

Syria crisis: the grave challenges the Syrian-Armenian community faces



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Syrian conundrum: from peaceful demonstrations to an international conflict

The Arab Spring escalated dramatically in Syria. Unfortunately, there is no lack of evidence to support this argument: thousands of victims, ruined towns and villages, the weakened central government, chaos, instability, international terrorism, drastic rise of the crime level, abductions and hostages, the rise of extremism, and unprecedented international pressure and sanctions imposed on Syria. External intervention transformed an internal conflict into an international one. The interests of power centers and alliances then surfaced clearly. Naturally, each of these parties attempt to use the Syria crisis in their interests and subsequently, strengthen their position in the region and protect their interests.

Traditionally, in one of the alliances the political interests of the western power centers are being served by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, which at the same time strive to address their own interests and defend their positions in the “Syrian game”. Two of these countries, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, partners in the conflict between Sunni and Shia military-political alliances, are the financial donors of the Syria crisis. Turkey spends millions of dollars in grants to support the armed conflict in Syria, and to sustain military training bases and refugee camps. Another alliance has brought together Russia, China and Iran over their own interests.

Naturally, anti-Assad forces will continue funding and providing technical assistance to Syrian opposition groups. Therefore, the crisis in Syria will continue until the allies of the Assad regime continue providing the necessary resources. It is also obvious that the Syria crisis can be managed in the result of a dialogue between the global power centers. Otherwise the conflict will expand and escalate.

Ethnic and religious conflict

In contrast to other countries in the region, Syria is a unique mosaic comprising a diversity of ethnic and confessional entities. Thus, it is not surprising that the struggle for civil rights has acquired shadings of ethnic and religious conflicts in parallel with the escalation of the conflict. After **Hafez al-Assad's coming to power** for decades Alawis and Sunnis have always been in confrontation, first open, then covert (before 1980s and the Hama operations). Civil unrests pushed these groups into different sides of the barricades. In parallel to the escalation of the conflict, alliances supporting each of the groups surfaced both in the country and abroad. For instance, minorities in the country, including the Christian ones, took the side of the Assad regime under the protection of the latter or the Alawis. Interestingly, the Sunni platform is not homogeneous either. Two social poles stand out here: on one hand, the low middle class in opposition and on the other, the upper middle class, which actually was considered to be one of the supporting pillars of the Assad regime. Kurds were another crucial factor in the context of the conflict. Assad tried to ensure their neutrality during the conflict through providing de facto autonomy to the Kurdish populated regions and freedom of action.

However, in the whirlpool of the Syria crisis clashes between different ethnic and religious groups are already inevitable. Moreover, all the social strata of the Syrian society participate in the conflict: it did not leave anyone out, but pushed all and each into the rough whirlpool of the conflict. The evidence is the explosion near Sayyidah Zaynab Mosque, a Shia shrine.



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United opposition: a reality or a myth?

Until lately the major alliance of the Syrian opposition comprised the Syrian National Council, which failed to gain absolute support either within the country or abroad. The Syrian opposition is stratified: it is fractioned both by ideological and tactic differences. In November, 2012 with the assistance of the West the oppositional groups united in the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which was officially recognized by the European Union, the US, and a number of other states. This group consisting of 60 members includes pluralists, leftists, many of whom have spent long years in prison and are members of the famous Damascus Declaration.

Challenges the Syrian-Armenian community faces

The Syrian-Armenian community plays a crucial role in the preservation of the Armenian nation. It is quite a large one, and Armenians live both in large cities and small villages. The Syria crisis has left the community with serious challenges. In addition to challenges such as unprecedented rise of prices, scarcity of diesel and electricity, collapsing economy, the community is also compelled to address the issue of its safety. People are scared to leave the house; they are scared of being kidnaped. The well-known Shakespearean character would have described the sufferings of the Armenian community as such: "A plague o' both your houses! I am sped."

The scale of emigration from the Armenian community in Aleppo is quite large. Many leave for Armenia, either to stay or to move on to another country. In contrast to Aleppo, emigration from Damascus, Kesab and other regions populated by Armenians is still rather low. In general, Syria, and even the whole of the Arab world becomes insecure in terms of preservation of the Armenian nation. Therefore, the imperative of the day is to include the issue of immigration of Syrian-Armenians into the domestic and foreign policies of the country.

Many Syrian-Armenians want to reside either temporarily or permanently in the Persian Gulf countries, specifically in the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, where there are more job opportunities available. However, at the moment these countries refuse to provide residence permits to the citizens of Syria. Therefore, the agenda of the international relations between Armenia and the Persian Gulf countries should include this issue.

To enhance full integration of Syrian-Armenians in Armenia it is necessary to improve the development of policy and legislation aimed at facilitating the procedures of providing residence permits in possibly short terms. Specifically, it is necessary to study and recommend concrete actions towards resettlement of rural Syrian-Armenians in the villages of Armenia.

There is so much to do! To be able to accomplish a lot, the Armenian communities worldwide have the best leverage: the independent state of Armenia. Understanding the role and responsibility of the Republic of Armenia in the mission of preservation of the Armenian nation, it is necessary to develop instruments to address these devastating challenges. In the increasingly globalizing world crises escalate fast and their impact becomes evermore catastrophic.

The paper is elaborated based on the opinions passed by the participants of the discussion "Syria: Regional Context", which took place on November 22, 2012. The roundtable discussion was attended by independent analysts, government officials, and representatives of the international organizations.

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