

# **SYRIA: 'Next time we will not survive' – Middle East Christian refugee**

World Watch Monitor (12.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2QJj9F0> – As many as 80% of Syria's Christians have left their country since the start of the civil war in 2011, while 50% of Iraq's Christians have been uprooted since 2006, according to a report produced by Christian charities Open Doors International, Served and Middle East Concern in June last year. The arrival of IS was only the "tipping point" of a trend already gathering pace as Christians experienced an "overall loss of hope for a safe and secure future", the report said.

Lebanon received the most refugees and in December 2016 the advocacy group ADF International heard some of their stories, which they have now shared with World Watch Monitor. In the snippets below, the interviewees are referred to by their initials alone, to preserve their safety.

"We lived in Mosul [northern Iraq] until 2005 [when] bullets were shot into our home. Between June and July, 2005, terrorists tried to kidnap our son three times, but he was able to escape," said S. H., a Christian father of five, adding that after this he moved with his family, including three disabled children, to Qaraqosh, 30km southeast of Mosul.

Three months after Islamic State arrived there, on 6 August 2014, the family fled again. "They gave us three options:

conversion, death or jizya [a special tax for non-Muslims],” said S. H., adding that this time they fled to Lebanon – because “it is Christian and Arab-speaking”.

Another man, a 43-year-old father of two girls, identified by his first initial, N., fled to Lebanon in February 2015 after IS gave him 24 hours written notice to leave Baghdad, his job and his home, or he and his family would be killed.

“My relatives – my cousin and his grandparents – were killed by bombings at their home, because they didn’t want to quit their job or convert. Colleagues of mine were kidnapped. Some were freed for US\$16,000, others were killed. They were told they must deny Jesus or they would be killed,” he said.

It is difficult to assess how many people have been killed by IS but mass graves were found last week, some of which contained thousands of bodies.

### ***‘Christians must not be alive’***

For 70 years another Christian family, identified as S. and H.K., had resided in the city of Hasakah, northeast Syria, where they lived at peace with their Muslim neighbours, S. told ADF. All that changed with the arrival of Islamic State.

“Our neighbours joined IS [and the group] used [them] to communicate with us [that we had] three options: convert, leave, or die. They burned our farm at night to kill us, but we were not there. We escaped, going from village to village.

We have two brothers, but now we don't know anything about them. We have had no contact since we fled," S. said.

A 71-year-old Catholic Christian, identified as H. S. H., recalls how he and his brother fled Aleppo, Syria on 27 December 2013, to find refuge at his farm in Raqqa, only to find further danger. "Our taxi driver was shot in the neck. My brother and I were assaulted and then locked up in the chicken stag pen, a dark room. We were locked up for three days. This was the last time I saw my brother. Our captors wanted to know if we were the owners of the farm. They stole my money. My neighbours later told me that this was IS," he said.

"We were fed dog food, and they told me that Christians must not be alive. We were told: convert to Islam, or be killed. They told me if I converted, they would give the farm back to me. The jizya was also an option. But some of my neighbours, who were Armenian, were killed after paying jizya."

He said he was able to escape when the Syrian army attacked IS, with the help of his Muslim neighbours, and that he fled to Lebanon as he had heard the UN could help him. "I have waited three years. The UN has not helped me directly. I had an interview at the French embassy; they told me it would take 20 days to get back to me. It has been two months," he said.

At the time of the interview he lived with friends in Beirut and had survived three heart attacks. "I do not want to go back to Raqqa or Aleppo," he said. "I have had too much trauma and could never go back. I don't want to remember what happened. It is too difficult."

## ***Psychological trauma***

The same is true for a Chaldean Christian family from Batnaya, northern Iraq. They had not been able to flee because of illness in the family, when IS entered the town in August 2014. Militants came to their house repeatedly, threatening to rape and kill them if they would not convert or if they called on anyone for help.

“After 22 days, IS took our whole family into El Sharkat prison in Mosul and stole everything we had,” the 63-year-old father, identified as G. H. G., said.

“[They] separated my 14-year-old son and me from my wife, daughter and our handicapped child. I thought they would kill my son and me, and I did not know what would happen to my family. After four days they took my son and me to another prison, in Kirkuk, where we were for five days until they released us. In the meantime, [my wife] had been released from prison because of our handicapped child. She took our daughter and our handicapped child to a church in Kirkuk. This is where we were reunited.”

Fearing for their lives, they fled to Beirut, but he said his daughter has psychological trauma and that they will never go back: “We escaped death by a miracle ... Next time we will not survive.”

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