

Syrian Christians keep uneasy alliance with Assad

by [Stephen Starr](#) and [S. Akminas](#)

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Hani Sarhan is a Christian who says none of his relatives works for Bashar Assad's regime or has anything to do with it. "But what we heard from [the protesters] at the beginning of this revolution—'Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the coffin'—started us thinking about the real aim of this revolution," he said. "So from this point of view, fearing for my life, I declared my support for President Assad."

Muslims dominate this nation of 22 million people, but Christians can be found at all levels of Syrian government, business and military. The 2 million Christians in Damascus and elsewhere in Syria trace their roots to ancient communities that survived under many rulers, even as Christian enclaves withered in other Arab nations, such as Saudi Arabia.

The rebellion of hundreds of thousands of Muslims against Assad that began in March 2011 has not seen Christians abandon their support for the Alawites, the Muslim sect to which Assad belongs and that has controlled Syria for decades.

Christians have largely remained quiet as Assad's forces pummeled rebel cities and towns with artillery, killing close to 10,000 people, according to the United Nations. Many of Syria's Christians continue to stand by the regime not out of support for Assad but out of fear of civil war if rebels gain strength, or worse, if they win and install an Islamist government that's hostile to religious minorities.

Qatana, a town 20 miles southwest of Damascus, is home to a Christian community of several hundred families. Protests here against the Assad regime have prompted military incursions and clashes between renegade soldiers and the regular army. At checkpoints surrounding the town, some Christians chat with Alawite security officers. Others offer water and whiskey.

Christians firmly believe that the Alawite regime will keep them safe. With the town's two churches located in Sunni Muslim neighborhoods, for months many families were too fearful to attend services, Christians here said. But a teacher at a Christian school said life is better now than before.

"The crisis is almost over," she said, asking that her name be withheld because she feared retribution. "Our church was full on Easter Sunday; last year it was practically empty. We were allowed to parade around the town, when last year we could only go in the street outside the church."

Yet Christian communities elsewhere have seen trouble. A church in Homs, Um al-Zennar, was badly damaged during the military's monthlong shelling of the city in February. Christians in Homs said the church was attacked by "foreign-backed armed gangs." Syrian state TV aired interviews with civilians who said the rockets were fired from the mountains dividing Syria from Lebanon, where rebels have arms-smuggling routes.

The uprising has also hurt Christians' standard of living. Foreign visitors are nowhere to be seen in the Christian neighborhood of Bab Tuma in central Damascus, a once-popular tourist attraction characterized by winding alleyways, traditional Arab-style hotels and ancient churches.

In 2010, tourists from the Persian Gulf, Europe and North America added \$8 billion to the Syrian economy. Since the revolt began, Syria's tourism sector has dropped off by 60 percent, according to the Tourism Ministry, and Christian businesses are among those suffering.

These days, many conversations in the close-knit communities turn to "the crisis," as it is called. Families watch Arab television broadcasts by the extremist Salafist sheik Adnan Arour, who from exile in Saudi Arabia calls for jihad against the Assad regime and death to those who actively support it.

Pro-regime commentators on state-run Syrian TV pounce on figures such as Arour and say Assad is all that stands between extreme Islam and stability. Christians here talk of letters sent to churches saying they are the next to go after Assad, and a mortar that struck a monastery in the Christian town of Saidnaya, north of Damascus, was blamed on rebels.

There is little evidence that the rebels are responsible for such acts, and Christians here say Assad does not appear to have a lot of support. But recent suicide bombings in Syria have the look of al-Qaeda, which seeks Islamic law over all.

Many Christians simply do not want to upset their way of living in a country where their fate will always be decided by Muslims, according to Syria experts. Christian doctors, lawyers and dentists have established successful and stable careers. Others occupy leading positions in the Syrian army, though a new constitution mandates that the head of state must be Muslim.

“They do support [Assad] and are feeling quite anxious,” said Joshua Landis, director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma and a Syria expert. “Even so, there are plenty of Christians [in Syria] who believe that democracy in the long run is the best protection for Christians.” —*USA Today*