

# SUPPORTING SYRIAN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AS PEACEBUILDERS

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## Introduction

The sectarian dimensions of the conflict in Syria make clear that it is essential to support and equip Syrian religious communities as peacebuilders. Given the fact that Syria's diverse sects are vulnerable to politically manipulation, there is a high value in advancing multi-religious cooperation as a key mode of peacemaking. The approach outlined here is the building of a Syrian Inter-religious Council that is equipped to engage in vital and highly concrete peacemaking roles.

The Syrian Inter-religious Council will need to engage Syria's religious communities to work during three dynamically linked stages<sup>1</sup> of the Syrian conflict: (1) the immediate **crisis phase** of the Bashar al-Assad regime, 2) the **transition period** that will ensue in the struggle for a new political set up and (3) within the early **period of a new political set up** that emerges. Each of the three stages presents different threats to peace to which a well-equipped Syrian inter-religious Council should be well-positioned to respond. While engaging religious communities in all three stages has great importance, lessons drawn from Syria's post World War I history suggests that there could be an especially high strategic value in focusing on equipping religious communities for positive action in the transitional period that could result from a successful *Geneva 2 process*.

<sup>1</sup>The three phases are overlapping as are the challenges for the religious communities. For the purpose of this paper, the crisis phase refers to the situation of revolt and armed suppression in the absence of any negotiated solution. The transition phase refers to the period that immediately follows the crisis of the sole rule of the al-Assad regime, regardless of the drivers of change – be they military or diplomatic, up to the consolidation of a new regime. The new regime refers, as the name suggests, to a new, legal and relatively stable political order. The three stages, including their time frames, will be influenced by interactive variables such as: a protracted armed struggle, a mediated transition of power, the rise of religiously based terrorism, a breakup of the unitary state, and/or diverse forms of proxy conflict within and potentially spilling over the borders of Syria proper. In all scenarios, religious factors could either exacerbate or contribute positively to the outcome of the current conflict.

The importance of building the Syrian Inter-religious Council is heightened due to the fact that the governmental mechanism for mediating religious interests and tensions has collapsed and there is at present no civil society alternative mechanism.

Global and regional religious leaders' solidarity is essential for the Syrian building of an Inter-religious Council. The *Religions for Peace* Middle East-North Africa (MENA) Council, a regional Inter-religious Council that includes senior religious leaders from Turkey, the states of the Arab League and Iran, has already provided useful assistance and credibility for the Syrians by convening early meetings designed to help the Syrian religious leaders establish their Inter-religious Council. And clearly, the Vatican has irreplaceable roles, as do perhaps Sunni institutions such as Al-Azhar, and Shiite institutions in the Hausa and Qum. The Vatican has sent observers to some of the early meetings and this provided significant help.

The Syria Inter-religious Council needs to be supported by a basket of friendly states as part of their efforts to partner with Syrian civil society. Observers from the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the United Nations have joined in the early meetings. The Syrian Council should retain its non-governmental status, but also be effectively "linked" to whatever transitional political structure emerges. In addition, the Syrian Council should be generously equipped to engage in critically needed humanitarian assistance, particularly at the local mosque and church levels. This assistance can help the needy and give "legs" to the Council, but it can also return an incalculably important "social cohesion" benefit that is essential for all of the Council's peacemaking work. Indeed, a strong argument can be made that the building up of "social cohesion" is essential to the success of a politically mediated peace process.

Finally, we need to think in an appropriate time frame for supporting a robust Syrian Inter-religious Council. *Religions for Peace (RfP)* supported the Bosnia religious leaders in their building and operating the Bosnia Inter-religious Council for ten years. A similar time span of support was required in Sierra Leone during and in the aftermath of the war there. These experiences suggest that we need to prepare to support the Syrian religious communities in their efforts to collaborate for peace for the next decade.

## **I. Background**

### ***1. Lessons on Religions from Post World War I Syrian History***

The Sykes-Picot Agreement between the British and French during World War I made the newly formed Syrian nation religiously and ethnically diverse without also establishing the governmental or civil society in-

stitutions essential to mediating conflicting communal concerns and achieving social cohesion and harmony. This led to decades of religiously linked communal conflict. After Syria gained independence in 1946, the various religious sects (Sunni, Alawites, Druze, small numbers of other Muslim sects, various Christian sects, Jews, Yazidis and others) attempted to gain power or take other steps to protect their safety and economic well-being. Sunni communities in Aleppo also competed with Sunni groups in Damascus in commercial and political life. In the 1950s, there existed ten different cabinets with several different *coups* and counter *coups*. Successive Syrian administrations attempted to create a unified Syrian national identity by eliminating the centrifugal effects of sectarianism. Despite these efforts, Syria's post-independence history up to the Hafez al-Assad regime was replete with often bloody conflict between diverse religious groups and the central government.<sup>2</sup> Religious and ethnic groups continuously vied for control or at least the protection of their interests, and the period was marked by **the absence of effective institutions (government and civil) that could mediate the grievances, fears and interests of the diverse sects and ethnicities and forge their consensus around common concerns.**

After Hafez al-Assad came to power, he approached the management of religious issues in a new fashion. First, he implemented laws and policies to inure all minorities from the rule of any form of Sunni religious-majority ideology. This not only protected his own Alawite sect and its function as his power base, but also laid the foundation for religious minority support for both of the Al-Assad regimes that has continued in significant degree into the present crisis. Second, he rigorously advanced the Baath Party's opposition to any inclusion of religion in matters of state. This two-fold policy was brutally expressed in the bloody 1982 massacre, which aimed at eliminating the challenge of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood.

In short, both al-Assad regimes have managed issues related to religious diversity **by using the authoritarian state to provide protection to religious minorities, disempower religious majoritarian ambitions and exclude religion from the political domain.** These policies were implemented by military force when needed and by credible threats of power as well as the provision of patronage and protection in exchange for loyalty to the regime.

<sup>2</sup> See Majdi Rafizadeh, "For Syria's Minorities, Assad is Security" at [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/09](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/09) His formulations have been used in this section.

From this short review of Syrian history a couple of general observations can be drawn relevant to religious factors in crisis and transitional periods of a weakened or eclipsed al-Assad regime:

- A. As the al-Assad regimes' authoritarian approach to religious plurality has collapsed, there is a profound absence of governmental institution useful for mediating religiously-based fears, ambitions or other interests. Unfortunately, this absence of institution will remain during the transitional period, which is a time of great fragility, need and risk, as well as the time when a new compact regarding religion and state must be forged. In addition, there is no civil society multi-religious mechanism.
- B. Historical animosities have built up during the al-Assad regimes and are being exacerbated in the current conflict. These animosities can be channeled into revenge and score settling between and among communities. With a weakened or collapsed regime, Syrians will revert to their religious and ethnic sub-identities for protection against other groups, much as groups in Iraq did post Saddam.<sup>3</sup> The communities will be extremely vulnerable to violence arising from within Syrian or outside groups.
- C. Community of majority (Sunni) ideological ambition – tamped down by the al-Assad regimes – has not gone away. The prospect of the re-assertion of majoritarian efforts for dominance that vexed the pre-Assad period is already a potent threat in the minds of the minorities. Their fears include concerns over Islamacist ambitions arising from within Syria as well as beyond it. The transition period will be a key time for sectarian ambitions to re-surface. Extreme manifestations of these will likely thwart efforts at national reconciliation.
- D. All communities will be extremely vulnerable to violence arising from the increasing numbers of violent extremist groups, many coming from outside of Syria.

In short, the transitional period between the decline of the Assad regime and the emergence of a new political regime could all too easily resemble the chaotic pre-Assad period in the specific sense that it, too, is likely to be **notable for the absence of adequate government and civil society institutions to mediate religious grievances, fears and ambitions.** Arguably the stakes are much higher today than in the pre-al-Assad period,

<sup>3</sup>The Iraqi case suggests that Syrian groups will be highly vulnerable to acts of provocation from within or beyond Syria that are designed to heighten enmity and fear between communities. These could also include intentional efforts to “wreck” Syria by interest unable to control it.

given the overlapping conflicts currently playing out in Syria, including the proxy dimensions of some of them.

Most fundamentally, today, Alawites, Druze, Christians and all other smaller groups will need assurances that their communities will be secure if they are to join forces with Sunni Muslim activists opposing the Assad regime. These assurances will have to be supported by credible government and civil society institutions designed to mediate diverse communal concerns.

## ***2. Stages of Conflict and Challenges Encountered by Religious Communities***

### ***A. The Immediate Crisis Phase: Humanitarian Disaster and Sectarian Conflict***

The immediate “crisis phase”, of unknown time duration, refers to the situation of increasing revolt and armed suppression or standoff in the absence of a military or negotiated solution.

*Key Challenges with Strong Relevance to the Religious Communities:*

- Armed insurgency that includes Syrian resistance, increasing numbers of outside actors and military attacks on civilians.
- Massive death toll; large numbers missing; large numbers imprisoned; extreme violations of human rights.
- Ever growing humanitarian and refugee crisis.
- Minority religious communities reluctant to overtly resist the government out of the fear of reprisal and uncertain future, but also vulnerable to government troops in areas under siege.
- Al-Assad regimes’ authoritarian “formula” for religious cohesion among diverse sects broken.
- Lack of civil society multi-religious mechanisms that can mediate religious grievances, fears and ambitions.
- Rising sectarian violence, including the danger of targeted provocations arising from within or beyond Syria, including the actions of terrorists.
- Rising Sunni ideology of majority ambitions, with a base within Syria and interests groups beyond – some with terroristic intentions.
- Rising numbers of foreign fighters committed to extreme forms of political Islam.
- Regional Sunni-Shiite conflict between Iran and the countries aligned with Saudi Arabia that fuels sectarian tensions.

### ***B. Transition Phase: Struggle for a New Political Order***

The “transition phase” refers to the period immediately following the current sole rule of the al-Assad regime, regardless of the drivers of change

– diplomatic and or military, up to the consolidation of a new regime.<sup>4</sup>

*Key Challenges with Strong Relevance to the Religious Communities:*

- The absence of governmental and fully robust Syrian civil society multi-religious mechanisms that can mediate religious grievances, fears and ambitions.
- Religious groups elevating their sub-identities over Syrian identity for protection and securing their interests, and resulting clashes among Syrian groups exacerbated by outside players and interests.
- Incidences of religiously linked provocation (arising from within or beyond Syria) and likely continuous low grade conflict designed to de-rail political compromise.
- Rise of religiously based ideology of majority power ambitions focused on the development of a new constitution that can set the boundaries of future political discourse.
- Deeply wounded social fabric with the accompanying dangers of score settling, vendettas and revenge.
- The absence of effective mechanism and schemes to advance “restorative justice”.
- Broken infrastructure and economy.

### **C. The New Political Phase**

The new political phase refers, as the name suggests, to the early stages of a new, legal and relatively stable political order.

*Key Challenges with Strong Relevance to the Religious Communities:*

- Inexperienced and untested governmental infrastructure to mediate religious grievances, fears and ambitions.
- Need for strong civil society multi-religious mechanism to mediate religious grievances, fears and ambitions.
- Need for strong multi-religious support of a rights based notion of citizenship for all Syrians, including religious freedom.
- Need for restorative justice.

<sup>4</sup> Should an internationally-endorsed peace initiative, such as the Geneva Plan, enter into effect, it can serve as an extremely useful frame of reference for multi-religious action.

## II. Supporting Syrian Religious Communities As Peacebuilders

The absence of an adequate governmental mechanism to mediate religious differences only heightens the importance of supporting the Syrian religious communities to build for themselves a representative multi-religious civil society mechanism equipped for and engaged in action for peace.

### 1. Robust Multi-religious Civil Society Mechanism

At the request of the Syrian religious leaders, *Religions for Peace (RfP)* has been working to assist Syrian religious representatives to form an all Syrian Inter-religious Council (*RfP-Syria Council*), which will be a non-political action-oriented multi-religious civil society organ representative of all religious communities across Syria.

The purpose of the *RfP-Syria Council* is to advance multi-religious cooperation to stem sectarian violence, advance reconciliation, and assist the entire Syrian population on its arduous path through the current violent crisis into a transitional phase and ultimately toward a renewed political order. The *RfP-Syria Council* will be equipped to take actions to:

- Work to prevent sectarian conflict.
- Advance social cohesion through provision of strategic humanitarian assistance to vulnerable population, particularly women and children.
- Promote human rights, religious freedom and pluralism.
- Work for reconciliation and restorative justice, and advance national unity.

### 2. Value of Regional Approach

The building of *RfP-Syria Council* and the convening of the Syrian religious leaders –including women and youth – are taking place under the leadership of the *RfP Middle East-North African (MENA) Council* established in 2008. The *RfP MENA Council* is an independent affiliate of *RfP* that embraces religious leaders from all of the States in the Arab League as well as Turkey and Iran. It has the great advantage of providing to the Syrian religious leaders a neutral regional multi-religious convener that has been constituted by senior religious leaders from states within the MENA region, including from those states with highly differing political stances toward the conflict in Syria. Observers from the Vatican, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the Arab League, and the United Nations Alliance of Civilization have participated as observers in the *RfP MENA Council's* convening of Syrian religious leaders. The *RfP MENA Council* is building Islamic, Christian and Jewish “cases” in support of citizenship, human rights including religious free-

dom and the religious obligation to care for vulnerable communities. These materials will then be shared with the Syrian Inter-religious Council.

### *3. Supporting Syrians Religious Communities to build the Syrian Inter-religious Council*

#### *• Multi-religious Gatherings*

*RfP* has been maintaining extensive bi-lateral engagements with Syrian religious leaders over many years, both prior and subsequent to the current political conflict. In addition, to date, it has convened a wide variety of Syrian religious leaders operating in areas controlled by the regime, areas under the control of the opposition and those who live outside of Syria. These Syrian religious leaders have requested *RfP* to assist them in establishing the *RfP*-Syria Council.

#### *A. Larnaca, Cyprus (February 22-23, 2012)*

More than 20 senior Muslim and Christian leaders from Syria participated along with concerned religious leaders from other MENA countries in the first of a series of meetings.

Participants at this meeting strongly rejected violence and the misuse of religions. They called on Syria to embrace all its citizens, with no distinction or discrimination. They highlighted the need to preserve the country's ethnic, religious and denomination diversity, and pledged to counter all forms of religious incitement, and disseminate messages of moderation, tolerance and rejection of hatred.

The meeting issued a strong “**Call for Peace in Syria**” and urged all parties of the conflict to put down their weapons stop the fighting and initiate a process of negotiations to solve the Syrian problem. They called for the immediate release of prisoners of conscience; refused all forms of foreign interference; called on Syria to embrace all its citizens, without distinction or discrimination; and called upon all countries to reconsider the sanctions being currently imposed on Syria.

#### *B. Cairo, Egypt (August 28-29, 2012)*

More than 15 religious leaders and representatives of Syrian religious communities joined the Cairo meeting to discuss the deteriorating situation in Syria, join efforts to reject the misuse of religion and mitigate its effect on the communal peace and inter-religious harmony within the country, and to express solidarity with the innocent victims, calling on the fighting parties to stop the bloodshed in the country.

The meeting released a powerful appeal under the title “**Rightful Cries to Cease Bloodshed in Syria**” that rejected the widespread killings and oppressions in Syria and called upon the Syrian army to retreat to their barracks and all armed groups of the opposition to stop the killing. The statement also called for the release of all political prisoners and abductees and appealed to states and international organizations to provide urgently needed humanitarian assistance to the internally displaced and refugees, and medical treatment for war injured people.

### *C. Istanbul, Turkey (April 18-20, 2013)*

The meeting “**Syria for All Syrians: Multi-religious Cooperation for Peace**” was attended by 35 senior religious leaders and representatives of religious communities across Syria and the MENA region. The participants in this meeting confirmed their commitment to the establishment of a Syrian led Inter-religious Council of Syria (*RfP-Syria*).

Syrian religious leaders forcefully reiterated their condemnation of the widespread use of violence and the wholesale destruction of Syrian cities and towns. They decried and rejected all attempts to incite sectarian conflict, and stated that cooperation based on shared religious values must be an essential key to unity among all Syrians.

In this meeting they committed to undertake joint projects to provide needed humanitarian assistance, prevent sectarian violence and advance reconciliation. Respectful of their religious differences, they pledged to use their shared moral commitments and respective spiritual teachings as key capacities for action.

### *D. Local Multi-religious Working Groups*

The intensity of the conflict in Syria has severely hindered mobility, cemented segregation and divisions; it has also made it practically impossible to organize meetings and activities for religious leaders and community representatives from all over Syria at the same time. In response to this, *RfP* in cooperation with religious leaders is now in the process of setting up and discreetly convening (as soon as circumstances allow it) small local and regional interreligious working groups (7-10 each) starting with locations in northeastern Syria (The Syrian Jazeerat al-Furat region/Hasakeh and Kamishli), and in the southern part of the country (Daraa/Bosra). Both areas are extremely rich and complex in their history, religious, ethnic and human diversity. They suffered for decades from systemic marginalization, neglect and mismanagement, and now from war and destruction. The working groups will focus on building and preserving communal peace, solving

problems and defusing sectarian violence.

### ***E. Strategic Humanitarian Assistance***

In addition to the meetings mentioned above, *RfP* is engaged in micro grants at the level of individual mosques and churches in Syria to provide humanitarian relief that is also intentionally designed to build social cohesion. These grassroots projects will be expanded and coordinated by the Council as soon as possible.

- The Center of Peace for Children of the Greek Orthodox Church in Al-Hosn town in Hims’s Wadi al-Nasara (Christian valley) area in the northwestern corner of the central governorate of Hims is being supported with an emergency humanitarian grant to deliver relief services and peace education to children (Sunni Muslims, Orthodox Christians and Alawites) from multi-religious and multiethnic backgrounds. This Christian valley, religiously mixed area where Muslims, Christians (mainly Greek Orthodox) and Alawites live together, sometimes mixed in small towns, and in other times in separate villages next to each other, has been largely spared from the intense fighting between government forces and the rebels and has received a good number of internally displaced persons, mostly Christians that left other areas for the safety of the valley.
- In Huran in the Sweyda region south of Damascus, *RfP* is assisting the local church serving the displaced communities, through supporting the day care center for children and the vocational training program for women. The majority of displaced families who are being supported are Muslims.
- In Safita, a Christian city north east of Homs, *RfP* is providing care and protection to displaced Syrian children from different religious communities as part of the local church’s project of providing daycare for children of internally displaced families.
- In the Jdaidet Artouz town in the western Ghouta region of Damascus, *RfP* is supporting the local mosques, churches and local volunteers in providing emergency food assistance for 165 internally displaced Syrian families (approximately 1,000 persons).

### **III. Going Forward**

A roadmap has been developed to engage and equip Syrian religious leaders during three dynamically linked and overlapping stages of the Syrian crises.

The road map calls for the establishment and equipping of a non-governmental all-Syrian multi-religious council capable of mounting projects that harness the strengths of national religious leaders, the extensive network of grassroots religious mosques and churches and the religious believers who make up the majority of Syrian citizens. The Council will be staffed by representatives of Syria's diverse religious communities and an experienced *ex patriot* who will serve as the staff coordinator at the pleasure of the Syrian religious leaders.

While engaging religious leaders in all three stages is of great importance, there is an especially high strategic value in focusing on equipping religious leaders for positive action in the lead up to, and throughout the transitional period, as this period is especially vulnerable to sectarian violence.

The *RfP*-Syria Council will focus on the following in the lead up to and during the transitional period:

- Working to prevent sectarian conflict and responding to it in a unified multi-religious fashion. This will include multi-religious advocacy to reject sectarian violence and joint responses to it designed to dampen polarizing cycles of violence.
- Advancing social cohesion through the provision of “strategic” humanitarian assistance to vulnerable internally displaced people, particularly women and children. (This assistance is termed “strategic” due to the fact that its goal is both the provision of humanitarian relief and the building of social cohesion, the latter achieved by equipping mosques and churches to provide relief across all sectarian lines).
- Working for reconciliation and restorative justice, and advancing national unity by performing symbolic, restorative acts designed to heal injury and prevent cycles of violence.

Later in the transitional period, the *RfP*-Syria Council will also focus upon:

- Promoting human rights as a basis for a new political order by conducting national and local workshops on religions teaching in support of a robust notion of citizenship, Human Rights Res. 16/18 and the religious obligations to protect minorities, as well as by related advocacy.

Over the long run, the *RfP*-Syria Council will play an important role in advancing a new rights-based political order. Syrian religious leaders will work in collaboration with all Syrians to educate and advocate for a constitutional regime that honors human dignity and the rights that flow from it. Thus, it will work to forge a new compact regarding religion and state centered on a robust notion of citizenship.

The *RfP*-Syria Council will be assisted to effectively communicate with the Syrian population at large and, through *RfP*, to relate with inter-religious councils and religious leaders around the world.

## Conclusions

In a few weeks time, it will be the fourth year of the Syrian conflict, possibly the deadliest conflict the world has witnessed in a long time. The numbers are daunting – over 130,000 thousand dead, 300,000 orphaned, 250,000–300.000 imprisoned and missing, 1/3 of the total population turned into refugees and IDPs, 1,000,000 homes destroyed and 1200 mosques, churches and houses of worship destroyed. These devastating numbers continue to rise.

The only way to stop this violence and disregard for the sanctity of human life is to enforce an immediate ceasefire by external and internal parties to the conflict coupled with a strong and effective transitional multilayered mechanism anchored in the Syrian “civil” society that is able to reach out to the grass roots and deeply into all the layers of Syrian society.

A strong, effective and robust Syrian inter-religious mechanism could capitalize on the assets and strength of religious communities and connect the religious networks together for this purpose. Unfortunately, we have often seen the powers that be opt for the hard solution and fail to adequately couple it with the soft power of civil society and religious networks that provide real access to the population.

We agree – I am sure – that we need an immediate cease fire. We need a transitional government and we need massive humanitarian relief. But we also need a representative Syrian Inter-religious Council that can be a major stakeholder in providing humanitarian assistance that can build social cohesion, that can mount projects to counter sectarian violence on religious grounds that can reach deep within the heart of religious experience to find the strength to lead on the painful path to reconciliation. Such a Council needs to claim its own sphere of competence, but it also needs to be properly linked with the transitional government and equipped for multi-stakeholder partnerships. Such a Council needs to be owned and run by Syrians, but they need and deserve our support.