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Attack on the inauguration of the church of Saint Sofia, wanted by the Russians

Agenzia Fides (25/07/2022) - <https://bit.ly/3vgRRMW> - Two people were killed and 12 injured on Sunday, July 24 by bombardment of a church as it was being inaugurated in the Syrian village of al-Suqaylabiyah, not far from the city of Hama. The small church intended to serve the local Greek Orthodox community, has a unique history: it wants to recall the ancient Constantinopolitan Basilica of Santa Sofia (Hagia Sophia, since July 2020 also re-used as a place of Islamic worship for will of the Turkish authorities), and was built in record time on Syrian territory on the initiative and thanks to the support of Russian political and military sectors.

Official Syrian sources attribute the attack to unspecified "terrorists". The rocket fired which sowed death and pain among the Christians who rushed to the inauguration was probably launched from a drone. Rebel militias and armed groups of Islamist origin, fighting with the Syrian apparatuses and partly supported by Turkey, still control parts of the Syrian provinces of Idlib, Aleppo, Hama and Latakia. Two days before the attack on the church's inauguration ceremony, bombings attributed to the Russian air force had caused seven deaths (including 4 minors) in the Idlib region. Even Yohanna X, Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, in a phone call with the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Bishop of Hama described the attack on the inauguration of the Christian place of worship as a "cowardly terrorist attack". The Patriarch - reports the Arab news site abouna.org - invoked God's consolation on the relatives of the victims and the speedy recovery for the wounded.

In al-Suqaylabiyah, as reported by Fides (see Fides, 29/7/2020), two years ago, with the approval of the Damascus government, and with the support of Russian political and military sectors, the construction of a church dedicated to Divine Wisdom began, erected with the declared intention of reproducing, albeit at a reduced size, the architectural profile of Hagia Sophia, the ancient Byzantine Basilica of Constantinople - today Istanbul - recently converted into a mosque by the Turkish authorities.

The Syrian "mini-Hagia Sophia", was presented by sources close to the government of Damascus, as a sort of Russian-Syrian response to the Turkish choice to re-open Hagia Sophia to Islamic worship.

Before the Syrian war, the town of al Suqaylabiyah was inhabited by about 20,000 Orthodox Christians. According to unverifiable information, relaunched through social networks by activists and propagandists close to the Syrian government, the laying of the first stone of the church took place in al Suqaylabiyah (a town in the governorate of Hama inhabited before the war by about 20 thousand Orthodox Christians), in the presence of representatives of the Moscow Duma (the Russian Parliament) and with the placet of the hierarchies of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch (based in Damascus).

According to some reports, the construction of the church was made possible thanks to the direct operational contribution of the Russian military stationed in the base near Latakia. Nadel al Abdullah, who is in particular known for having led a militia that presented itself as a self-defense force composed of Orthodox Christians, indicated among the paramilitary groups deployed with the Assad regime in the conflict against the militants jihadists of the Islamic State (Daesh) or of Jabhat al Nusra. Syrian and Lebanese media had at the time also relaunched the statements of the Russian parliamentarian Vitaly Milonov, also known at home for the campaigns aimed at restoring the ancient name of Constantinople in Russian official publications to indicate the current Turkish city of Istanbul. The ancient Christian Basilica of Hagia Sophia became a mosque after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople and was transformed into a simple museum complex in 1934 by the will of Mustafà Kemal Atatürk, founder of the modern Republic of Turkey.

Photo: Agenzia Fides

USCIRF Hearing on freedom of religion or belief in Syria

Peace can only be achieved through justice

By Dr Zsuzsa-Anna Ferenczy for Human Rights Without Frontiers (*)

HRWF (05.11.2022) - On May 10, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) organized a hearing on freedom of religion or belief in Syria to examine the current conditions in the country. The hearing, moderated by Nadine Maenza, USCIRF Chair, highlighted opportunities for U.S. policy to support Syria's diverse religious and ethnic communities in formulating a political solution. The main question the invited expert witnesses addressed was how US policy can more effectively integrate freedom of religion or belief issues in its focus on Syria.

At present, religious freedom in Syria remains threatened. The regime of President Bashar al-Assad systematically discriminates against members of religious groups outside the President's own Alawi branch of Islam, destroys religious minorities' houses of worship during clashes with opposition groups, and actively strips both religious minorities and the Sunni Muslim majority of their autonomy and religious authority. Armed opposition forces and militant Islamist groups target vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities in their attempts to wrest power from the Assad regime and one another.

The al-Qaeda offshoot Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) continues to displace religious minority communities in the northwestern region of Idlib, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has increased its presence in eastern Syria, further destabilizing the region. Turkish-supported Syrian armed opposition groups leverage their Turkish financing and military support to wage campaigns of religious and ethnic cleansing in Afrin. In contrast, there are promising environments for religious freedom and

intrareligious cooperation in Syria, including areas in the north and east governed by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).

Ethan Goldrich, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs of the U.S. Department of State stressed that the state of human rights with regard to freedom of religion or belief in Syria is dismal. The United States urges an end to abuses by all parties and promotes accountability for ongoing atrocities against all minority groups, this remains a key US foreign policy priority, he added. The US also continues to engage the UN envoy for Syria to support a UN-facilitated Syria-led efforts.

Badran Jia Kurd, Deputy Co-Chair of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) emphasized that in this part of Syria there several different groups coexist, without distinction made between them, whether Muslim, Christian or Yazidi. Religious tolerance and freedom of religion or belief are developed within the Administration, in a system accommodating all religions, where they can maintain their identities. The Autonomous Administration is offering an opportunity for all citizens who fled from ISIS, of all faiths. ISIS and the regime paved the way for deep religious divisions, affecting the mentality of the society long-term, he cautioned. Looking forward, a political solution is needed, that enables the preservation of all cultures and religions, in coexistence.

Max Hoffman, Director of the National Security and International Policy, Center for American Progress, stressed that the US welcomes reconciliation efforts in Syria in the last few years, with a complete opposition to any normalization of Assad in power. Yet, the US should do more in the country, going beyond what it does at present, he stressed, keeping in mind that no political resolution is likely in the near term.

David Phillips, Director of Peacebuilding, and Rights Program at the Institute for the Study of Human Rights at Columbia University spoke of Turkey's role in the current situation in Syria. Mindful that Turkey acted as a lifeline for ISIS in the past, the US should adjust its policy regarding Turkey according to the reality at present, and see Turkey as it is, not as it wishes to see it. He also spoke of the situation on the ground more broadly, recalling that in 2014, the jihadists rampaged through Christian, Yazidi communities, launching a worldwide jihad against them. Armenian Christians, who have been present in Syria since biblical times, were attacked, taken hostage, had their churches destroyed and families uprooted in and around Aleppo, with options ranging from forced conversion, to slavery, extortion or execution. In 2015 and 2016, the US and the EU declared the persecution of Christians by ISIS as genocide.

The expert witnesses agreed that going forward accountability for crimes committed is key. They recommended that the US engages the victims of persecution in order to cultivate long-term solutions as it addresses religious freedom in Syria.

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