as well. The second biggest Syrian opposition group, the National Council for Democratic Change (NCC), and the Kurds did not enter the alliance.

The KNCS and VWK, as well as the KHR would enter the new Syrian alliance, the SNC. However, they demand that the Syrian opposition already commit itself to a democratic, ethnic and religious pluralistic, politically decentralised Syria. The SNC rejects this, however. Turkey is trying to prevent the Kurds from setting up self-government and thus creating facts by all possible means.

### 3. Religious minorities

#### 3.1. Alawis and Ismaelites

Alawis belong to the many Shia religious orientations in the Middle East. Roughly three million members of this denomination live in Syria today, they make up both the military and political elite of the country, despite being a religious minority. The main reason is the Alawi Assad clan's more than 40 years of ongoing rule which began on November 16<sup>th</sup> 1970 with a coup by Hafiz' al Assad, and in the course of which the most important positions in society were held with Alawis. Such privileges did not always apply. For centuries, most recently under Ottoman rule, Alawis had been persecuted as heretics. For this reason they often pretended to be Christians, since in comparison with themselves, the Christians were often better off under the rules of the sharia.

The first victims of the regime, however, were also Alawis. Right at the start of his rule, Hafiz al-Assad had the Alawi General Salah Dschadid arrested as he feared that he would put him before the disciplinary committee of the ruling Baath-Party for his failures during his time as Defence Secretary from 1966 to 1970. Alawi officers, who remained loyal to Dschadid, were imprisoned as well. Dschadid himself died in gaol, old and infirm, 23 years later. On 20<sup>th</sup> January 2012, several Alawi intellectuals recalled this "forgotten" story. In a public statement they affirmed that Bashar al-Assad can never represent all Alawis.

Admittedly the situation of the Alawi Muslims in Syria has improved under the 40-year rule of Assad, but not all Alawis have benefitted from it. For the Assads, familial relationships were mostly more important than denominational affiliation. Indeed, they often discriminate their own religious community, presumably, to placate the vast Sunni majority.

Members of other population groups which were discriminated against and persecuted under both Hafiz al-Assad and his son and successor Bashar al-Assad, do not see the differences between the religious minority of the Alawi and the Assad regime. Thus, since the beginning of the protests in March 2011, the Alawi have been victims of

reprisal attacks by the Sunni majority who vent their built-up anger indiscriminately on the regime.

Non-Alawi Syrians generally regard them as beneficiaries of the system and Assad's policy, and so Alawis again have to fear for their lives and hide their faith after more than four decades of power.

Concern for the Alawi minority is increased by the developments within the Syrian opposition. More and more frequently, fundamentalist tones can be heard there. Meanwhile, the Free Syrian Army has also been infiltrated by Islamic forces, and is fighting side by side with the Al-Nusra-Front and other Islamist terror groups against the regime. Such Jihadists often regard violence against dissenters as legitimate. So there are concerns that in the event of a rebel victory, the Alawis as brothers in faith of the hated president would have to fear expulsions and worse, regarded as they are as apostates of Islam by the radical Islamists.

Closely linked to the fate of the Alawis is that of the Ismaelites, another Shia religious community. The Ismaelites have the same fears as the Alawis, since they are also regarded as apostates of Islam by a vast number of the Sunni majority, and especially by the Islamic forces on the side of the rebels. The Ismaelites consider themselves as tolerant and open Muslims. So the protests against the Assad regime subsided quickly in Salamiyya, the centre of the Ismaelites in Syria, because the Ismaelites are sceptical of the Sunni majority and the radicalisation within the Syrian opposition. Salamiyya is a town in which tolerance and openness are pursued, and where Ismaelites can practise their faith peacefully after having been exposed to persecution and threat for centuries. This situation however, is already a thing of the past due to the clashes between Assad's security forces and opponents of the regime.

### **3.2. Christians**

After Egypt, Syria has the biggest Christian minority in the Middle East with two to three million believers. These Christians, however, differ greatly regarding their religious denomination, as there are a range of Christian churches in Syria.

The Rum-Orthodox constitute the biggest group of Christians in Syria with about one million believers. They regard themselves, generally speaking, as representatives of an Arabic Christianity which accepts the constitutive framework of the Islamic culture. This self-conception is expressed in the liturgy of the Rum-Orthodox, which is held solely in Arabic.

In contrast to the Rum-Orthodox, the Syrian Orthodox attach great importance to the independence of their church, which is visible in their liturgy, which they celebrate in Syrian. For that reason they were once persecuted by the Rum-Orthodox. Many Syrian Orthodox members, especially in Northern Syria, are descendants of refugees. Many survivors of the persecution and genocide of up to 500,000 Christians of all denominations in today's South-West region of Turkey during the First World War looked for shelter in Syria.

A split from the Syrian Orthodox Church is constituted by the 62,000 Syrians (Syrian Catholic), whose church is united with the Roman-Catholic Church.

The Armenians are also predominantly Christian and descendants of refugees, namely the survivors of the genocide between 1915 and 1917, in which hundreds of thousands, according to Armenian indications even between 1.5 and 2 million people, were murdered in the Ottoman Empire. They speak their Armenian language, in which they also celebrate their liturgy. About 21,500 believers belong to the Armenian-Catholic Church in Syria, which is united with the Roman-Catholic Church and whose patriarch resides in Lebanon, and roughly 200,000 believers belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Other denominations whose members are descendants of refugees, and who live now on Syrian state territory, are the approximately 15,000 members of the Assyrian-Apostolic Church of the East as well as the 15,000 Chaldeans, a splinter group of the Apostolic Church of the East. The Chaldeans regard themselves as part of the Roman-Catholic Church.

In addition there are Maronites, whose number of 49,000 members is a lot less today than it was in Syria in the mid 19th century. Due to tensions between Druze and Maronites and massacres in the Damascus area in 1866, many Maronites fled to Lebanon. In Syria today, the Maronite religious community are in the shadow of their once great history. Both the Maronites and the Chaldeans recognise the Roman-Catholic Pope as their head. Originally their liturgy was in the Syrian language, but with a few exceptions Arabic has now generally replaced the Syrian language in religious ceremonies and rites.

In addition there are about 25,000 Protestants, whose churches came into being due to European mission efforts, as well as 15,000 members of the Roman-Catholic Church.

The Assyro-Arameans represent a special case. They have retained their Aramaic (old Syrian) language and are regarded as the native population of Syria. They are also tolerated as Christians by the regime, but as an ethnic minority they were in many cases deprived of their historical ancient Syrian or Assyrian identity, which is defined linguistically and culturally, by the compulsory Arabisation measures of the regime. Hence nowadays, many Syrian Christians designate themselves as Arabs. There is a probability that these Christian Arabs are of Assyrian/Aramean descent.

As monotheists, Christians are regarded as “charges” in Syria. However, their rights are also significantly restricted. According to the constitution, no Christian can become president. And there are many laws which discriminate Christians, especially in the areas of culture and education. These laws restrict the free development of the cultural autonomy and the Christian identity, or make it almost impossible. Nevertheless, the Christians were able to practise their religion pretty much freely, and due to the secular character of the Syrian Arab Republic, a life in peace was largely possible. The Assad Regime grants Christians the right to exercise their religion freely and tolerates Christianity as a religious denomination, even if there is more to extensive religious freedom than just that.

Since the beginning of the uprising against the Syrian regime, serious negative changes threaten the situation described of the Syrian Christians. Christians have consistently

been victims of excessive violence in the entire Middle East in the past years. First Egypt and Iraq were in the focus, but since the beginning of the protests in Syria against President Assad, there have also been violent attacks on Christians here.

One incident is an example of the danger to the Christians and other religious minorities. The two Christian bishops, who were abducted by an armed Islamic group on April 22nd 2013, are still missing. Ibrahim Hanna, bishop of the Syriac Orthodox Church in Aleppo and Bishop Boulos Yazigi of the Greek Orthodox Church, were kidnapped near Aleppo. Their driver, a deacon, was shot by the abductors during the attack. The Islamic infiltration of the Syrian opposition, and especially the Free Syrian Army, is revealed here as well. For many radical Islamists Christians are dissenters. They often regard violence against such dissenters as legitimate.

In many places the Christian minority serves as an example for the consequences of the civil war and the radicalisation of the rebellion. On the one hand the reports about horrific executions, deliberate assassinations, abductions and rapes of Christians by radical Islamists are becoming more frequent, on the other hand more and more believers are leaving the country out of fear. Most of them find refuge in the neighbouring state of Lebanon. There their number has risen to several tens of thousands. The refugees are placed in the Christian Lebanese communities on the Mediterranean coast in the north of the country. Tens of thousands of Christian families from Syria are said to have been received there. However, since the Lebanese government fears becoming dragged into the bloody civil war, it does not interfere with "refugee policy". Furthermore, for the time being it does not want to set up refugee camps because it assumes that these camps could turn into strongholds of the rebels.

The neutrality of Christian leaders during the rebellion, which is supposed to prevent believers getting caught in the crossfire, also holds dangers. Crimes against them are already being justified by saying they are not on the side of the revolution and therefore on the side of the regime.

If an Islamic state is going to be a setup of after the civil war, then there is a danger that more and more Christians will feel forced to flee, or that they will be expelled. A

Christian daily life would then be almost impossible, and it will be impossible to prevent discrimination of those who will not assimilate or convert. As the current situation already shows: Christians in Syria already find themselves between the fronts of the civil war.

### **3.3 Yazidi**

#### **3.3 Yeziden**

In Syria the Yazidi live in the Kurdish areas in the north or north-east of the country. The Arab-nationalist regime of Baschar al-Assad attempted to arabise them and treated them, like the Muslim Kurds, as second class citizens. Often they are not issued with a document stating their nationality, so that they are de facto stateless. Yazidi are not allowed to work in higher professions, and their religion is regarded in Syria as a spin-off of Islam.

Numerically, The around 5,000 Yazidi in Syria make up the smallest minority in the country. Their history in Syria is marked by constant oppression, because they are exposed to dual persecution: firstly because of their ethnic descent as Kurds, secondly because of their religious classification as Non-Muslims. Because next to God (Chode) they also worship a higher angel (Melek Taus), they are reviled as devil worshippers and as apostates of the "One-God-Faith". Though in the Yazidi faith the angel Melek Taus is merely a minister of God and intermediary to the believers, and Yazidism is therefore a monotheistic religion. Since the beginning of the civil war, more than two thirds of the Syrian Yazidi have already left their villages and fled abroad, and everything seems to indicate that emigration will continue. The Sunnisation and radicalisation of the rebellion is a factor here as well, because the Islamists openly threaten religious minorities with violence. The Yazidi as non-Muslims will have to fear for their security then as well. On October 29<sup>th</sup> 2012, Islamist groups attacked the Yazidi village Qestel Ali Cindo in the Afrin district in the extreme north-west of the country. The attacks were stopped by a Kurdish militia. The Yazidi village Basufan, not far from the world-famous

“Saint Simon Citadel”, has also been attacked by Islamists time and again. The aim of the Islamists is to expel the Yazidi from the region.

A lot, however, will depend on the developments within the Kurdish opposition. If Sunni Kurds are radicalised by Islamic influence, it could have severe consequences for the Yazidi. Even though there has still been no radicalisation of the Kurds, and there are even parts of the Kurdish minority who are fighting against the Islamists who are part of the Syrian opposition, the future for the Yazidi in Syria is still uncertain.

### **3.4 Druzes**

There are about 300,000 Druze in Syria. They live in the south-west of the country in the mountain range “Dschebel ad-Duruz”, named after them. In contrast to other regions it has been very quiet in this area since the uprisings against the regime began. If there ever is a demonstration, it is usually very small and remains peaceful. They are not supported by the broad masses, which does not mean that there are no Druze organised in the opposition. There are indeed Druze representing important functions in the Syrian National Council and the National Coordination Committee, the two major bodies of regime opponents.

There are various reasons why the Druze do not protest more actively against the Assad regime. The Druze have continually been victims of persecution since the emergence of their religious community in around 1010. Although their religion developed out of Islam, they are not regarded as Muslims, most of all by the Sunni. For instance many Druze believe that the soul of a human wanders into a newborn child immediately after death, which is not compatible with Islam. Despite common roots, the radical Islamists deem the Druze to be apostates. The Druze have therefore developed into a “secret religion” whose religious rites are only known to its members. As a result of persecution, they retired to mountain regions which were difficult to access. Since the Baath-party took over in the country, the Druze have been able to live more or less freely. For that reason many Druze felt neutral towards the Assad regime. Today however, many Druze are dissatisfied with the regime because of the poverty and corruption in the region.

Nevertheless, there are also purely practical reasons for the restraint shown by the Druze in the protests. In other towns the starting point for protests was mostly mosques, for instance after Friday prayer. In contrast to public gatherings, no one can forbid common prayer for religious reasons. In the Druze settlement zones there are usually no mosques, and therefore no places where big protest marches can form. Security forces could easily break up the smaller protests. Moreover, the protests in the country were mostly supported by young people. However, due to high unemployment many young Druze moved out of the settlement zones, only a few stayed.

In the past year, the viewpoint of many of the Druze has changed: they speak more openly, criticise the regime or support the opposition financially. One of the leading Druze, the Lebanese Walid Jumblatt, called for uprisings against the regime. He also criticised Russia for its veto of the Syria-resolution in the UN Security Council. At a rally in Beirut in February 2012, Jumblatt said: "The Syrian popular uprising will prevail."

The Druze who live in the Syrian Golan Heights annexed by Israel in 1967 have a different viewpoint on the events in Syria. They fear that the Syrian opposition is widely infiltrated by radical Islamists and they are unwilling to be involved in "Syrian power politics". Many also reckon that, due of their small numbers, the Druze would be too weak and vulnerable. However it can not be ruled out that the Druze will be dragged into the war. If this is the case, the Druze in Israel have announced support for their fellow brethren.

## **4. Ethnic minorities**

### **4.1 Kurds**

With around two to three million people, the Kurds make up about 15% of the total population and are the biggest ethnic minority of the country. They mainly live on the mountain massif Çiyayê Kurmênc (Kurdish mountain) north-west of Aleppo in the Kobani (Arabic: Ain al-Arab) region in the north-east and in north of the province Djajira (Arabic: Al-Hassake), in the extreme north-east of the country.

The situation of the Kurds before the start of the uprisings against the regime in Syria and the civil war exemplifies the oppression of all non-Arab peoples and religious minorities of the country. The history of their oppression reaches far back. One of the early testimonies of violence against Kurds is the incident in 1957 when 250 Kurdish children died in a cinema in Amuda which had deliberately been set on fire. Since the takeover of the Baath-Party in 1963, Kurds have been particularly brutally oppressed and their human rights systematically violated. Officially, the existence of the Kurds was denied for decades. The attempt was made to solve “Kurdish problem” by aggressive assimilation and a rigorous, racially motivated Arabisation policy. The Kurds have no legal political representation. Since the Syrian constitution does not allow ethnic and religious parties, Kurdish parties are de facto banned. The Kurdish language was oppressed traditionally by the regime as well. Furthermore, 120,000 Kurds were denaturalised in 1962, meanwhile the number of stateless Kurds rose to 300,000. As a concession, since then Assad then has nationalised the stateless persons again. This reflects the fact that the Syrian Kurds are caught even more between the fronts than other minorities in the civil war. Reasons for this are the disunity and the diversity of opinions between and within the Kurdish parties, as well as the role of Turkey.

For the Kurds, the outbreak of the rebellion in 2011 was linked primarily to their hope to be able to promote their traditions, culture and language again. At the beginning of the protests, however, it remained quiet in the Kurdish areas in northern Syria. In 2004 the Kurds had already protested against their oppression, especially in the town Qamishli. These protests were violently suppressed by the regime, which is probably why many wanted to wait and see how the protests would develop. After the assassination of the prominent leader of the Kurdish Future Movement and friend of the Society for Threatened Peoples, Mashaal Tamo, in October 2011, Kurdish protests increased. As a result the different Syrian-Kurdish parties went different ways. The majority set up the Kurdish National Council (KNCS), analogous to the Syrian National Council (SNC), which did not become part of the opposition alliance as many members of the KNCS were cautious about the Arab-Sunni dominance of the Muslim Brotherhood within the SNC, and the SNC refused to discuss political autonomy of Syrian-Kurdistan. The SNC only

guaranteed that in future Syrian Kurds would be equal citizens. Basically the KNSC wants to overthrow the regime. It demands federalism for Syria, and with that self-determination for the Kurdish population and the whole of Syria. This would be the only alternative to the regime. Moreover, complete religious freedom is demanded. The regions in north of the country, which are inhabited predominantly by Kurds, are to be rearranged into one integrated administrative unit and managed by their own residents. The Kurdish language is to be recognised officially as second national language.

Unlike the KNCS, several small Kurdish groups joined the SNC. The Party of Democratic Union (PYD), a sister party of the radical Workers' Party Kurdistan (PKK) in Turkey, took a completely different route by turning against both the SNC and the other Syrian-Kurdish opposition parties. However, it cannot be said that the PYD is allied with the regime. Indeed, Baschar al-Assad's father, Hafiz al-Assad, supported the Turkish PKK, however he also had Abdullah Öcalan deported in 1998 following pressure from Turkey. Moreover, before the uprisings PYD-supporters were persecuted more brutally than members of other Kurdish parties. So it can be said that the PYD is not just fighting for any particular side, but for autonomy, maintenance of power and a monopoly on the use of force in the Kurdish areas in the sense of an autonomous West-Kurdistan. We can assume that in such a West-Kurdistan, the PYD would like to exercise authority in order to overcome the division within the Kurdish opposition.

Syrian oppositionists claim that the PYD is an extension of the regime in Kurdish areas in Syria. This assessment is certainly going too far. However the regime has exploited the dissent between the Kurdish groups and the Syrian opposition, as well as those within the Kurdish population, by permitting demonstrations in the Kurdish areas after the eruption of the protests with the result that the PYD in particular was able to expand its influence. Where the Kurdish Peoples Defence Forces (YPG), who are at very least affiliated with the PYD, are fighting against the Sunni Islamists who are increasingly dominating the armed struggle of the Syrian opposition, the regime does not have to interfere and can use its military capacities to fight the protests in the Arab towns in the rest of the war zones in Syria. This approach was only made possible when Turkey broke with the regime, and the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan terminated the

friendly relationship to Bashar al-Assad. Assad could now as far as possible leave the Kurds without having to consider the aims of the government in Ankara.

The massive support for the opposition by Turkey thus provokes new conflicts between Kurds and other opponents of the regime. On no account does Turkey want to let the Kurds, and especially the PYD, take control on Syrian soil near the Turkish border. The Kurdish-Turkish conflict thus greatly encumbers the rebellion against the regime, and has caused the already bloody civil war to escalate even further. Following the abduction of a YPG female patrol by Islamists in July 2013, large clashes erupted between the YPG and the Islamist Al-Nusra-Front, with whom several combat units of the Free Syrian Army, as well as the extension of Al-Qaida Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), are fighting. Attacks by Islamists have already caused numerous casualties amongst Kurds and other minorities. On July 31<sup>st</sup> the Syrian wing of Al-Qaida, the Al-Nusra-Front, and other Islamist brigades of the so called Free Syrian Army stormed the Kurdish settlements of Til Hasil and Til Aran about 30 kilometres south-east of Aleppo. According to information provided by a Kurdish politician from that region, more than 70 Kurds, particularly women and children, were shot by Islamists in the attack. At least 700 Kurds are said to have been abducted or are still missing. Thousands of people have fled. The houses of the Kurds are said to have been looted and their cattle stolen. Both places lie outside of the Syrian region controlled by Kurds.

The possible consequences for the Kurdish minority resulting from a victory of the Islamists are therefore obvious, and whether Bashar al-Assad would grant the Kurds more rights and more autonomy in the case of a victory by the regime is, at least, unlikely.

However, since summer 2012 there have at least been efforts to reach a union of the Kurdish parties. On June 11<sup>th</sup> 2012, the KNCS and the people's council, established by the PYD, concluded a treaty on future cooperation. Following this, a committee of 10 people, the "Supreme Kurdish Council", was set up under the mediation of Masud Barzani, the president of Iraqi-Kurdistan.

Nevertheless, the danger of a radicalisation of the uprising hovers over the Kurdish minority, although the majority of the Syrian Kurds are Sunni, like the Islamists on the side of the opposition. In order for the Kurds to use their culture, tradition and language legally again, all population groups in a new Syria would have to be guaranteed the same rights. Otherwise the Kurdish minority would again be threatened with oppression and persecution.

The aims of the various Kurdish groups are only partly transparent and diverse. They range from the pursuit of complete self-government, through to participation in the government in a new state of Syria. The fate of the Kurdish minority will depend upon whether the deep division in the Kurdish political landscape will be overcome to some extent, and whether an agreement on core questions in the individual groups will be reached.

A lot will also depend upon whether a further radicalisation of the opposition will take place. In this event, the armed Kurds could at least definitely become an independent war party. Probably many Kurds, including those from abroad, would then join the armed struggle. A peaceful end of the war would move even further into the future. Unfortunately it seems that this scenario is already becoming reality.

#### **4.2. Armenians**

Syria has been a home for Armenians for decades. The country has also served as a refuge and haven. In particular during the genocide of the Armenians between 1915 and 1917, when up to 1.5 million Armenian and 500,000 Assyrian-Aramean Christians were killed, many Armenians deserted from the Turkish army to Syria. In 1918 the Armenian community numbered an estimated 142,000 people in Syria. Today about 300,000 Armenians live here, of which the biggest community with 30,000 to 40,000 people lives in the now embattled town of Aleppo. There are smaller Armenian communities in Damascus, Qamishli and Qasaab. The Armenians in Aleppo are a small group in the Syrian mosaic of religions and ethnicities; however they distinguish themselves with their active contribution to the economic and cultural life of the country. For instance,

Armenians are said to be the best artisans in Syria. Compared to other ethnic groups Armenians are well integrated because the regime offered them refuge after their flight from Turkey. However, integration does not mean assimilation. The Armenians live in a perfect parallel society. They form independent communities within their group. Many Armenians left Aleppo and Qamishli at the end of the 1960s for political and economic reasons. The former Soviet Republic of Armenia received many Syrian Armenians then, however most of them emigrated to America, Europe and Australia. In the meantime, due to the bloody civil war in Syria this emigration has intensified. It could mean the end of a community which has found a home in Syria for several decades. Today's Republic of Armenia will most likely have to deal very soon with a large wave of immigration. The government in Eriwan has to prepare for that and, for instance, create capacities for the reception of refugees from Syria.

#### **4.3 Circassians**

In view of the civil war in Syria, many Circassians who live in Germany, Turkey, the USA or Russia are now worrying about the members of their ethnic group. According to Circassian sources, hundreds of Syrian Circassians have already submitted requests to the Russian authorities for resettlement in their ancestral territories in North Caucasus from where their ancestors had fled due to the Russian-Caucasian war (1817-1864). According to estimates, around 80,000 Circassians live in Syria today. Circassian organisations report that 500 of them fled to North Caucasus up until October 2012, due to the current conflict in Syria. The native people take a positive stance on the refugees: money is being collected from private persons and companies from Moscow, Naltschik and other areas to support the new arrivals. One entrepreneur, for example, has provided free accommodation in his hotel for 150 Circassian refugees. The non-governmental organisation "Perit" coordinates the collaboration between Circassians in Syria and in Caucasus. The board of "Perit" is concerned: soon all local resources will be used up and only Moscow will then be able to help. Iwan Suchow, Caucasus expert and blogger in Moscow, reports that the radical Islamists who can be found amongst the refugees pose a real threat. They would quickly look for like-minded people locally.

Apparently there have already been “incidents”, says Suchow, without mentioning any details, however. At the moment it is not foreseeable whether and how all Syrian Circassians who wish to return to North Caucasus will be able to settle there. The authorities in the autonomous republics are fairly open to the returnees; however the government in Moscow has created several bureaucratic hurdles in order to complicate their return.

#### **4.4 Turkmen**

The Turkmen see themselves in a better position than the Circassians, as they regard Turkey as their protecting power. The majority of the Turkmen therefore call themselves Turks due to their language and history. However, this closeness to the neighbouring state could get them into bigger trouble if they are accused of collaboration with Turkey by the Arab nationalists or Kurds. The Syrian Turkmen, who are mainly Sunni Muslims, settle predominantly in the provinces of Aleppo, Latakia, in the Euphrat-lowlands and in Damascus. They are not to be confused with the Turkmen in Central Asia as they speak a Turkish dialect which is influenced heavily by the Arab, Kurdish and Ottoman Turkish language.

Since Syria ignored the autonomy of the Turkmen, and large parts of the people were assimilated, almost no official data about them is available. According to estimates there are about 140,000 Turkmen in Syria. Because they are not recognised as an ethnic group by the government, they have no cultural rights and have no access to either media or school lessons in their mother tongue. The creation of associations which could represent their interests has so far been denied.

### **5. Conclusion and demands**

For decades, all non-Arab peoples and religious minorities of the country were oppressed by the regime of the Assad clan. Opposition of any kind was persecuted. When the Arab spring reached Syria in March 2011, the sympathies of the world public were with the predominantly Sunni opposition. At the beginning, most religious and

ethnic minorities kept themselves back and waited to see how the protests would develop. Today the Syrian war is one of the bloodiest and most intense conflicts in the world. Now both sides commit violations of human rights and war crimes. In particular the radical forces in the opposition and the combat units of the now numerous Islamic terror groups, as for instance the al-Nusra-front, the Syrian extension of al-Qaida, are now fighting not only against the security forces of the regime, but also increasingly against armed and unarmed members of non-Arab and non-Sunni minorities, as well as repeatedly against parts of the Free Syrian Army which is fighting side by side with them elsewhere. Furthermore, the war in Syria is developing from a civil war, in which the opposition and the regime face each other, into a proxy war for supremacy in the Middle East. Foreign forces support both sides both financially and materially, and so keep the conflict alive. As long as Islamists in Syria are supported, and as long as Syrian Sunnis become more radical or join the Islamists out of economic reasons, the war will endure. And as long as there is a one-sided dominance of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian National Council (SNC), there will be no united opposition which will manage to overthrow the regime. Many western governments contribute to this by solely supporting the SNC. There is no cooperation with the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCC) which demands a non-violent transformation process. Furthermore, no cooperation is taking place with the Kurdish minority, which is exposed to increasing violence and threat of the Islamists and is being dragged deeper and deeper into the civil war. Only when a united opposition comes into being which can guarantee that all religious and ethnic minorities can live equally and peacefully in coexistence in a post-revolutionary Syria, will there be hope again of an ending of the bloody conflict.

Therefore the Society for Threatened Peoples demands:

- The violence of the regime as well as that of the Islamist combat units of the opposition against the civil population has to be discontinued with immediate effect.

- All opposition groups have to guarantee the observance of human rights. Opposition groups, including the Kurdish PYD, have to ensure the freedom of speech and demonstration and all human rights for everyone in the areas controlled by them. They have to permit open access for international and local commissions to examine the prisons which they operate.
- All plans by western governments for an intervention in Syria may only be considered if a complete plan for the solution of the existing conflict inside Syria is “on the table”. Minorities and the whole of the civilian population must be protected not only from Assad’s air force, but also from the marauding armed bands of every colour. The population in Syria must not be left to their fate following military intervention, as was the case in Somalia.
- Support for any opposition groups and governments in Syria should be linked to there being a new constitution in which the linguistic, cultural and administrative rights of the Kurds as well as the Assyro-Arameans and other minorities are guaranteed. Christians, Yezidi, Alawis, and Druse must be able to enjoy complete freedom of worship.
- There must not be impunity in a future state of Syria. All people responsible for war crimes and violations of human rights are to be called to account.
- An international Syria conference must be convened as quickly as possible. At this conference a peace process should be initiated in which all Syrians, including all minorities as well as the opposition and the regime, are involved. Furthermore all foreign participators must contribute towards a constructive solution to the conflict.