

Syria: Bashar Al Assad's Secular Government's Battle against ISIS Protects Pluralism, Catholic World Report

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Last year Pope Francis called for a day of prayer and fasting for peace in Syria, the Middle East, and the whole world, setting the date for September 7 and himself presiding over a prayer vigil in Rome.

In a recent piece for the Wall Street Journal, Peggy Noonan reports that in September of 2013,

“the American people spontaneously rose up and told Washington they would not back a bombing foray in Syria that would help the insurgents opposed to Bashar Assad. That public backlash was a surprise not only to the White House but to Republicans in Congress, who were—and I saw them—ashen-faced after the calls flooded their offices. It was such a shock to Washington that officials there still don't talk about it and make believe it didn't happen.”

That, of course, was before ISIS, the Islamic State, appeared on the scene, cutting through a third of Syria and Iraq and advancing rapidly, tragically, into the area with the strongest Christian presence in Iraq. A shocked world witnessed the ghastly beheadings of innocent Westerners, along with the displacement, raping, and murdering of Iraqi Christians and Yazidis, the looting and burning down of churches, and the marking out of Christian homes. The leaders of the Western world all vowed to take immediate action. The president of the United States solemnly committed to “degrade and destroy” ISIS. Yet in a matter of months, even the beheadings seem to have receded into the background. It would seem that if you dither long enough, even the most acute world-wide indignation will fade away, as observers become increasingly inured to outrages. Only days after President Obama's solemn denunciation, the anti-government Syrian “rebels” announced a deal with ISIS. What for? To join forces against their common enemy: Bashar al-Assad.

Despite a stunning one-time-only admission by President Obama to a delegation of patriarchs in Washington last September—in which he reportedly said, “We know Assad has been protecting the Christians”—the bipartisan attitude towards the Syrian government has continued to hover between aloof and openly hostile.

The depiction of Assad by credible witnesses is quite different. Speaking at a private meeting held at the Veritatis Splendor Diocesan Center in Bologna, Italy last October, Msgr. Giuseppe Nazzaro, former apostolic visitor to Aleppo and former Custodian of the Holy Land,

had this to say:

[Assad] opened the country up to foreign trade, to tourism within the country and from abroad, to freedom of movement and of education for both men and women. Before the protests started, the number of women in the professional world had been constantly increasing, the university was open to all, and there was no discrimination on the basis of sex. The country was at peace, prosperity was on the rise, and human rights were respected. A common home and fatherland to many ethnicities and 23 different religious groups, Syria has always been a place where all were free to believe and live out their creed, all relationships were characterized by mutual respect. The freedom that is purportedly being brought to us by the rebels is precisely what this rebellion has taken away from us.

Msgr. Nazzaro was also among the heads of the Churches of the Middle East who were invited to speak at the UN headquarters in Geneva on September 16, where he denounced the “massacres and the atrocities, together with the crimes against humanity” committed by the Islamic State in both Syria and Iraq. The Syrians pinned great hopes on this meeting, but were bitterly disappointed.

Syrian Patriarch Ignace Joseph III Younan, in Rome for the recent synod on the family, told about the time the host of a French prime-time news program asked him about Syria’s “awful president,” saying, “He’s a monster. He’s killing innocent people, children and women.” To which Patriarch Younan replied with the story of a Capuchin priest from a Syrian town on the Euphrates River which is 98 percent Sunni Muslim. The Capuchin told Younan that as the town was being attacked by anti-government rebels, he sheltered four Missionaries of Charity sisters and 12 elderly women in their care within his parish center. When the situation was no longer sustainable, the Capuchin said, the nuns called Damascus.

“And Damascus sent military vehicles to evacuate [them] from the parish compound—there were the nuns, 12 elderly people, and [the Capuchin], and they took all to safety, in Damascus.”

“Now,” Patriarch Younan had said to the French news-show host, “you can judge for yourself if this person, Assad, is a monster or not.”

The West’s dogged insistence on doing away with Mr. Assad *first*—considering this a priority even with respect to stopping the ISIS cutthroats—is predicated on the existence of “moderate Muslims” among the machine-gun toting rebels. But if they will not listen to the Christians, then why don’t they look for moderates among the Muslims who *don’t* sack and pillage and are in fact against the war? In Syria, the tradition of peaceful, brotherly coexistence among religions is a national trait of which all Syrian groups have always been proud, including Syrian Muslims, for whom the differences between Sunnis and Shiia are not cause to rend the fabric of the nation. “Although Syria is a Muslim-majority country, Syrians reject radicalism and the Islam they practice is a moderate form of Islam,” confirmed Msgr. Mario Zenari, current apostolic nuncio to Syria, in a recent interview with Vatican Radio.

A good example is the Grand Mufti of Syria. An intriguing figure, Dr. Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun is a staunch supporter of the need for a dialogue among religions, a cause to which he has dedicated more than just words. Faced with personal tribulation when his 22-year-old son was killed two years ago in retaliation for his father’s recognition of the Assad

government, he has never spoken of revenge. "I've always explained," he said in an interview with Italian daily *Il Giornale*, "that if Mohammed had asked us to kill, he would not have been a Prophet of the Lord. This is why I have forgiven my son's murderer and I ask all those who undergo a tragedy of this kind to do likewise."

In a press conference on the plane home from Turkey on November 28, Pope Francis called on Muslim leaders worldwide to speak out and condemn all violence committed in the name of their faith, asking them to declare that "this is not Islam." "We all need a world condemnation," said the Pontiff, "including by the Muslims, who have that identity and who should say: 'That is not who we are. The Qu'ran is not this thing here.'"

This is precisely what Dr. Hassoun has been doing. He tells the young Muslims swarming in from everywhere to fight against the Syrian government "not to sell out your brains."

"Our religion teaches peace, not war," he said in his *Il Giornale* interview. "To these young people, I ask that they study the Qu'ran well and not believe those who exhort them to go fight abroad. A good Muslim travels to build peace, not to fight."

With regard to Christians, when Msgr. Giovanni Battista Morandini—the apostolic nuncio—left Syria and retired to Italy, the Grand Mufti sent word to then-Pope Benedict XVI that "Christians are full-fledged Syrians, Syria is their home, they shouldn't abandon it; wherever they go they will always be foreigners, which they aren't in Syria, because here they are in their own home."

For their part, the Christian clerics of Syria return the compliment. Melkite Catholic Patriarch Gregorios III Laham never tires of reminding the faithful that Christian Arabs have a specific mission. "The 'Church of the Arabs,'" he said in an interview with *AsiaNews*, "means the Church of Jesus Christ, which lives in an Arabian setting and in a profound and intimate relationship with the Arab world, with its pain and its hopes, its joys and its sorrows, its problems and its crisis. The Church is Emmanuel, a Church with, for and in this Arab society, without forgetting its Arab roots and nature, thanks to our history and our geography."

This is the civilization that Western world is helping tear down by dragging its feet in going after the Islamic State.

In the Middle East, apart from the Kurdish peshmerga, the only army with any clout that has taken on ISIS is Assad's. But Assad must go, according to the US.

A secular administration, with widely popular multireligious support, which has guaranteed religious freedom in what remains to this day a Muslim-majority country, has to go.

Scores of authoritative figures, as well as the thousands who voted in the elections, are ready to attest that Assad has *not* committed genocide, and indeed has been protecting his people. Yet at all costs, he must go.

In the meantime, ISIS has entrenched itself further into the territory carved out of Iraq and Syria, and has so far advanced in building itself a nation that it is reported to be working on a national currency. ISIS's tentacles have reached Libya, where it has taken over the town of Darnah, now an outpost of the Caliphate. Darnah used to be home to poets, merchants, ministers, and the religious; today it is a place where they behead young people for posting

unapproved words on Facebook. The graffiti on the walls of Darnah's main square say "No to al-Qaeda" because ISIS considers the al-Qaedaists to be a bunch of unacceptably moderate sissies. Eight hundred miles from Rome, Darnah will be ISIS's starting place if they carry out their repeated intentions to attack the capital of Christianity.

Consider that the fighting on the ground has been delegated to the Kurdish people, including many brave women soldiers, but NATO-member Turkey—wary lest Kurds gain in strength and advance their historical demand for an independent Kurdistan—lets reinforcements and truckloads of supplies flow freely across its border into the hands of ISIS.

As it was observed in Britain's *Daily Telegraph*,

If the insurgents win the war, there will be no Christian churches in Syria any more (just as there aren't in Saudi Arabia at the moment). Life will be similarly terrible for many of the ordinary Muslims who make up the great majority of the population.

There are no "good guys" in Syria's civil war. But we should not be blind to the fact that there is a project out there to destroy its rich, pluralist, and unbelievably intricate culture and replace it with a monochrome version of Wahhabi Islam, of the kind favoured by Saudi mullahs. And for reasons that history may come to judge very severely, Britain, the United States, and the West have been aiding and abetting this project.

This, in so many words, is the message that so many Christian religious figures—nuns, priests, and patriarchs of various different traditions—have been trying to convey to the West, through anyone willing to listen.

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