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ON SYRIAN POLITICS AND THE SITUATION OF ITS CHRISTIAN MINORITY

Martin Beck / Léa Collet

The perception of Syria varies to a high degree on the policy issue under consideration. In 2007 a headline in one of the leading German weekly *Die Zeit* read "A People Teaches Tolerance", thereby referring to the peaceful relation of religions in Syria.¹ In the very same year, Syria was listed among the "Worst of the Worst: The Worlds Most Repressive Regimes Resistant to Change", in a study released by the renowned think tank Freedom House examining political rights and civil liberties.² Left with this kind of apparent inconsistency, analyzing Syrian foreign policy does not give much more orientation at first glimpse: Thus, on the one hand, Syria finds itself on the U.S.-American 2007 list of "state sponsors of terrorism", which only comprises four states;³ on the other hand Syria, in 2007, participated at the U.S.-sponsored, Iran-boycotted Annapolis peace conference in which Israel played a major role.

Foreign Affairs, Domestic Affairs and the situation of the Christian minority –, this article aims at discussing all three issues, thereby showing whether and how the character of Syrian foreign, domestic and religious policy simultaneously differ from as well as correspond with each other. Thereby, the focus will be on religious as well as foreign

- 1 | Charlotte Wiedemann, "Ein Volk lehrt Toleranz," *Die Zeit*, February 22, 2007, in: <http://www.zeit.de/2007/09/Syrien> (accessed September 20, 2010).
- 2 | *World's Most Repressive Regimes Resistant to Change*, Freedom House, May 9, 2007, in: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=70&release=503> (accessed September 20, 2010).
- 3 | *State Sponsors of Terrorism*, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/c14151.htm> (accessed September 20, 2010).

affairs. However, the issue of domestic politics can be dealt with only briefly and mainly in light of links and (dis) similarities with the two other areas.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

In the past years, Syria caused quite a stir on the regional and international level as the Syrian regime rid itself of its *pariah* role.⁴ In the aftermath of the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, U.S. President George W. Bush increased the political and economic pressure on Syria primarily due to its support of Hizbullah and Hamas and its military presence in Lebanon. Moreover, Congress opted for more stringent policies by passing the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSA) in October 2003. On the basis of this act, President Bush imposed sanctions on the Syrian trade and economy in May 2004 which targeted U.S.-export to Syria and Syrian aircraft flying in and over the United States. The sanctions were designed to stop Syria's support of militant groups, development of weapons of mass destruction and its interference in Lebanese affairs.⁵

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Although the sanctions to a certain degree dissuaded U.S. and EU businesses from investing in Syria,⁶ their overall impact on the bilateral U.S.-Syrian trade relations was limited. Syrian trade with the United States was already at a depleted level before the imposed measures with an approximate 300 million U.S. Dollar of total annual trade volume. Furthermore, certain measures of the 2003 Syria Accountability Act were only symbolic such as the banning of already non-existent Syrian commercial flights to the

4 | For an overview of the concept of pariah or rogue state, respectively, which is highly prone to ideological disputes, see Martin Beck and Johannes Gerschewski, "On the Fringes of the International Community. The Making and Survival of 'Rogue States'," in: *Sicherheit und Frieden/Security and Peace* 27.2, 84-90.

5 | Jeremy Sharp, Syria: *Background and U.S. Relations* (2009), 10-13, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33487.pdf> (accessed May 23, 2010).

6 | John Dagge, "Riding the wave of sanctions on Syria," *The Middle East*, May 2008, 2, in: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2742/is_389/ai_n25428148/ (accessed July 11, 2010).

United States.⁷ Moreover, in contrast to the sanctions' intended result, Syrian economic reforms, as limited as they were, such as cutting interest rates for lending, liberal-

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izing custom duties, consolidating exchange rates and establishing a stock exchange in 2009, led to an increase in trade relations with the United States. Thus, compared to 2006, the U.S. increased its export volume to Syria by more than 50 percent to 361 million U.S. Dollar in the following year.⁸ Also U.S. imports from Syria increased from 324 million U.S. Dollar in 2005 to 352 million U.S. Dollar in 2008. The overall trade volume between the USA and Syria rose from 438 million USD in 2006 to 586 million USD in 2009.⁹

Despite its very limited economic effects, Syria suffered politically from the stressed relations with the United States. Moreover, the Syrian-European relations deteriorated. Although the EU has for long placed its hopes in a strong cooperation with Syria, it changed its policies after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005. In the year prior to the assassination, the EU had initialled an association agreement with Syria but its ratification was postponed several times due to a series of sensitive issues, particularly weapons of mass destruction and human rights.¹⁰

As a result of growing frustrations with Syria's interventionism in Lebanon, the Middle East witnessed in September 2004 the rare event of an axis between Paris and Washington when the UN Security Council passed resolution 1559 to push all foreign forces to withdraw from

7 | "U.S. Sanctions Syria", Arms Control Association (2004), http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2004_06/Syria (accessed July 11, 2010).

8 | Marc Sorel, "Re-thinking the U.S.-Syria Trade Relationship," *Foreign Policy Digest*, <http://www.foreignpolicydigest.org/20081217214/Regional-Archive/Middle-East-Archive/re-thinking-the-us-syria-trade-relationship.html> (accessed May 11, 2010).

9 | Jeremy Sharp, 2010, 15, n. 5.

10 | Julie Gregson, "Should the EU have taken the road to Damascus sooner?," *Deutsche Welle World*, December 5, 2009, in: <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,4882023,00.html> (accessed July 14, 2010).

Lebanon.¹¹ Initially, Syria reacted with limited concessions and reduced its force level. Then, after massive anti-Syrian protests in Lebanon following the assassination of its former Prime Minister Hariri in 2005, the regime in Damascus withdrew its troops completely from Lebanon. Thus, the Lebanese parliamentary elections held in May and June 2005 took place without Syrian military presence. Syria then continued to pursue a more moderate foreign policy and committed itself to regional dialogue. In particular, Syria engaged in developing better relations with many actors in the region and beyond, particularly Turkey, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and the United States.

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As another major important step to free itself of its *pariah* role on the international level, Syria took part in the November 2007 Annapolis conference as a result of which direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) were resumed. Syria illustrated its independence vis-à-vis Iran, which boycotted the Annapolis conference, thereby proving its intention to end its political isolation by participating in a conference whose agenda was designed in particular according to Bush's interests.¹² Moreover, in spring 2008 Syria agreed to Turkish-mediated indirect peace talks with Israel which was the first significant rapprochement with Israel since Bashar al-Asad succeeded his late father Hafiz as Syrian President. The West approved these moves as steps to divert its political affiliation from Iran and towards more moderate actors of the Middle East. Although the negotiations with Turkey did not lead to direct peace talks,¹³

11 | Martin Beck, "Pariastaat Syrien: Zwischen externem Druck und internem Beharrungsvermögen," *GIGA Focus*, (2006), 3-5, in: http://giga-hamburg.de/dlcounter/download.php?d=/content/publikationen/pdf/gf_nahost_0607.pdf (accessed November 5, 2010).

12 | "Reshuffling the Cards? (II): Syria's New Hand," *Middle East Report* № 93, International Crisis Group, December 2009, 3-4, in: http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/93_reshuffling_the_cards_ii_syrias_new_hand.ashx (accessed September 28, 2010).

13 | On the contrary, Israeli-Syrian relations deteriorated when Damascus decided to formally suspend the indirect negotiations as a reaction to the Gaza War 2008/09. Thereafter, Turkey occasionally signalled its readiness to resume talks mediated by a third party, whereas the new Israeli government •

Syria's efforts facilitated a rapprochement with the EU and prevented an intensification of U.S. pressure.¹⁴

The Turkish mediation between Syria and Israel also highlighted the new strategic partnership between Ankara and Damascus. The politically and historically strained relations between Turkey and Syria had already gradually relaxed during the 1990s when, with the creation of an independent Kurdish region in North Iraq, a situation arose that both countries perceived as threats to their security interests. The Turkish-Syrian honeymoon reached its height in 2009 when their governments decided to lift mutual visa restrictions and connect their electricity and gas networks.¹⁵

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Furthermore, Syria has undertaken various steps to further ease its relations with Lebanon. After several days of negotiations in Doha, Qatar, the rival Lebanese factions agreed on May 21st, 2008, with an understanding to end the deadlock over the make-up of the government and the crisis triggered by Hizbullah's take-over of West Beirut on May 8-9, 2008. The Doha agreement marked the end of an 18-month long political crisis in Lebanon by establishing a national unity cabinet, naming former army Chief Michel Sleiman as President of the Republic and reforming the electoral law.¹⁶ Syria welcomed this agreement openly.

headed by Benjamin Netanyahu insists on direct negotiations: "Assad: Turkey must mediate Israel-Syria peace talks," *The Jerusalem Post*, September 13, 2010, in: <http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=187939>; Dan Williams, "Israel shuts door on Turkish-mediated Syria talks," Reuters, August 12, 2010, in: <http://in.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-41714020090812>; Fulya Özerkan, "Israel-Syria talks moving head without Turkey," *Hürriyet*, July 11, 2010, in: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=turk-mediation-in-israel-syrian-talks-loses-momentum-over-crisis-with-tel-aviv-2010-07-11> (accessed September 28, 2010).

14 | International Crisis Group, "Reshuffling the Cards? (II): Syria's New Hand," 8-10, n. 12.

15 | "Reshuffling the Cards? (I): Syria's Evolving Strategy," *Middle East Report* № 92, International Crisis Group, December 2009, 5-6, in: http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/92_resuffling_the_cards_i_syrias_evolving_strategy.ashx (accessed May 23, 2010).

16 | "Background Note: Lebanon," Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, in: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35833.htm> (accessed July 14, 2010).

Notwithstanding the fact that Damascus had been accused of involvement in the assassination of former Prime Minister Hariri, in July 2008 Damascus agreed in the course of the inaugural summit of the Union for the Mediterranean to open full diplomatic relations with Beirut. Thus, it was a first major step taken by Syria to formally recognize Lebanon's sovereignty.¹⁷ By March 2009, Syria illustrated its intention to normalise relations by sending its first ambassador to Beirut.¹⁸ Syria moreover accepted the results of the Lebanese elections held in June 2009 which allocated only 57 seats to the Syrian-supported opposition alliance led by the Shiite Hizbullah.¹⁹ Also the visit of newly-elected Prime Minister Saad Hariri to Damascus in December 2009 marked a significant enhancement in bilateral relations.²⁰ By June 2010 Damascus and Beirut declared their willingness to demarcate their maritime and country borders,²¹ including the key part of territory along the two countries' shared border known as the Shebaa Farms.²² However, the improvement of the Syrian-Lebanese relations got dampened when Damascus was not satisfied with Hariri's apology in September 2010 exonerating Syria's involvement in the

By June 2010 Damascus and Beirut declared their willingness to demarcate their maritime and country borders, including the key part of territory along the two countries' shared border known as the Shebaa Farms.

- 17 | "Sarkozy Helps to Bring Syria Out of Isolation," *New York Times*, July 14, 2008, in: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/14/world/europe/14france.html> (accessed July 14, 2010).
- 18 | "Syria appoints first ambassador to Lebanon," Reuters, March 24, 2009 <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE52N31720090324> (accessed September 28, 2010).
- 19 | Patrick Goodenough, "Lebanon Resumes 'National Dialogue' But Hezbollah Refuses to Discuss Its Weapons," in: *CBS News*, March 9, 2010, in: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/article/62478> (accessed July 14, 2010); "Syria Salutes Spirit of Consensus by Lebanese after Elections," *Al-Manar TV*, June 9, 2009, in: <http://www.almanar.com.lb/newssite/NewsDetails.aspx?id=89317&language=ar> (accessed September 28, 2010).
- 20 | "Syria. Country Report," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, January 2010, 9.
- 21 | "Lebanon, Syria to start demarcating borders," *The Daily Star*, June 16, 2010.
- 22 | The Shebaa Farms were occupied by Israel in 1967. Both Syria and Lebanon consider them as Lebanese, which is why Hizbullah claims that Israel's occupation of Lebanon did not end. Yet, the United Nations confirmed the Israeli position insofar as the area was conquered from Syria. However, if Syria and Lebanon declared in a legally binding way that the Shebaa Farms are on Lebanese territory, both Israel and the Hizbullah could come under pressure: Israel to withdraw from the Shebaa Farms and Hizbullah if Israel did so.

murder of his father. Rather, Syria demanded clarification of facts without reserve and issued arrest warrants against high-ranking Lebanese state officers and politicians as well as confidants of Hariri.²³

Furthermore, Syria's relations with Saudi Arabia have improved considerably since the end of 2009. It was the Saudi-Syrian understanding achieved in October 2009 that paved the way to end the deadlock between the Western-backed March 14 and the Hizbullah-led March 8 alliance and finally led to the formation of a national unity government under Prime Minister Saad Hariri, whilst granting Hizbullah veto power. Moreover, in view of Iran's attempts to act as a regional power and Syria's role as a potential industrial centre and transportation hub, Saudi Arabia's King Bin Abdullaziz intensified bilateral ties with Syrian President Asad.²⁴ Syria also supported the Saudi policies in the war between Shiite Houthi-fighters and the Yemeni military, placing itself against its traditional ally Iran.²⁵

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These developments prove that, in contrast to Iran, Syria chose a pragmatic policy strategy towards the Western political and economic pressure: Rather than ostentatiously present itself as the leader of an anti-Western ideology as Teheran does, Syria endeavoured to return on the international scene to re-conquer international respect. While Iran can be considered a *pariah* state by design, Syria's status has always been an involuntarily one which it has consistently sought to exonerate itself from as soon as context conditions allowed.

23 | "Syria seeks arrest over Hariri probe: general," Reuters, October 3, 2010, in: <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE69228S20101003> (accessed October 15, 2010).

24 | Andrew Lee Butters, "A Rapprochement Between Syria and Saudi Arabia?," *CNN News*, October 8, 2009, in: <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1929072,00.html> (accessed September 22, 2010).

25 | André Bank, "Partner oder 'Paria'? Syriens Nahostpolitik unter Bashar al-Asad," 6, *GIGA Focus* (2010), in: http://giga-hamburg.de/dl/download.php?d=/content/publikationen/pdf/gf_nahost_1006.pdf (accessed August 19, 2010).

In this perspective, Syria started to reconsider its policy towards Iraq, which was also meant to reduce U.S. pressure. Bilateral relations between Syria and Iraq have improved since 2004 as a result of Syria's fears that the Iraq conflict could spill across Syrian borders, thereby spreading religious extremism in the region.²⁶ Syria resumed diplomatic relations with Iraq with frequent visits by its Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallim to Baghdad between 2006 and 2009 to sign agreements to increase economic ties between the two countries and to strengthen security cooperation. However, in the aftermath of a major terrorist attack in Baghdad in late August 2009, Syria was accused of hosting the insurgents suspected of having sponsored the attacks.²⁷ When both countries decided subsequently to remove their respective ambassadors, relations plummeted abruptly.²⁸ Yet, Iraqi-Syrian relations have recently improved significantly. Particularly, an apology of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki was conveyed to Bashar al-Asad for the Iraqi allegations of Syrian involvement in the August 2009 bombings.²⁹

The United States and Syria share the objective of Iraq's stability and territorial integrity. Thus, Syria played a major humanitarian role in helping and providing assistance to fleeing Iraqis during the past years. It kept its borders open and allowed the refugees access to vital social and health services.³⁰ In light of the increasing violence in

26 | Ayman Nour, "Unsplendid Isolation," *Internationale Politik*, September/October 2009, 26, in: <http://www.internationalepolitik.de/ip/dossiers/naher-osten/unsplendid-isolation.html> (accessed May 30, 2010).

27 | "Iraq-Syria war of words escalates," *BBC News*, August 31, 2009, in: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8230635.stm> (accessed September 20, 2010).

28 | Jomana Karadsheh, "Iraq, Syria pull ambassadors as bombing suspects sought," *CNN News*, August 25, 2009, in: <http://cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/08/25/iraq.bombing.syria> (accessed September 22, 2010).

29 | Janbulat Shakai, "Muwaḍḍiḥa anna 'l-wafda yaḥmilu 'i'tidārān' mina 'l-Mālikī ilā 'l-q'īyādati 's-sūrīyati" ("Syria welcomes agreement to transfer crude Iraqi oil via its territory"), *Al-Watan*, September 14, 2010, in: <http://alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=86412> (accessed November 4, 2010).

30 | „Engaging Syria? U.S. Constraints and Opportunities”, *Middle East Report* № 83, International Crisis Group, February 11, 2009, 25, in: <http://crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-syria-lebanon/syria/083-engaging-syria-us-constraints-and-opportunities> (accessed May 30, 2010).

Iraq and the growing influence of extremist groups, Syria tried to reshape its policies and to reinforce its military presence along its border with Iraq.³¹ Moreover, following the 2009 Iraqi governorate elections, Syria strived to improve bilateral economic relations in hope of increasing Syrian-Iraqi trade volume whose level of 641 U.S. Dollar (2007) was comparatively low in contrast to the 2 billion U.S. Dollar prior to the Iraq War 2003.³²

Much more than his predecessor, President Barack Obama was ready to openly engage with the regime in Damascus. Though U.S. sanctions against Syria have been prolonged in May 2010, relations between Syria and the United States

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have improved since the new U.S. Administration came into power in January 2009. As a first step, the new U.S. President sent several security delegations to Damascus and high officials of the Administration such as special envoy to the Middle East, George Mitchell, to discuss topics such as the stabilization of Iraq and border security. In September 2009, for the first time after five years, a high Syrian official, Deputy Foreign Minister Fayssal al-Mekdad, embarked on talks with significant representatives of the U.S. Administration such as Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources, Jack Lew in the United States.³³ As a result of the improving relations, President Obama dispatched an ambassador to Damascus in February 2010, thereby reversing the Bush administration's withdrawal of its envoy in February 2005 to protest presumed Syrian involvement in the assassination of Rafiq Hariri.

31 | Julien Barnes-Dacey, "Iraq-Syria dispute jeopardizes progress on stability, trade," *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 19, 2009, in: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2009/0919/p06s01-wome.html> (accessed September 21, 2010).

32 | "Syria, Iraq to Boost Financial Cooperation," *iraq-business news*, June 2010, in: <http://www.iraq-businessnews.com/?p=4981> (accessed July 15, 2010); Julien Barnes-Dacey, "Syria Looks to Iraq for an Economic Boost," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 1, 2009, in: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124381333544570547.html> (accessed July 15, 2010).

33 | Natasha Mozgovaya, "Top Syria official's visit to U.S. marks tentative growth in ties," *Haaretz*, September 29, 2009, in: <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1117712.html> (accessed May 30, 2010).

DOMESTIC AFFAIRS

Recently, Syria has pursued a more flexible, and moderate approach on the international and regional level. Yet, ridding itself of its *pariah* role has not been accompanied by decisive changes to its internal authoritarian system. Its domestic politics has been characterized by a lack of democratic rights for the past decades.

As the long-lasting conflict on human rights issues in the framework of the association agreement with the EU shows, the Syrian government declined to go through with the final approval as it was not ready to tolerate what it considered an illegitimate interference in its domestic affairs.³⁴ The Association Agreement was initialled in 2004, but negotiations were postponed after the increasing isolation of Damascus, the Iraq crisis, the controversy over a new clause on weapons of mass destruction and the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.³⁵ The EU resumed negotiations when France took over the EU presidency in 2008. During the visit of the EU's High Representative of Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton to Syria in March 2010, the Syrian government announced that it will negotiate with the EU to resolve issues that have delayed the signing of the agreement.³⁶ Yet, the question how the Syrian government actually will solve dissensions with the EU remained unanswered.

During the visit of the EU's High Representative Catherine Ashton to Syria in March 2010, the Syrian government announced that it will negotiate with the EU to resolve issues that have delayed the signing of the Association Agreement.

Although there is no democracy among the Arab countries, quite few of them have been undergoing periods of significant liberalization policies. The Syrian power structure is, however, still marked by systematically restraining human and citizens' rights. The Bertelsmann Foundation's *Transformation Index* (BTI) ranks Syria 115th out of 128 countries concerning democratic development and 94th out of 128 concerning market economies.³⁷ This shows that Syria is

34 | "Syria. Country Report," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, April 2010, 10.

35 | Julie Gregson, 2009, n. 10.

36 | *Economist Intelligence Unit*, 2010, n. 34.

37 | Syria Country Report, *Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2010*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 1, in: http://www.bertelsmann-transformation-index.de/fileadmin/pdf/Gutachten_BTI2010/MENA/Syria.pdf (accessed July 11, 2010).

repressive in the political field and backward in economic development. The Syrian President's overarching powers and his ultimate strength also derive from support by the armed and security forces. Furthermore, the emergency law of 1963, which gives the security agencies unlimited authority to hold suspects incommunicado for prolonged periods without charge, is still in effect.³⁸

The regime in Damascus deals with opposition groups in a repressive way. When Islamist groups rebelled in Hama in 1982, the army crushed the movement with brutal force. The incident is born in the minds of many Syrians to date – an estimated 7,000 to 35,000 people were killed.³⁹

After Bashar al-Asad came into power, numerous civil and political activists gathered to discuss reform issues and to call for certain political changes. The “Damascus Spring” was abruptly ended when 10 opposition leaders were imprisoned by the Syrian authorities.

Many political and social activists hoped in 2000 that Bashar al-Asad would open the political system. After his coming into power, numerous civil and political activists gathered in private forums to discuss reform issues and to call for certain political changes such as the cancellation of the state of emergency.

In August 2001, however, the so-called Damascus Spring was abruptly ended when 10 opposition leaders were imprisoned by the Syrian authorities. Since then many civil society advocacy and human rights groups have not had any alternative than to continue their activities on a low-key level.⁴⁰

THE SITUATION OF THE CHRISTIAN MINORITY

Compared to some other neighbouring countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iraq, Syria offers a far more favourable environment for Christians. Practising religion is free in Syria – as long as it does not position itself as a political force opposed to the regime. According to article 35, paragraph 1 of the Syrian constitution, the freedom of

38 | “Worst of the Worst 2010: The World’s Most Repressive Societies,” Freedom House Foundation, 20, in: http://freedomhouse.org/uploads/special_report/88.pdf (accessed July 12, 2010).

39 | “Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) – Hama,” *Global Security*, in: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/syria/hama.htm> (accessed September 21, 2010).

40 | “No Room to Breathe,” *Human Rights Watch*, October 16, 2007, in: <http://www.hrw.org/en/node/10646/section/4> (accessed September 22, 2010).

faith is guaranteed and the state respects all religions.⁴¹ Tolerance towards non-Muslim minorities is assured by the fact that passports and identity cards do not declare religious affiliations.⁴² Although the Christian religious press finds itself subjected to political censorship – a restriction that Christians however share with their Muslim counterparts – Christian communities enjoy the freedom of building places of worship and organising various religious activities. Furthermore, the constitution legally excludes Christians only from the position of presidency but guarantees equality under law for all citizens. The Christians, who represent roughly 10 percent of the total population⁴³ – a share that is significantly higher than in the “Holy Land” (Israel, Jordan, Palestine) – benefit from the secular principles of the Syrian state which prevents it from discriminating Christians. Moreover, like the other officially recognised religious groups, i.e. Muslims, Druses, and Jews, Christians enjoy an extensive autonomy particularly in family law.⁴⁴ As an important symbol of religious tolerance in Syria, President Bashar al-Asad acknowledges Christian feast days through sending goodwill messages or personally participating at the celebrations. Moreover, many interfaith events are held regularly.

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41 | Syrian Constitution, in: http://www.law.yale.edu/RCW/rcw/jurisdictions/asw/syrianarabrep/syria_constitution.doc (accessed August 19, 2010).

42 | Alistar Lyon, “Christians view Syria as haven in unstable region,” Reuters, June 9, 2010, in: <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE6582CQ20100609> (accessed October 5, 2010).

43 | “The World Factbook: Syria,” CIA, in: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html> (accessed May 30, 2010); “International Religious Freedom Report 2009: Syria, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor,” in: <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127358.htm> (accessed August 19, 2010). Some other estimates are significantly higher or lower. Thus, Ray Mouawad states that Christians make up only 6.5 percent of the population (Ray Mouawad, “Syria and Iraq-Repression: Disappearing Christians of the Middle East,” in: *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2001, 51-60, in: <http://www.meforum.org/17/syria-and-iraq-repression> (accessed September 15, 2010). According to Andreas Christmann, however, 14 percent of the Syrian population are Christian (Andreas Christmann, “Syrien,” in: Werner Ende/Udo Steinbach (eds.): *Der Islam in der Gegenwart*, München: Beck, 2005, 510).

44 | *Ibid.*, Andreas Christmann, 2005, 510-511.

The majority of Christians in Syria adhere to the autonomous Orthodox churches (the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East). Other Christian groups are organized in the Armenian (Apostolic), the Greek Catholic, the Maronite, the Syrian Catholic and the Chaldean Catholic Church, as well as the communities of the Baptists, Mennonites and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. There used to be over 30,000 churches throughout Syria but with more and more Christians exiling their number is rapidly diminishing.⁴⁵ Christians live mainly in urban areas in and around Damascus, Aleppo, Lattakia and Homs, but they are also settled in the Qamaloun Mountains and the province of Hasake. Syria further provided shelter for Iraqi refugees of whom 18 percent Christians are highly overrepresented. In Damascus, nearly 12,000 Catholic and Orthodox Christians make up the biggest group of registered Iraqi refugees who fled the terror of war but also religiously motivated persecution.⁴⁶

The secular orientation of the Syrian Baath Party was essentially defined by its ideological founder Michel Aflaq. This is why many Christians have developed loyalty to the ruling party.

Due to the secular approach of the Syrian Baath Party, which provides for the inclusion and integration of Christians into the political system and society, many Christians consider the power of the Baath regime as a guarantee of their religious freedom, particularly a form of protection against the attempts at Islamization of state institutions and society as crushed by the regime in 1982.⁴⁷ The secular orientation of the Syrian Baath Party was essentially defined by its ideological founder, Michel Aflaq, who was a Greek Orthodox. This is why many Christians have developed loyalty to and shared interests with the ruling party. Christian religious leaders are regarded by the Baath regime also as guardians of the churches who maintain

45 | "Christianity in Syria: An interview with Archbishop Samir Nassar of Damascus," Aid to the Church in Need, June, 24, 2010, in: <http://members4.boardhost.com/acnaus/msg/1277344760.html> (accessed September 21, 2010).

46 | UNHCR, "Hintergrundinformation zur Situation der christlichen Bevölkerung im Irak," June 2006, in: <http://www.unhcr.ch/uploads/media/588.pdf?PHPSESSID=b7c27ff2ea6f3c1cdb9af7840b1b625e> (accessed September 5, 2010).

47 | Fiona McCallum, "Silent Minorities? The Co-optation of Christian Communities in Ba'athist Syria," paper presented at the 3rd WOCMES, Barcelona, July 22, 2010.

control over their communities and serve as semi-officials to the regimes who are supposed to support government policy. In some cases, particularly the Armenians, the church serves also to recruit Christian Baath candidates.⁴⁸

Since freedom rights in Syria are curtailed in general, interference of state agencies and secret services are also applied to Christians and particularly their dignitary. Thus, given the context of the political system in Syria, freedom of religion is far from having the same quality as in democratic systems. In everyday life, the limits of freedom for all religious and social groups are felt in the field of education: In 1967, Syria nationalized the private schools. This move hit the Christians particularly hard since their private schools had enjoyed a standard far above the national average.⁴⁹

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Although Syria has been headed by an Alawi President for over 40 years and the Alawi minority, which makes up 11 to 12 percent of the population,⁵⁰ is heavily overrepresented in the political elite, it would be misleading to state that the Asad Administration is a minority-based regime which discriminates all other religious groups in favour of the Alawi community. Even though Christians are underrepresented in the formal political elite, they hold key positions as counsellors.⁵¹ At the same time, definitely not every Alawi has a share in power as also among this group social differences persist among those who have good relations with the regime and those who are neglected. Especially in mountainous northern Syria, many Alawi villages remain deprived of electricity and water supply and suffer from harsh poverty.⁵²

48 | Ibid.

49 | Ray Mouawad, 2001, n. 43.

50 | Peter Heine, "Das Verbreitungsgebiet der islamischen Religion: Zahlen und Informationen zur Situation in der Gegenwart," in: Werner Ende/Udo Steinbach (eds.): *Der Islam in der Gegenwart*, München: Beck, 147; "Background Note: Syria," Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, in: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm> (accessed September 28, 2010).

51 | Ray Mouawad, 2001, n. 43.

52 | Kim Ghattas, "Syria's minority Alawites fear for future," *BBC News*, November 22, 2005, in: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4439294.stm (accessed May 30, 2010).

Since the Ottoman era and the French mandate, a disproportionately large number of Christians climbed up the social ladder owing to their trade relations with Lebanon and to their access to institutions of higher education. Yet, still a disproportionately large number of Christians have emigrated in the last few decades as the economic and political development opportunities are limited in Syria. On the basis of family ties abroad, higher education and their religion, Christians enjoy better chances to gain ground in the West. Therefore, the number of Christians in Syria has been decreasing continuously as many see opportunities particularly in Scandinavia, as well as Canada and Australia.

CONCLUSION

Being under the pressure of the United States (and the EU), Syria decided to pursue a more moderate foreign policy and entered regional dialogue in order to regain international respect. Yet, the Syrian flexibility in terms of its foreign policy in the region should not hide the fact that the regime in Damascus is still fairly immobile in domestic affairs. Rather, the regime intends to lower external pressure on its internal affairs by freeing itself of its pariah role in international affairs. The Baathist power structure is still marked by systematically restraining democratic and citizens' rights. This applies to Christians not more or less than to other religious and social groups in the country.