Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea?
Re-Examining Christian Engagement with Ba’athism in Syria and Iraq

Louis Elton,
University of Oxford

Abstract: This article re-examines the dominant scholarly perception that Christian support for Arab Nationalist regimes is primarily a product of fear of Islamism. After a brief examination of the Christian origins of Ba’athism—a form of Arab Nationalism—the author argues that a more granular understanding of the current Christian politics of Syria and Iraq reveals that while some Christians have supported regimes out of fear, there is also significant strain of active, positive support, though to what extent this is a product of Christian identification with Arab identity requires further research. The study employs an examination of posts from pro-Assad Syrian Christian Facebook pages.

Keywords: Christianity, Arab Nationalism, Ba’athism, Syria, Iraq

Introduction

The perpetration of mass violence in Iraq and Syria by the nations’ respective self-identified Arab nationalist leaders Saddam Hussein (1979–2003) and Bashar al-Assad (2000–) horrified many. So, too, has the ultraviolence of various Islamist insurgency groups in both countries. The influence on, and support for, Hussein and al-Assad’s authoritarian regimes by some Christians can appear bafflingly at odds with certain apparent Christian moral imperatives. However, a granular examination of the complex socio-political matrices underpinning the experiences of Christians in both contexts may help to elucidate their ostensibly enigmatic support. Syrian Christian philosopher Michel Aflaq’s Arab nationalist ideology—“Ba’athism”—helped shape both nations’ postcolonial political identities. We will question whether this supposedly secular and religiously tolerant ideology helped Hussein and al-Assad win Christian support, or if such support is a product of Christians being caught between the idiomatic Devil and the deep blue sea.

In Iraq, we argue that before the war, many Christians were often united in their opposition to Hussein’s repressive policies, though divided on
the alternative. However, with hindsight and experience of the dangers posed by radical Islamist groups, many mourn the loss of Hussein’s religiously and culturally repressive, but politically stable governance. Meanwhile, in Syria, though some strands of what we will call a “lesser evilist” toleration of al-Assad do exist, the Ba’athist Party has succeeded in embedding a moderate sense among many Christians that they are stakeholders in the state, thereby winning support, and occasional exaltation—arguably a rare feat for Christians in the Middle East. Further, this Syrian Christian support is heightened—sometimes to a violent level—by the blueprint of Iraqi Christians’ ominous experiences under Islamism post-Hussein.

What is Arab Nationalism?

We must first define “Arab” and “nationalism.” The diversity that exists among “Arabs” regarding traditions, dialect, and culture is vast, and one so-called “Arab” in Algeria is likely to have a different experience and identity to another in Jordan. Language is a key characteristic that unites the “Arab” social group.¹ Though this is not to say that all Arabic-speakers are indeed “Arabs” as many millions of Muslims outside of the confines of “the Arab world” like Iran and the Philippines speak the language as the Quran was first written in Arabic.² Islam is also often considered a uniting element for Arabs. Yet, many non-Muslims like Christians and Druze have historically been identified—or self-identify—as Arabs.³ Without committing to asserting that Arab-ness is either primordial or socially-constructed, on a functional level it is perhaps best to theorize Arab-ness as a group and individual identity. This identity is generated by contextual individual and collective interaction between contemporary and historical, geographic, linguistic, and cultural experiences, attitudes, and worldviews—often constructed in response to the alterity of the respective encroaching colonial forces of the Turkish

---

Nationalism is also a slippery concept. C. Ernest Dawn views nationalism as a European product from the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Dawn suggests the colonial encounter brought the concepts of “nation” and “nationalism” to the Middle East. Ottoman elites supposedly saw strength in the solidarity and loyalty brought by the emphasis on a collective identity of individuals within a people. Believing that importing European liberal ideas of nationalism would enable them to replicate European progress, the Ottomans underwent an administrative Westernization. Ottoman national identities began to emerge. These manifested differently across the diverse contexts of the empire.

Benedict Anderson describes how imagined histories, social contexts, places, and times facilitate meaning-making experiences for groups and individuals on their journeys or pilgrimages through life. The size and diversity of the Ottoman Empire led to the forging of not one, but several Ottoman national identities. The many different contextual journeys produced distinctive conceptions of the national identity of the people within each space. For instance, in Beirut, the intersection of prosperous Greek Orthodox Christians and Sunni Muslims produced a certain “Syrian patriotism.” Whereas the context of the Maronite Clergy in Mount Lebanon supposedly produced a national identity that saw itself as deserving the right to independent governance within the Ottoman empire. Dawn suggests these Ottoman identities shaped future Arab national identities in the region.

The historiography of Arab nationalist ideas is multifaceted. However, quoting notable Arab nationalist theorist Sati’al-Husri, Adeed Dawisha defines it as an ideology that seeks “the political unity of the Arab-speaking people [whom] ‘have one heart and a common soul […] and as such…] constitute one nation, and so they have to have a unified state.’” Arab nationalists, it follows, are those who believe that this, perhaps somewhat romantic, unification of the “Arab” people is an antidote to the “politically ineffectual and military feeble” plurality of Arab states, which they perceived

---

https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139521970.010.

5 C. Ernest Dawn, “The Quality of Arab Nationalism,” in *Arab Nation, Arab Nationalism*, ed. Derek Hopwood, St Antony’s Series (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2000), 41–61, 
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-62765-3_3.

6 Ibid., 43.
as being intentionally artificially constructed by imperialist Ottoman and European powers to render them uncompetitive.\(^7\)

Arab nationalism is often used interchangeably with “Arabism” and “pan-Arabism,” but they are subtly distinct. Patrizia Manduchi suggests “Arabism” denotes the “sense of belonging” to the culture that spans from Morocco to Iraq that emerged in the late nineteenth century.\(^8\) While “Pan-Arabism” refers to the aspiration of unity between these “Arab” people.\(^9\) “Arab nationalism” takes these sentiments and elevates them into the political sphere, articulating them in the historically European vernacular of the nation-state, origin mytho-histories, civilian rights, and a military superstructure.\(^10\) Some have suggested that “Arab nationalism,” in addition to the Arab-unification model, may also denote other incarnations of nationalism in the Arab world, whether that be a local, territorial nationalism as found in North Africa, or religion-based ethnocentrism as found in Saudi Arabia.\(^11\) Our focus lies on the elevated pan-Arab model of Arab nationalism pertinent to Syria and Iraq.

Arab nationalist unification movements have been largely unsuccessful. Brief moments of unification like the short-lived United Arab Republic between Egypt and Syria (1958–61) failed due to conflicts concerning leadership and economic integration.\(^12\) However, many ideologically Arab nationalist political parties have administered nations. In addition to Hussein and al-Assad in Iraq and Syria, other regimes occasionally associated with Arab nationalism include Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt (1956–1970) and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya (1969–2011).\(^13\) Non-state


\(^9\) Ibid., 9.

\(^10\) Ibid., 8–9.


\(^13\) Barry Rubin, “Pan-Arab Nationalism: The Ideological Dream as Compelling Force,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 26, no. 3 (July 1991): 543; Peter K. Bechtold, “New
organizations like the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (formerly the Arab National Movement)—founded by the Eastern Orthodox Christian George Habash—have been active in the Israel-Palestine conflict.\textsuperscript{14}

**Christians and Arab Nationalism**

Christians like Habash and Michel Aflaq have played a fundamental role in the propagation of Arab nationalism. In the nineteenth century, Butrus al-Bustani, a Maronite Christian intellectual, helped popularise ideas of an age when “Arabs were great.”\textsuperscript{15} Through his studies of Arabic-language literature and history, he invoked the times when Europeans had learned from Arabs, calling for Arabs to regain their former strength. Another example is Edmond Rabbath, a Syrian Catholic active in the twentieth century, who formed his ideology in response to the French Mandate in Lebanon.\textsuperscript{16}

Rabbath sought communalism of all Arabs regardless of their religious sensibilities.\textsuperscript{17} To Rabbath, according to Spencer Lavan, the Arab identity was a product of history as well as “blood, soil, language, customs, civilization and ideas.”\textsuperscript{18} The Christian intellectual forefather whom we are most concerned with is Aflaq, a Greek Orthodox Christian likely born in Damascus in the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{19} Aflaq—alongside Muslim colleague Salah al-Din Bitar—co-founded the Arab Ba’athist Movement in 1940.\textsuperscript{20} Later, they merged with another ideologically similar organisation to

---


\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 119.

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., 121.


\textsuperscript{20}Ibid., 170.
form the Arab Socialist Ba’athist Party in Syria, before establishing branches across the Arab world.\(^\text{21}\)

Aflaq represents a clear example of the translation of theoretical Arab nationalism, to practical political engagement. Norma Salem-Babikian suggests Aflaq's father, a grain merchant in an area controlled by the Ottomans, may have introduced the widespread sense of anti-Ottoman resentment into the young Aflaq's life.\(^\text{22}\) Further resentment developed from the perceived betrayal by the British at the Paris Peace Conference where a French Mandate in Syria was established—which left the nation administratively divided. This broke the British promise of an Arab state made in the McMahon-Hussein correspondence in exchange for Arab support against the German-allied Ottomans during the First World War.

These pressures, Salem-Babikian suggests, however, echoed in Aflaq's mind leading him to declare that he was a “nationalist” before even attending university in Paris.\(^\text{23}\) In Paris, he read widely, admiring Marx, Bergson, Gide, and Tolstoy while also entering a milieu of other Arab students in the city. On returning, he became a teacher where he began to disseminate his nascent Ba’athist ideology to students, who would become his primary support base. And, perhaps, ironically developing anti-Western views as a result of Aflaq’s Western education.

What characterises Aflaq’s Ba’athism? Our principal sources are Aflaq’s writings and the 1947 Ba’ath Party constitution, published when he became the party leader. The constitution’s slogan describes a “movement striving for Arab unity, liberty, and socialism.”\(^\text{24}\) The constitution emphasises that the movement is underpinned by a shared vision of the Arab people as a “suppressed” cultural and political unit that must be “resurrected”—“Ba'ath” translates as “resurrection.”\(^\text{25}\) Aflaq believed that this resurgence would cure “the ills of the Arab World,”\(^\text{26}\) Aflaq's approach to Arab unity was conditioned by respect for romantic idealist nationalisms and the glorification of the formerly vast Islamic Arab Empires.\(^\text{27}\)


\(^\text{23}\) Ibid., 166.


\(^\text{26}\) Ibid.

However, he constructed this nationalism on a secular cultural matrix, to accommodate non-Muslims Arabs.\textsuperscript{28} He still centred Islam as fundamental to Arab “renewal,” believing that Muhammad’s revelation was delivered to the Arab community in their language as a result of their “virtues” which would be required for “the ascent of Arabism towards unity, power and progress.”\textsuperscript{29} To Aflaq, Islam was an “Arab humanism” known not by “intellect” (religious engagement such as learning texts and theology), but experienced through “living.”\textsuperscript{30} In essence, Islam's revelation was not only a religious awakening but a national one too that resulted in the bringing of social “justice and goodness” achieved by the strength of the Arabs.\textsuperscript{31} If the Arabs were able to regain this strength, Aflaq believed, so too would society. In the context of a supposedly “secular” Ba'ath ideology, this adoration of Islam may seem paradoxical. However, he urged Arab Christians to “love” Islam and view it as the genesis of their national culture.\textsuperscript{32}

Arab liberty is woven into the justification for unity. The B’ath constitution describes colonialism as an “evil” that the Arabs must fight “by every possible means.”\textsuperscript{33} The process of uniting conditions the greater project of removing unwanted foreign control. As the Arab nation is “indivisible,” those that seek to divide it are the Arabs’ jailers.\textsuperscript{34} Similarly, socialism was considered coterminous and “fused” with unity and liberty.\textsuperscript{35} Aflaq believed socialism to be essential so that the citizens of their free Arab state could have a stake in their nation’s “resources with the intention that they better their life.”\textsuperscript{36} Free from exploitation, Aflaq hoped Arabs’ “talents and abilities” would be unleashed.\textsuperscript{37}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{29} Lavan, “Four Arab Christian Nationalists,” 97.
\bibitem{30} Ibid., 98–99.
\bibitem{31} Ibid., 99.
\bibitem{32} Ibid., 100.
\bibitem{33} Ba’th Socialist Party of Syria, “Constitution,” 196.
\bibitem{34} Ibid., 196.
\bibitem{36} Michel Aflaq, \textit{Fi Sabil Al-Ba ‘th (In The Path of Ba ’th)}. (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Tal, 1959).
\end{thebibliography}
Christian Ba’athism in Practice

Theory and practice are, of course, different. How did Aflaq's Ba'athist ideology manifest in the Iraqi and Syrian governments? How has the secular, unifying Ba’athist ideology affected the nations’ Christians whom it was designed to include? After the Second World War, local politicians began to take control of their nations as colonial powers withdrew from the Middle East. Several coups and clashes punctuated the rise of Ba'athism in Iraq and Syria. In the bitterly divided context of Syria, Aflaq found himself in prison on several occasions. Due to various ideological, institutional, and political reasons, a schism formed between the Syrian and Iraqi branches of the Ba’th Party. In Syria, the military wing of the party led by as Salah Jadid and Hafiz al-Assad (father of Bashar) took over during a coup d'état in 1966.38

In Iraq, Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr led a coup in 1968, going on to rule the nation before being replaced by Hussein in 1979. Aflaq was banished from the Syrian party by a faction who favored a Marxist-Leninist-inspired Ba’athism, though his involvement continued with the Iraqi Ba’athists. The Iraqi and Syrian parties went on, however, to remake Ba’athism in their image. In Syria, Nikolaos van Dam suggests Ba’athism has become characterised by a cult of personality termed “Assadism.”39 Ofra Bengio describes the Ba’athist “Saddamism” of Iraq as idealising Iraq as the epicentre of a new epoch for the Arabs.40

Still, if we consider the Iraqi and Syrian constitutions, intense shades of Aflaq's Ba'athism are visible. Resonating with Aflaq, Article 1 of the 1970 Iraqi Constitution orders that the state’s “principal aim is to fulfil the united Arab State and to establish the Socialist system.”41 Further, it stipulates that the President of the Council of Revolutionary Command take an oath pledging to fulfil an “Arab nation in unity, freedom, and socialism.”42 However, one major departure from Aflaq’s “secular” Ba’athism is Article 4’s statement that

42 Ibid., 7.
“Islam is the religion of the state,” though Article 25 makes provisions for religious freedom.\textsuperscript{43} Meanwhile, Article 7 of the 1973 Syrian Constitution also contains an oath to the “Arab nation's aims of unity, freedom, and socialism.\textsuperscript{44} The Syrian constitution requires that the President be a Muslim and that Islamic jurisprudence is “a main source of legislation.”\textsuperscript{45} However, and rather than instituting a state religion like Iraq, Article 35 guarantees that “[t]he state respects all religions,” without elevating Islam—a controversial move among some Muslims, provoking riots.\textsuperscript{46}

Ironically, despite the Iraqi party sheltering Aflaq when he was banished from the Syrian party, it was the Syrian constitution that maintained a more significant element of the supposed “secularism” that Aflaq advocated. Conversely, the Iraqi constitution enshrined Islam as its state religion. How these differing approaches to the position of religion in the state have gone on to affect Christians in both Iraq and Syria is a complicated question with no definitive answer. An examination of the experiences of these Christians helps to illuminate their intricate approaches to Arab nationalism in the dangerous circumstances that radical Islamism presents. Like Arab nationalism, so-called “radical Islamism” is a complex, discursive term—here we take it to refer to a hard-line Islam-inspired, exclusivist, revolutionary ideology represented by groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).\textsuperscript{47}

Who are the Christians in Iraq and Syria and how have they intersected with Arab identity and nationalism both before and during the violence? With this understanding, we can theorise how the textures of Syrian and Iraqi politics shape Christian identity and attitudes. It is vital that we avoid ironing over the diversity and nuance that exist in both Iraq and Syria. Christian communities in Iraq and Syria are not one homogenous bloc—they are stratified into theological, class, ethnic, cultural, and geographic clusters. Further, when examining the Christian experience with regards to Arab nationalism and the threat of Islamism, we must distinguish between the eras before and after the beginning of the respective wars and insurgencies in Iraq (2003–) and Syria (2011–). Further, it is essential to note that obtaining

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 53–57.
\textsuperscript{47} Richard Martin and Abbas Barzegar, \textit{Islamism: Contested Perspectives on Political Islam} (Stanford University Press, 2010), 2–8, \url{https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/ets004}. 
accurate, representative data about Christians in Iraq and Syria during this time of mass violence and upheaval is difficult.

Christians and Ba’athism in Iraq

In Iraq, before the war, the 1987 census found that there were 1.4 million Christians. Later calculations in 2003 and 2016 suggest that number dwindled to 1 million and subsequently 300,000.\(^{48}\) It is estimated that two-thirds of Iraqi Christians are members of the Chaldean Catholic Church while most of the others belong to various Assyrian Orthodox churches.\(^{49}\) There is also a small minority of Protestant and Independent churches. Most Iraqi Christians live or lived in major cities such as Mosul, Basra, and Baghdad as well as in the agricultural north-eastern Nineveh plains. Regarding national identity, there are various dimensions to the Iraqi Christian experience. As Yasmeen Hanoosh has shown, the histories of interactions between self-identifying Assyrians and Chaldeans are culturally, ethnically, and religiously tangled.\(^{50}\) To generalise, historically the Assyrian Orthodox communities often speak neo-Aramaic and identify with their Assyrian roots.\(^{51}\)

Meanwhile, the majoritarian Chaldean Catholics are often found in cities. It is suggested that some embraced “Arab” identity, likely due to a desire to support the national interest and perhaps to avoid accusations of being allied with foreign powers.\(^{52}\) Furthermore, a distinction must be made between the generally poorer rural Assyrians and the often wealthier urban Chaldeans, many of whom succeeded as interlocutors with Christian Westerners in business and tourism.\(^{53}\) Under Ba’athist rule, Christians in Iraq were able to attend church freely and run media outlets.

---


\(^{52}\) Ibid.

Further, a few Christians who joined the Ba'ath party held positions of responsibility such as Tariq Aziz who rose to become Deputy Prime Minister. However, Aziz's rise was a notable exception, as he was the only Christian in Hussein’s cabinet. Additionally, he had changed his name from the distinctively Christian-sounding Michael Yuhanna to a more Arab-sounding name, perhaps so that he might avoid being considered an outsider. However, Aziz suggested that the name was “common” and “neutral” as it is used by the “three monotheistic religions.”

Aziz’s alleged attempts to enhance his Arab identity mirrors the social engineering project of “Arabisation” that was essential to the Iraqi Ba’ath Party’s rule. As Yaniv Voller demonstrates, the government used state legislative and bureaucratic powers to both attract and coerce Assyrian Christians to identify with the Arab community. Voller cites a recovered secret Ba’ath memorandum which described Christians as being “an indivisible and vibrant part of [their Arab] nation” who could be won over by demonstrating to them that the Ba’athist Party welcomed them. However, Arabisation methods were far from organic. Hussein instituted the banning of Aramaic language in Christian schools, the forced choice between Arab or Kurdish identity on censuses and official governmental documentation, and the regular imprisonment of certain Christians that the government considered a threat. Furthermore, though supposedly “secular,” Islamic jurisprudence reduced Christians’ liberties. Laws such as the requirement for Christians to have a religious and civil marriage ceremony, while Muslims only needed one ceremony, implying a residual Islamic overtone.

Nevertheless, despite the coercion, few Assyrian and Chaldean Christians fully embraced the Arab identity. Though, Anthony O’Mahoney suggests that some Christians saw Hussein as the “guarantor for a relatively free religious life.” However, the beginning of the war saw a dramatic turn in the experiences for Christians in Iraq. The chaos that ensued after Hussein was toppled saw the sectarian forces that he had previously repressed,

---

57 O’Mahony, “Christianity in Modern Iraq,” 133.
58 Ibid., 132.
unleashed. The association of Christianity with the Western colonial history (and perhaps Rome too) made Islamists suspicious of Iraqi Christians leading to regular persecution. In the early years of the war, Islamist groups such as Al-Qaeda, as well as other Sunni and Shi'a Islamist militias, attacked over twenty-seven churches, killed scores of Christians and kidnapped and murdered several clerics, notably Poulis Faraj Rahho, the Archbishop of Mosul. During the war, as many as 500,000 Christians fled the country, comprising a vastly disproportionate percentage of refugees registered by the United Nations. After the war, insurgencies saw other Christian-persecuting Islamist groups arise—notably ISIS.

The worsening situation poses the question: how did (and do) Iraqi Christians feel about their circumstances? Generally, it seems that to differing extents, Iraqi Christians preferred their position under Ba’athism to Islamism. A spokesperson for the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADU), a major Assyrian nationalist party, suggested: “Before Saddam, we’re fighting this one madman for recognition of our ethnicity, […now] we are a target of many.”

Under Hussein, Christians were threatened with prison, but now, the spokesperson suggested, they fear death. The ADU’s tweet implies that though they disliked Hussein, in hindsight, they view him as a lesser evil, despite being a self-identified democratic movement. Others such as Chaldean Catholic priest Raban Youssif suggests, however, that although Hussein’s regime was a “tyranny”, the recent situation has affirmed the belief amongst “the majority of those [Christians] affected” would favor “a dictator” provided “the dictator is fair.”

Youssif, in opposition to the democratic desires of the ADU, says that that the Iraqi people, including Christians, “do not know how to apply democracy.” This perhaps places Youssif alongside the late Chaldean leader Patriarch Raphael I Bidawid, who before the war praised Hussein saying: “Saddam gives us what we want, listens to us and protects us”—though this

62 Hughes, “Nationalism by Another Name,” 38.
63 Ibid.
may have been motivated out of fear of reprisal. Even the Iraqi Christian Human Right Council tweeted: “Without a doubt, majority of Iraqi Christians who lived in Iraq pre-2003, 1.5–1.8 million people, hold that life was better for Christians under Saddam & the secular Iraqi government.” Other Christian interviewees expressed similar sentiments.

There are problems with pointing to sources such as these. Firstly, we cannot assert that these views are at all representative—an accurate survey would be impossible given the on-going situation. Secondly, there are many voices—though often Kurdish, not Christian—who suggest that there is no difference between life under Islamism and Hussein. However, despite these critiques, as of yet, there seem to be few, if any, Christian voices suggesting that the current situation is better than before 2003, whereas one does not need to look far to find Christians who retrospectively view Hussein with greater affection. In this view, desire for a “fair” dictator who protects Christians, is better than the alternative of life-threatening radical Islamism. In the current climate, there seems to be little consideration of other options like democracy.

Nevertheless, despite backing robust and protective leadership, there is little evidence to suggest that support comes from Christians actually identifying as “Arabs” under the supposedly inclusive Arab nationalism. Both Bidawid and Youssif have asserted that they remain committed to an Assyrian national identity. Appealing to a supposedly ancient “Assyrian” identity perhaps hints at an assertion of primacy over Islam, perhaps similar to Lebanese imaginations of an ancient mercantile “Phoenician” identity. Instead, most Iraqi fondness for Hussein comes from a position that values the

66 Iraqi Christian Foundation (@iraqschristians), “Without a doubt, majority of Iraqi Christians who lived in Iraq pre-2003, 1.5–1.8 million people, hold that life was better for Christians under Saddam and the secular Iraqi government,” Twitter, May 1, 2018, 1:20 p.m., https://twitter.com/iraqschristians/status/991366651881893889.
69 Hanoosh, “Minority Identities Before and After Iraq,” 8; Yousiff, “An Interview.”
little independence and safety that his government provided—he was a lesser evil. In this sense, the Iraqi Christian identification with Ba’ath Arab nationalism comes from its vague commitment to freedom of religion (despite Islam being the state religion), rather than actual Arab identity and any in-group affection that this may have intended to foster.

Christians and Ba’athism in Syria

How does the situation compare in Syria? Before the Syrian Civil War, Christians comprised over 10% of the population—more substantial than in Iraq. The largest communities are the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch and Melkite Greek Catholic Church—both registering around 400,000 members, though war makes these figures difficult to verify. There are also many Christians belonging to the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and the Armenian Orthodox communities, as well as smaller numbers of Protestants and other minority denominations. Like Iraq, these Christian communities are diverse and dispersed across the country. They cannot be reduced into reductive collective identity blocs. They mostly speak Arabic but have varying national, ethnic, and religious identities, perhaps hinting at the value of secular pluralism.

Additionally, like Iraq, many Christians, especially in the cities, are largely socio-economically prosperous. Favored by the French, they became trade liaisons and dominated the financial industry. With independence, Christians—like Aflaq—helped to secure their economic status in the country by weaving themselves into the secular Arab nationalist narrative. Many elite Christians were fully immersed in political life—at times Christian politicians ran vital government ministries including but not limited to Education,

---


73 Ibid.


Agriculture, and Finance. Large numbers Christians are opposed to al-Assad’s regime—many demonstrated against him in the 2011 protests, some even joining anti-Assad militias when the war began. During the demonstrations, some important pro-democracy opposition leaders and influencers, like Michel Kilo, were Christians. However, as Gabriel Said Reynolds argues, having seen in Iraq what the possible alternative of Islamism could mean for Christians, many decided to support al-Assad, treating him as the lesser evilist, “Devil They Know.” Ilias Tasopoulos suggests that as the disputes between al-Assad and the opposition militarised, things changed.

Tasopoulos argues that Christians began to turn on the opposition believing regime-backed voices who suggested the opposition saw themselves as a Sunni “revolution” against Shi’a Alawi hegemony, which Christians believed could be dangerous to their survival. Tasopoulos is correct to suggest that this fear for survival motivated some Christians to turn away from the opposition, and al-Assad’s government certainly played a part in spreading this narrative. However, the sense in which Tasopoulos describes—somewhat generically—“the Christians” as reluctantly acquiescing to al-Assad “thinking perhaps that no viable alternative [was] available” seems to exaggerate the lesser evilist position.

The Lesser Evil or Something More?

Lesser evilist narratives seem to be the dominant theoretical explanation among scholars of modern Iraq and Syria. However, perhaps contrary to Iraq where this is maybe the case, there is an ostensible trend among many Christians—or at least those with influence—towards supporting the regime out of respect for the secular protections that they view al-Assad as maintaining. Early in the war, many Christian institutions were pro-government. In May 2011, just weeks into the war, the Chaldean Bishop of

80 Ibid., 81.
Aleppo, Antoine Audo declared that “all the Christians” were behind the government.\(^{81}\) Further, the President of the Syriac League, Habib Afram, said that his Christian community saw themselves as Syrian “sons of the land” ahead of being Catholic, Orthodox, Assyrian, or any other denomination, stressing the assertion that the churches and Christian leaders desired “security” and “religious freedom.”\(^{82}\)

Georges Fahmi suggests that before 2011, the old fear of Islamist politics has conditioned a strong alliance between Church leaders and the Ba’ath government—though the fear of government reprisal may have also conditioned this alliance.\(^{83}\) Elite Christian support has generally been unwavering even at times when al-Assad’s regime has allegedly violated international conventions on war, namely the use of chemical weapons.\(^{84}\) This is reflected in the words of several important Christian clerics.

For instance, the three major Patriarchs of the largest denominations—John X (Greek Orthodox), Joseph Absi (Melkite-Greek Catholic), and Ignatius Aphrem II (Syrian Orthodox)—issued a joint statement condemning Western airstrikes on Syrian land. They accused the United States of making unsubstantiated claims about al-Assad’s use of chemical weapons and praising the “courage, heroism and sacrifices” of al-Assad’s army.\(^{85}\) The three Patriarchs conspicuously condemned the aggression against “our precious country,” implying a strong sense of identification with the nation and its leadership.\(^{86}\) This overt implication of collective national identification, also insinuated by Afram’s claim that the Christians see


\(^{86}\) Ibid.
themselves primarily as “[Syrian] citizens” before their Christianity, bolsters the position that the motivations of some Syrian Christians are more complicated than just lesser evilism.

If we are to take the leaders of these Christian communities as representatives, then we may suggest that some sort of Aflaqian identification and solidarity with the Syrian Arab Republic, or at least an affection for the secular freedoms it offers, is likely at play among some Christians. Critics may suggest that this only implies elite support for al-Assad. However, the Christian militias fighting alongside al-Assad’s army, perhaps suggest otherwise. Journalist Pascal Andresen has attempted to exhaustively catalogue all of the Christian militias active in Syria—both pro and anti-government.\(^\text{87}\) Paramilitary organisations such as Quwat al-Ghadam and Nusur az-Zawba’a have campaigned alongside government forces to protect Christian neighborhoods. These groups and others are consistently posted about on Christian pro-Assad Facebook pages. A notable example is Junud al-Massih (“Soldiers of Christ”), which regularly posts images of pro-Assad Christian soldiers alongside images of al-Assad and Christian imagery.

For instance, in July 2015, they posted a photograph of an icon of St. Mary alongside a Kalashnikov, a Syrian flag, and a picture of al-Assad with a caption translating as “#SoldiersOfChrist,” garnering 760 “likes.”\(^\text{88}\) Other posts on this page and another called This is Christian Syria 2, venerate al-Assad as a protector of the Church and Christians, often depicting him alongside clerics and Christian imagery such as the Cross.\(^\text{89}\) Perhaps this may

---


\(^{88}\) جند المسيح,” last modified June 19, 2015, accessed February 6, 2020, \url{https://www.facebook.com/jesus.soldier33/photos/a.451486038317707/668427426623566/?type=3&theater}.

simply be an expedient post with the intention of gaining credit. As Fahmi, suggests—contrary to *This is Christian Syria 2*’s claim that “80–90% of Christians” support al-Assad—the “majority [of Christians] are neither with the regime nor with the opposition” but do what is most pragmatic for survival.90

Ultimately, attempting to establish whether Christian support for al-Assad’s Ba’athism is out of lesser evilist convenience, identification with Syrian Ba’athism, a combination of the two, or other factors, is without a doubt a near-impossible task. Contrary to Iraq, voices widely ranging from the elite, high-ranking clerics to grassroots social media campaigners seem to express more widely audible support for, and identification with, Syrian Ba'athism, than was ever the case in Iraq. Perhaps this is purely a product of the post-Hussein Iraqi blueprint that may have frightened Christians. Further, perhaps the now-ubiquitous democratising power of social media, which was largely unused in the time of the Iraq war, has given a platform to al-Assad-sympathising Syrian Christians whose attitudes we can now explore online. However, there are ostensibly no comparable archives to examine the attitudes of Iraqi Christians in 2003—if there were, we could have hypothetically deciphered a more textured interpretation with perhaps greater Iraqi Christian support for Hussein.

To conclude, comparing Christians’ views on Arab nationalism in Iraq and Syria during the periods of both dictatorship and tumultuous war is a complex task. Beyond the comparable slide from a supposedly “secular” Ba'athist regime into violent political turmoil, there are several subtle but significant distinctions of note. In Iraq, the principality of Islam in the Ba'ath constitution and repressive Arabisation programmes made Christians more consistently anti-Hussein. Considering the post-war danger presented by a wave of radical Islamist insurgency, Christians seem to generally believe that as much as they disliked Hussein, his repressive cast-iron governance gave them greater independence and safety: he was the lesser evil. Yet, the same theoretical approach cannot be applied to Syria where the Civil War has revealed dissent among Syrian Christians, who are more divided on the

matter. Though some appear to resign themselves to a *lesser evil*st attitude and others are even involved in attempting to overthrow al-Assad, there remains a striking, substantial portion of Christians who actively, sometimes fervently, support al-Assad viewing him as their protector and ally. As the examined Facebook groups indicate, to many Syrian Christians, al-Assad is not simply the *lesser evil* or the “Devil They Know”: he is a guardian worthy of veneration who defends them from near-certain annihilation at the hands of vicious radical Islamist groups like ISIS.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Iraqi Christian Foundation (@iraqschristians). “Without a doubt, majority of Iraqi Christians who lived in Iraq pre-2003, 1.5–1.8 million people, hold that life was better for Christians under Saddam and the secular Iraqi government.” Twitter, May 1, 2018, 1:20 pm. https://twitter.com/iraqschristians/status/991366651881893889.


https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/devil-they-know.

https://doi.org/10.1177/002200949102600310.


https://www.facebook.com/jesus.soldier33/photos/a.451501174982860/1125068490959455/?type=3&theater.


https://www.facebook.com/jesus.soldier33/photos/p.660858257380483/660858257380483/?type=1&theater.


https://www.facebook.com/jesus.soldier33/photos/a.451486038317707/66842742623566/?type=3&theater.


**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Louis Elton* studied Theology, Religion, and the Philosophy of Religion at the University of Cambridge. He is continuing his research at the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

I would like to thank Ralph Lee, William Salomon, and Milan Kakone for nurturing and supporting my interest in this important (and often forgotten) topic.