

## SPRING IN CIVIL WAR



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*As of now the ‚Arab Spring‘ in Syria has become a civil war that is increasingly showing signs of denominationalism. Under these circumstances the collapse of the Assad-Regime will not necessarily result in democracy.*

Meanwhile it seems to be merely a matter of time until the Arab-nationalist Baath-Regime, which has been ruled by a family clan of the heterodox Shiite Nusayris (Alawis) minority since the Hafiz al-Assad's coup d'état in 1971, is going to collapse.

The lack of willingness to compromise and reform, the missing organised civil opposition with strong unions as well as the political and military support of the 'Free Syrian Army' by Turkey, Saudi-Arabia, Qatar and the USA have led to a militarisation of the conflict, which will complicate a new start in Syria.

Currently the opposition keeps together as they have a common enemy. But in contrast to Libya, there is not even a pro forma unified political representation of the opposition. The Syrian National Council is basically a session in exile and its members admit on the quiet that they have no control over the Free Syrian Army under the command of Riyad al-Asad. Leaders of the civil opposition complain about being left out by western intelligence agencies regarding the financial and military support of the Free Syrian Army. Furthermore, the army is already split up in rivalling militias that are likely to rip each other into shreds after the fall of Assad. Salafi groups, that had no significance in the past, become more and more popular as their demand for military interventions and the active support by conservative Sunni Gulf monarchies over the last few weeks is well received. The allegations of the regime that some of the bloodiest attacks were of al-Qaida's responsibility were deemed wrong by Western media. However, by now, even western intelligence services assume the involvement of al-Qaida in the Syrian


civil war to be true. Hence, Syria could be facing a scenario like Iraq did after 2004.

### Religious minorities in fear?

There are no guarantees for the safety of religious minorities, especially for the Nusayris (Alawis), a heterodox Shiite sect - not to be confused with the Turkish and Kurdish Alevi who are another Shiite sect. The fear of a revenge campaign by Sunni militia is ineradicable to the point that fellow believers from the adjacent province Hatay (Antakiya) in Turkey have been gathering in the streets over the last days to demonstrate their support for Assad. Many Syrian Christians also prefer to choose 'the devil they know' over a possible Sunni-Islamist takeover. Undeniably, the two strongest and best organised fractions of the Arab opposition within Syria are the Muslim Brotherhood and the Saudi-backed Salafi-groups. Christians' fears of a Sunni revenge also have historic roots. Historic traumas play an important role within the big Armenian and Assyrian communities in particular. Almost one million Assyrians and 200,000 Armenians are descendents of those Christians, who survived the genocide by the Young Turks in 1915 and found refuge in the French mandated territory "Syria" after World War I. The intervention of the Turkish AKP government on the side of the Syrian opposition and the close ties between the Turkish Sunni religious governing party and the Muslim Brotherhood are evoking historic fears among these Christian minorities. As long as the umbrella organization of the Arab Syrian opposition, the Syrian National Council (SNC), is based and supported by Turkey, the Armenians will see it as a tool of the Turkish neo-ottoman expansionism.

Besides the Christians and Alawis, also Imamite Shiites and Ismaili Shiites fear the revenge of Sunni Islamists. Many of them are afraid of becoming a target of the opposition due to the Iranian support for the regime.

The minority of the Druz, a religion with some connections

 Syria Freedom | Syrian rebels take a position behind a wall as they fire their weapons during a battle with the Syrian government forces, at Rastan, in Homs province, Syria, on January 31, 2012.



<sup>1</sup> Last edit 28 March 2012. A previous version of this article was published in German language in Austria. Schmidinger, Thomas (21.02.2012): Aufstand in Syrien - Frühling im Bürgerkrieg. In: <http://derstandard.at/1329703280705/Aufstand-in-Syrien-Fruehling-im-Buergerkrieg> (last viewed 6 May 2012).

to the Ismaili Shia, but generally regarded as an independent religion in Lebanon, Syria and Israel, is split. The Druz on the Golan and the Jebel Druz-Region took part in the uprising against the regime, but with the increasing influence of Salafi and other Sunni-extremists also parts of the Druz population of Syria seem to dread a Salafi takeover of the state.

## The Kurdish question in Syria

The Kurdish minority appears split, too. With more than 2 ½ million Kurds, about 10% of the Syrian population belongs to the biggest national minority. For many years, the Syrian Kurds were oppressed by the Arab-nationalist regime. Already in the 1960s, more than 120,000 Kurds were categorized as aliens and lost their rights as Syrian citizens. The regime tried to deport them from the border region and established an Arab cordon ("Hizam Arabi") on the border to Turkey. As a consequence, Kurds have been the spearhead of resistance against the Arab-nationalist Baath-Regime.

Nowadays most Kurdish parties, like the Azadi, the Yeketi or the Democratic Party of Kurdistan – Syria (el-Parti), are indeed found on the side of the opposition. But the PKK party, sister party of the PYD (Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat), is an important player against the opposition groups. Some of the Kurdish parties even allege the PYD to collaborate with the Baath-Regime. Hence, it was accused of being involved in the killing of the prominent leader of the Kurdish Future Movement Mishaal al-Tammu in October 2011. While the PYD strongly denied these accusations, the mistrust between the PYD and the other Kurdish parties is growing. In fact, the regime did not mind the PYD when it started to open Kurdish cultural centres and language schools and even accepted that the party started to act as a Para-state force in at least two of the three Kurdish regions. While the Kurd Dagh, with the city of Afrin and the region around Kobani (Ain al-Arab), is meanwhile controlled by the PYD, the other Kurdish parties who are all schisms of the historic Democratic Party of Kurdistan-Syria are still strong in the Jazira-Region around Qamishli. Most of these parties

established the Kurdish National Council of Syria (KNCS) in October 2011. Although the KNCS reached an agreement with the Syrian National Council (SNC) in the mid of May, they already left the SNC two weeks later. The quarrelling SNC reunited in the night from March 27 to March 28, but the KNCS left it again, saying the SNC had failed to address Kurdish hopes of creating an autonomous federal region within a post-Assad Syria. In the meantime, the PYD also calls for an end of the Baath-regime. However, due to their links to the PKK, they still strongly oppose the pro-Turkish-opposition forces.

Besides the question of the future relation between religion and the State and hence the religious minorities, the question of the Kurds is the second biggest issue regarding the future polity of Syria. Although most of the Arab opposition groups are currently able to profess equal rights and cultural rights for the Kurds, some of them emphasize on the fact that there will not be a political autonomy along the lines of Iraq. The 'Kurdish Future Movement' is still backing the protest movement, as well as youth groups and numerous Kurdish intellectuals and artists. The KNCS and the PYD also struggle against the regime, but they do not coordinate with the SNC. They hope to obtain as many rights for the Kurdish minority as possible during the reorganisation in Syria as they are now involved in the subversion of the regime. However, especially the PYD strongly opposes the military intervention from the Turks.

## Difficult future

Even this shallow look at the situation in Syria shows that the subversion of the regime and the defeat of Assad will not necessarily be

followed by democracy and human rights. It is quite plausible that acts of revenge on religious minorities and a long-term denominational civil war, which is currently fuelled by the Saudi-Iranian regional conflict, will take place after the fall of the Assad regime.

In this complex situation, a military intervention could add fuel to the fire and one has to consider that the international fold is not only interested in human rights and democracy in Syria but above all in defining future orbits. So far, Russia and China have been withholding their approval of a UN resolution mainly because of the NATO exceeding their mandate in Libya. While Russia also has its own agenda with his old ally Syria, China mainly refused a UN-resolution because it felt cheated by the US, Britain and France. In the case of Libya, the UN resolution of 1973 was misused to overthrow Qaddafi. However, in today's Libya there is little evidence for human rights and democracy.

In the case of Syria, there is no indication that a civil war will lead to less blood shedding and a more stable, democratic result than in Libya. Therefore a joined diplomatic mission borne by the US, the EU, Russia and China aiming at the cessation of the clashes and facilitation of free elections under international supervision would be a more promising scenario than a humanitarian justified military intervention. The Annan-peace plan could be a last chance if the regime and the opposition took it serious. External forces, like Iran, Turkey and Saudi-Arabia who fanned the flames of the conflict over the last months, would also have to commit themselves to a peaceful solution of the conflict. Until now, the hope for such a scenario is vague, but the alternative would be a long lasting denominational civil war with many casualties and a long term destruction of the country. ■

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