

They've turned against him, too
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DAOUD RAJIHA, the assassinated minister of defence, was one of several Christians drawn into the higher ranks of officialdom by the Assad clan that also belongs to a religious minority, the Alawites, an esoteric offshoot of Shia Islam. Keen to portray the uprising as a sectarian insurrection by extreme elements of the Sunni Muslim majority posing a vicious threat to minorities, Mr Assad has often wheeled out bishops and nuns to express devotion to his regime and to condemn supposed foreign interference. Yet they do not carry their flocks with them.

Amounting to about 10% of the country's 23m people, Syria's Christians increasingly, if still often privately, express sympathy for the opposition. In battered cities, behind closed doors in living rooms cluttered with statues of the Virgin Mary, many grumble about the bloody crackdown. Christians and Muslims often attend funerals together for the victims of government violence, such as Basil Shehadeh, a young Christian film-maker recently killed in Homs, Syria's third city. Christians are well represented in the political opposition. The Syrian National Council, a group mainly of exiles, includes several. The "local co-ordination committees", as activists' cells are known, contain numerous Christians. A church-based group ferries medicine around the country to help the victims of repression.

It is true, however, that among the armed rebels, mainly angry young Sunni men bolstered by defectors from the forces, religious minorities are under-represented. Moreover, the growing visibility of Islamists within rebel ranks, as well as the election of a Muslim Brother, Muhammad Morsi, as president of Egypt, has made some Christians nervous. In Qusayr, near Homs, two Christians were recently kidnapped for supporting the regime.

But harmony between Christians and Sunnis generally prevails. If there is sectarian animosity, it tends to be directed against the Alawites, who dominate the security services yet are barely more numerous than the Christians. "Syria is different from the stereotypes," says a woman shopkeeper in the rebellious mountain town of Zabadani. "We Syrians are moderate, whether Muslim or Christian."

General Rajiha's death may worry some Christians, especially in Damascus. But the chaos creeping towards the heart of the city makes more of them nervous. On social networks Christians send each other cartoons of women draped in the veil and men with bushy beards as harbingers of the new Syria. "I'd rather have this regime than chaos or Islamists," says a teacher in Bab Touma, a Christian quarter of Damascus, proudly pointing to his scantily clad female family members. But such views are becoming rarer.

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