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70,000 Syrian Armenians have fled during the war, and few will return

World Watch Monitor (27.06.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2yO1Gat> - The fragrance of Middle Eastern cuisine wafts into your nostrils, even before you open the door of the café opposite the central railway station in Yerevan, Armenia's capital.

Nerses Kevo, the café's owner, is one of thousands of Armenian Christians who fled the Syrian civil war and moved to Armenia, with sorrow for what they'd left behind and determination to start a new life in what they call their historic homeland.

One day, amidst the cauldron of war, Kevo found his Aleppo factory, which produced air filters for vehicles, demolished to the ground by air strikes.

"Seeing the result of years of hard work perish overnight, and fearing for our lives, my family and I decided to leave Syria," Kevo says. "As with so many Syrian Armenians, we were also convinced that we would be most welcome in Armenia, with our compatriots." According to Armenia's Ministry of Diaspora, around 25,000 ethnic Armenians have moved there from Syria since the beginning of the war; 3,000 of them later left for other destinations, or returned to Syria.

Syria's Armenian community, of more than 100,000 pre-war, mainly consists of people whose great-grandparents were exiled from their historic homeland during the Armenian Genocide committed by the Ottoman Empire in 1915. The Turks forced Armenians into long "death marches"* across the Syrian Desert – Syria was part of the Ottoman Empire at the time – the final destination being the city of Deir ez-Zor, where concentration camps were waiting for the refugees. The ones who escaped or survived the camps made Syria their second home.

Since then, this Christian minority has built dozens of churches, schools and cultural centres, making the Syrian Armenian community one of the main cultural hubs of the worldwide Armenian diaspora, though 70 per cent of the community are now believed to have left the country, according to figures quoted by the Armenian Ambassador to Syria, Arshak Poladian, last year.

Kevo, who now leads the Syrian Armenians' Union in Armenia, says he thinks the diminution of Syria's Christian minority is irreversible because, he says, very few refugees will ever go back.

"Henceforth, that region of the Middle East is going to be a dangerous zone for Christians, as any conflict may erupt at any time again. Armenians who have been living in Armenia for four to five years have children settled in schools and universities. They don't speak Arabic, so taking them back would make their lives difficult," Kevo explains. "Plus, many of them have started small businesses here. Some people are waiting until it's the right time to go back and sell their land and property in Syria at a reasonable price, to then completely move out of that country, as are some who have stayed there."

Armenia and many organisations belonging to the Armenian diaspora worldwide have provided financial and humanitarian aid to Syrian Armenians during the war. The ones who have settled in Armenia will soon receive financial aid in the sum of 3,000,000 Euros from the European Union, Armenian news agency [Armenpress reported](#). The aid will target Syrian Armenians' housing issues, development of their businesses, and their re-training and skill development.

Kevo's colleague from the Syrian Armenians' Union, Vani Nalpantian, joins our conversation. She moved to Armenia from Aleppo in October 2012 with her husband and two children and now imports wooden jewellery boxes from Syria. Nalpantian also coordinates programmes for Syrian Armenian women, to teach them various skills such as crafts and cooking, so they can make a living.

She is also convinced that life will never be the same for the dwindling Armenian community in Syria.

"Before the war, we were 100 per cent sure that we were safe and secure in Syria, but it turned out we weren't. Now that the situation is so volatile over there, we should expect anything, anytime, to happen again," Nalpantian says.

Through the war

Of all the Armenian communities within Syria, Aleppo's was the biggest and therefore the most affected by the civil war.

In July 2012, finding themselves the targets of armed militants, Aleppo's Armenians engaged in self-defence. Around 170 Armenians died, more than 100 were taken hostage (most were later freed after ransoms were paid), and seven others disappeared without a trace.

Of Aleppo's 17 Armenian churches, only seven survived the war – the others were destroyed or burnt down. Armenian residential areas, cemeteries, shops and factories were also damaged and looted.

Across the country, 11 Armenian schools were destroyed, among them the Karen Jeppe secondary school in Aleppo, named after a Danish missionary who delivered aid to victims of the genocide. The school was the landmark of the Armenian community and an educational hub for the Armenian diaspora, so it was given top priority for reconstruction and reopened in September 2017. Before the war the college had 1,300 students; now there are only 300.

Having been successful entrepreneurs, and possessing a strong flair for trade, over the years Armenians have made a significant contribution to the Syrian economy, thus earning the respect and support of the Syrian state. They have practised their religion, language and culture without any hindrance, according to Nerses Kevo, and have had many privileges in comparison with other minorities. But Kevo says that during the war, because of their close relationship with the state, their position became more precarious.

"From the very beginning of the war, Armenians took Assad's position. But Aleppo's Arab population was in opposition," Kevo explains. "We, the Armenian community, and Arabs were always respecting each other, but we needed to realise that it was dangerous to ostensibly take Assad's side. We needed to be more diplomatic and remain neutral."

'Our Church is our kingdom'

Despite all the doubts and the sense of insecurity, the life of the Armenian community in Syria continues as normal, a lady who has lived in Aleppo throughout the war told World Watch Monitor. Hrip Kananian, the head of the regional administration of the Armenian Relief Cross in Syria, gave an up-to-date insight into the current situation in the country during a visit to Yerevan.

"The task of the leadership of our organisation is to give people hope and make them believe that the city is revitalising. Even if we don't believe what we preach ourselves, we need to give people hope and encourage them to come back, build their homes and lives," she says.

"We have estates, land, churches, schools, clubs, all belonging to the community. It will be a shame to abandon all of that and leave the country. We make a very big effort to prolong the life of the community on the Arabic land."

A teacher for 25 years, Kananian cared for children at an Armenian orphanage during the war. She recalls the morning of 31 December 2015, when she took the children into town to see the New Year decorations and buy them presents.

"I was with the children when my nephew called me and said, 'Your house has just been bombed'," Kananian remembers. "I ran home and saw dust all over, burning cars, but the house was not damaged: the bomb had exploded in front of it. Many rockets fell in our district, but my house was not destroyed, which reassured me even more that I needed to stay there and be useful for the community. I stayed with the kids of the orphanage to give them strength."

Now, as ever, she says the Syrian Armenian community is united around the Church, trying to live "as if nothing has happened". As in every Armenian community worldwide, the Armenian Church in Syria is not just a religious establishment but also part of the Armenian identity and, in practical terms, the main organiser of community life. As the Armenian Apostolic Church has more members in Syria than the Armenian Catholic and Evangelical Churches, it is the representative of the Armenian people to the state.

"Over the last 100 years, the Church has been the uniting point for everyone. We have become one with the Church. The Syrian state recognises the Armenian community through its Church," Kananian says. "For us, the leader of the Church is our king, and the Church is our kingdom."

The future of the Armenian Church in Syria largely depends upon the steps taken at present. Under a new scheme announced in May, by order of the spiritual leader of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Catholicos Karekin II, primary school graduate boys of the Syrian Armenian community will be offered places to study in the religious seminary of the Armenian Church in Lebanon for eight years to train to become celibate priests. At the end of the studies, whoever decides not to go down that path can either become a married priest or a teacher.

The Sunday buzz in and around churches is a reassurance that life continues and the Armenian Christian presence within Syria will still continue, says Hrip Kananian. But the number of students in schools and that of clergy in churches will never be the same, she warns, saying the community rarely gets a chance to welcome anyone back.

Kevo will not return there either, but says he is very worried about the huge Christian cultural heritage in Syria, which he says will need care and maintenance. This concern is etched across the man's face as I take my leave.

'Avoid persecution-of-Christians label,' says Syria expert

World Watch Monitor (02.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2HVeYpO> - As the conflict in Syria continues, freelance journalist Jayson Casper sat down with Miles Windsor, head of advocacy at Christian charity Middle East Concern, to discuss where Syrian Christians' allegiance lies, whether those who fled the country may return, and how Christians in other countries can help.

Jayson Casper: There has been much reporting about how Syrian Christians supposedly support the regime, the opposition, or are neutral. There is also reporting about how their stance may have shifted over time. What is your perspective on how the hard-to-define majority of Syrian Christians should be described?

Miles Windsor: The first point to stress is that within Syria's sizeable Christian communities, there are both supporters of the Assad regime and supporters of opposition groups, so it's important to avoid blanket generalisations. And a second basic point is that for most Syrian Christians, and indeed most Syrians generally, political allegiance is usually nuanced or qualified.

Although there are Syrian Christians who support, and are active within, opposition groups, most Syrian Christians tend to favour the Assad regime. This is certainly the public position articulated by most Syrian church leaders.

Such support has historical roots. The Assad regime has traditionally granted a significant degree of freedom to the diverse religious communities of Syria.

But it is important to note that the support given by many Christians to the Assad regime is motivated just as much by the lack of confidence in – or downright fear of – alternatives to Assad. They fear that any alternative regime would be less accommodating of the diverse range of communities in Syria, and could possibly be harshly repressive of non-Sunni communities.

Over the course of the prolonged conflict in Syria, the pro-regime stance of many Christians seems to have hardened. Although in the early stages of the conflict some Syrians (including some Christians) tried to maintain a neutral position, such a position has become increasingly untenable as the war has dragged on. This is partly on pragmatic grounds, because if you are not a supporter you are likely to be considered an opponent. But it is also ideologically driven, particularly as the more extremist opposition groups, with harsh Islamist agendas, have grown in influence.

JC: If peace and stability are established, do you think most displaced Syrian Christians will return to their homes? And are they being encouraged to do so?

MW: Syrian church leaders have consistently encouraged Christians to remain in Syria, while also recognising that the decision to stay or leave is an individual one, based on personal circumstances. The same applies to the question of return.

The majority of Syrians who left their homes are internally displaced within Syria. It is likely that return rates will be higher among these IDPs [internally displaced people] than among the millions who have sought refuge in other countries, especially those who have since been resettled outside the Middle East and North Africa region. Improved security alone will not be sufficient to facilitate large-scale return. More time will be needed to for people to feel confident that there will be job prospects and economic opportunity.

JC: How can Christians in other countries help?

MW: The focus of prayers, appeals and support should not be solely or even primarily on Christians. To a significant extent, their plight is the same as that of their fellow Syrian Muslims. Care must be taken to avoid applying a 'persecution of Christians' label to challenges that are faced generally because of brutal conflict or the dire economic situation.

Firstly, the urgent need is for a sustainable peace-settlement for the benefit of all. If prominent voices within the global Church or the international community appear to downplay or ignore the suffering of other Syrians in favour of Christians, this can create dangerous resentment towards Syrian Christians, undermining their insistence that they are an integral part of Syrian society.

Secondly, Syrian Christians must urge the global Church to add its voice to appeals for a peace settlement. The priorities they must stress are:

- The need for a settlement in which the rights of all Syria's citizens are protected and promoted, regardless of religion or any other status
- The need to ensure dignified living conditions for all, including the provision of housing, education, and employment opportunities, which will encourage refugees and the displaced to return
- The need for broad-based reconciliation and rebuilding programmes in which faith-based organisations are able to play a full role.

Thirdly, Syrian Christians must urge, above all, the global Church to continue praying. As the conflict drags on, attention can wane and perseverance in prayer can be hard.

Netherlands joins UN Security Council to shine light on IS genocide

World Watch Monitor (11.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2r10m0c> - The Netherlands has just joined the UN Security Council as a temporary member for a year. Ten days before, its Foreign Minister, Halbe Zijlstra, published a letter explaining the Dutch government's response on the use by politicians of the term "genocide".

The Dutch Parliament had had several debates on the "genocide" committed by members of the Islamic State group (IS), and came to a consensus that it was not for politicians but for the international judicial system to make such a determination.

The Dutch government's response - the main points of which can be viewed at the bottom of the article - followed a joint legal opinion from the Advisory Committee on International Law Issues (CAVV) and the External Adjudication Adviser (EVA), which it had requested at the end of 2016.

"The Dutch government must be commended for its work on this topic. Hopefully those promises are translated into action and will be visible over the next year."

The Dutch government supported this legal opinion, and confirmed its reluctance to use the word "genocide" where such a determination had not been previously made by an international court or UN body.

However, concerning the atrocities perpetrated by IS against Christians and Yazidis, the Dutch government confirmed that it "is the opinion that sufficient facts have been established to judge that [IS] is most likely guilty of genocide and crimes against

humanity". It added that the obligations under the 1948 UN Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide apply to IS's atrocities.

This declaration is late, in comparison with other actors. The opinion published by the Dutch government, relying on the joint legal opinion of CAVV and EVA, clarifies the approach to be taken by government and parliamentary officials concerning mass atrocities that may amount to genocide.

Additionally, the Dutch government indicated in its letter the possible direction of work, including: referral of the situation in Syria to the ICC; supporting the work of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism, a new mechanism established by the UN General Assembly resolution to collect evidence of atrocities in Syria; and assisting the Investigative Team, a new mechanism established by the UN Security Council to collect evidence of IS atrocities in Iraq.

The Dutch government mentioned that it would further advocate focussing on atrocities perpetrated by other actors in addition to IS. Concerning Iraq, this position has been abandoned by other states for the sake of achieving consensus on the issue of IS.

But the Dutch government emphasised that the atrocities perpetrated by other parties must not be neglected and forgotten.

Analysis by Ewelina Ochab*

The Dutch government must be commended for its work on this topic. Hopefully those promises are translated into action and will be visible over the next year.

It should also be emphasised that apart from the commendable joint opinion of the CAVV and EVA, the Dutch government has had great assistance on the topic from MP Pieter Omtzigt, who represents the Netherlands at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and became a rapporteur on bringing IS to justice in late 2016.

His mandate included preparing a report outlining the options to bring IS to justice, and a resolution proposing recommendations to member states to the Council of Europe. The report and the resolution were adopted by the EU in late 2017.

Omtzigt will continue to hold his mandate for another year to follow up on the recommendations made in the EU resolution, as he looks to ensure the Dutch government makes a firm stance at the UN Security Council.

He has said he wants to ensure IS militants are prosecuted for their involvement and complicity through an international or hybrid tribunal (a domestic court with significant support of international expert and judges).

The UK recently claimed that it was not "crucial" to make such a determination of genocide, and that it has fulfilled its international obligations by working with the Iraqi government on UN Security Council Resolution 2379, establishing the Investigative Team to collect the evidence of IS atrocities in Iraq, and has been providing humanitarian assistance. However, there is more to the story.

Indeed, the determination of genocide should not be crucial to trigger the obligations under the 1948 UN Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide; historically, however, this has been done first after the use of the word "genocide".

The UK was the leading force behind the UN Security Council Resolution 2379 that passed successfully on 21 September 2017. However, the resolution proposes that Iraqi

courts will deal with prosecutions of the perpetrators. The question is whether Iraqi courts can do so.

British peer David Alton questioned the UK government on what checks it had done before proposing, by way of Resolution 2379, Iraqi courts prosecute IS militants. The UK government responded that it was currently considering the issue, namely after the resolution was adopted and not in preparation of the resolution, to allow it to propose the best solution for bringing IS to justice.

If, in fact, Iraqi courts do not have the capacity, it means that an international or a hybrid tribunal will need to be established, as proposed by Omtzigt. Furthermore, the UK has failed to prosecute returning IS fighters. According to the information submitted by the UK to the Council of Europe, as of early 2017 only 101 individuals connected with IS atrocities have been convicted, which may be just the tip of the iceberg, considering that 425 are said to have returned to the UK.

The UK has been actively supporting the work of the Global Coalition against IS, a coalition of 74 countries with the aim to tackle IS on all fronts. However, at the same time, the assistance provided to the victims of the IS genocide is concerning. The UK government confirmed that it is funding 171 projects in the Christian areas affected by IS atrocities and 80 projects in the Yazidi areas. While this may sound reassuring, the extent, impact, and benefit of these projects is unclear. I attempted to obtain this information by way of Freedom of Information request but have not received word back yet.

However, as indicated in the letter from the Dutch government, the determination of genocide is a vital step towards the fulfilment of the obligations to prevent and punish.

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