

## **Table of Contents**

- ***Christians on brink of extinction in Middle East, warns Archbishop of Canterbury***
- ***'Next time we will not survive' – Middle East Christian refugee***
- ***Churches in Syria: 'We live together or we die together'***
- ***Syrian village bombed: five children under 15 – three from same family – among 12 killed***
- ***Op-ed: Over 1.5 million refugees return home, according to Russian UN Envoy – Fake news or hidden news?***
- ***70,000 Syrian Armenians have fled during the war, and few will return***
- ***'Avoid persecution-of-Christians label,' says Syria expert***
- ***Netherlands joins UN Security Council to shine light on IS genocide***

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## **Christians on brink of extinction in Middle East, warns Archbishop of Canterbury**

By Camilla Tominey

The Telegraph (01.12.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2Ebc6TI> - Christians who were the first founders of the church are on brink of "imminent extinction", the Archbishop of Canterbury is warning.

Describing the "daily threat of murder" faced in the Middle East, the Most Reverend Justin Welby says Christians are experiencing "the worst situation since the Mongol invasions of the 13th Century".

Writing in the Sunday Telegraph, Archbishop Welby, the most senior clergyman in the Church of England, calls on the Government to take in more refugees.

It comes as figures have revealed just one in 400 Syrian refugees given asylum in the UK last year were Christians despite them being subjected to "horrendous persecution".

Highlighting their plight ahead of a special service at Westminster Abbey to celebrate the contribution of Christians in the Middle East, the Archbishop writes: "Christians face daily the threat of violence, murder, intimidation, prejudice and poverty.

"In the last few years, they have been slaughtered by so-called Islamic State, and in many countries they find themselves squeezed between the upper and lower millstones of pressure on them within society and of conflicts that afflict the region.

"Many have left. Hundreds of thousands have been forced from their homes. Many have been killed, enslaved and persecuted or forcibly converted. Even those who remain ask the question, 'Why stay?' The Christian population of Iraq, for instance, is less than half what it was in 2003 and their churches, houses and businesses have been damaged or destroyed. The Syrian Christian population has halved since 2010. As a result, across the region Christian communities that were the foundation of the universal Church now face the threat of imminent extinction."

He adds: "The Christians of the region are facing the worst situation since the Mongol invasions of the 13th Century."

The Archbishop says that even where Christians are secure in physical terms, tensions in regions like Israel "makes life difficult for them".

Calling for everyone to "remember Christians in the Middle East and pray for them", he says we should not ask Syrian Christians to choose between President Assad "under whom they were tolerated" and "the unimaginable horrors and threats of so-called Islamic State", adding: "We should not judge too easily."

"We must support and help them in every way we can," he says. "Where they wish to leave, they will be refugees in need of asylum. Where, courageously and by the grace of God, they choose to remain, they need publicity and external, visible support."

Archbishop Welby will join forces with Prince Charles at Tuesday's service, where the heir to the throne is expected to give a Reflection focusing on forgiveness and reconciliation. In a moving speech last Christmas, the future king spoke of his "heartbreak" at the situation, and called on believers in the UK to step up their response to the crisis.

And in an Easter message this year, he said: "Over the years, I have met many who have had to flee for their faith and for their life – or have somehow endured the terrifying consequences of remaining in their country – and I have been so deeply moved, and humbled, by their truly remarkable courage and by their selfless capacity for forgiveness, despite all that they have suffered."

In June, a Freedom of Information request found just 11 of those admitted to Britain under the Government's flagship Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS) in 2017 were Christian. This is despite an estimated 10 per cent of the Syrian population being Christian at the start of the civil war.

The number of Christians granted asylum by Britain has slumped considerably since 2016, when 1.5 per cent were Christians. Last year that percentage dropped to just 0.23 - amounting to 11 of the 4,832 Syrians who were resettled in the UK.

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

World Watch Monitor (12.11.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2QJj9FO> - 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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## **Churches in Syria: 'We live together or we die together'**

World Watch Monitor (26.09.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2zINduM> - The Syrian civil war seems finally to be drawing to a close, with Idlib province the last battlefield in a long and bloody conflict between government forces and rebel groups.

Seven years of war has taken its toll, including the devastation of many Christian sites, which local communities are slowly trying to rebuild, along with their lives.

This footage from the start of this year shows the destruction in Aleppo to Armenian Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Syriac Catholic churches, and the efforts of the churches to support their communities.

See the video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1bXMZY6tw>

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## **Syrian village bombed: five children under 15 – three from same family – among 12 killed**

World Watch Monitor (11.09.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2x7iPII> - The children were still playing in the streets on Friday night. Then the rebels bombed the village.

On Saturday, they should have celebrated a wedding in Mhardeh, a Christian village in northwest Syria. Instead they had to carry ten of their own to the grave; two more later died in hospital.

The streets were full of people in mourning; they carried the dead to the Greek Orthodox Church of St. George on Saturday morning. The coffins were carried on people's shoulders in the traditional way.

The attack occurred at 18.30 on Friday night, as traffic in the village was at its busiest before the weekend.

### ***Family loses mother, grandmother and 3 children***

Five of the dead were children under 15, three from the same family, whose mother and grandmother were also killed. The children's father is in hospital. In total, over 20 people were injured.

"Do you feel that you are safe now?" asked a reporter for Norwegian newspaper Dagen, which has links to Mhardeh. "All we can do now is to pray," a local source told its reporter. "The only thing we feel is grief. Please pray for us."

Mhardeh, reported to be one of the most densely populated Christian villages in Syria, has received thousands of internally displaced people from other parts of the country.

The UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) confirmed the attack, putting it in the context of the government forces' current offensive in Idlib.

Mhardeh is surrounded by several rebel-controlled villages. Last year, the village was subjected to a violent attack under what has become known as the Hama offensive (Hama, about 45km north of Homs, is the nearest city) when the rebels tried to take control of the village from Syrian government forces.

Earlier, the village had also been attacked several times by the rebel group Jaysh al-Izza, which has been supported by the US with anti-tank missiles

According to Al Masdar News, which is broadly pro-Syrian government, Al-Qaeda-linked opposition group Jund Al-Aqsa and the Free Syrian Army launched an offensive against the strategically important Mhardeh last Monday.

### ***Cancelled wedding***

Dagen wrote about a group of youngsters from Mhardeh in March, when its reporter visited the St. Elias monastery near Tartus.

Fifteen young students had come to the monastery to have a break from the war. "We come to pray, help and share life with the monks," said one of the students at the time.

Dagen confirmed that the students they met then were unharmed in the village attacks. But one of the women told them that her sister's wedding last Saturday had to be cancelled; the bride hopes to be able to hold the ceremony later. But then it will be without a wedding party, said the woman, who was busy cleaning her sister's new house when several bombs fell right next to it, but did not explode, she said.

The area around Mhardeh is now being searched for unexploded bombs, they told Dagen.

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## **Op-ed: Over 1.5 million refugees return home, according to Russian UN Envoy – Fake news or hidden news?**

By Willy Fautré

HRWF (25.08.2018) - European media repeatedly point at the decrease of refugees from Syria as if it were the work of the EU and the heads of EU member states but is it? Russia and Turkey also claim in their media that this decline is the result of their policies.

On 23 August, Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzya announced that "more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees have returned to their homes as 96% of Syria's territory has been liberated from terrorists thanks to the efforts of the Syrian army backed by the Russian taskforce."

"More than 1,400 populated localities in Syria have been liberated from terrorists and more than 96% of its territory has come under control of government troops and militias thanks to the support from the Russian armed forces," he said at a United Nations Security Council meeting on threats to international peace and stability coming from terrorism.

"As a result, more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees have been able to return to their homeland," he stressed.

Last week, Russian President's Special Envoy for Syria Alexander Lavrentyev and Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Vershinin visited Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey to discuss the problem of Syrian refugees. After the visit, Lavrentyev told TASS that the Russian side had invited Turkey to organize regular work to promote the process of the return of Syrian refugees to the places of their permanent residence. It was announced that Moscow and Ankara are interested in cooperating in creating conditions for the safe return of Syrian nationals to their home country.

Fake news?

Of course, it would be politically uncomfortable to credit Moscow and Ankara with the sharp decline in the EU of the number of migrants from Syria and to recognize the pragmatic results of Putin's policy in the Astana process in which the West had no say.

If it is not true, Juncker and Western heads of state should denounce such a fake news but they still do not. The ball is now in the court of Brussels.

### ***Towards a new constitution in Syria backed by Moscow***

About the discussions between Moscow and Ankara, Sergey Lavrov, Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, was quoted as saying by TASS: "We focused on the situation in Syria, including the implementation of agreements reached at the Astana-format summits, high-level and expert meetings, as well as the execution of decisions made at the Syrian National Dialogue Congress, which relate to the formation of a constitutional committee."

Participants in the Syrian National Dialogue Congress, held in the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi on January 30, decided to establish a constitutional committee that will work on the country's new constitution. The full candidate list will comprise 150 people,

including 100 representatives of the Syrian government and domestic opposition, as well as 50 members of the foreign-based opposition. The UN envoy suggested that the committee should consist of no more than 50 members.

### ***Humanitarian aid from Russia***

A public-opinion poll conducted in Russia in late 2017 revealed that 73 percent of the country's citizens consider it necessary to continue helping Syria after the end of the current conflict. An even larger proportion of respondents – 75 percent – said that they would like to see Russia continue sending humanitarian aid to Syria.

A few days ago, Central Muslim Spiritual Board chairman and Russian Chief Mufti Talgat Tajuddin called on the international community to provide humanitarian aid to Syria.

"We are calling on all peoples and countries of the world, primarily Arab and Muslim countries, to extend humanitarian aid to the people of Syria who have suffered from the atrocities of international terrorism and also refugees who are returning to their home country," he said during a sermon on the occasion of Eid al-Adha, the Muslim holiday, also known as the "Festival of Sacrifice", at the Lala Tulpan (Tulip in Bloom) mosque in Ufa on 21 August.

The Muslim community takes pride in the fact that "our country has been providing genuine assistance to the fraternal people of Syria in order to repel the aggression of terrorism and restore peaceful life on this land," he said.

The Russian chief mufti also criticized those who apply double standards and "try to take advantage of any occasion to pit peoples and states against each other, those who, while welcoming the fight against terrorism, are using it only in their own interests." (Interfax-religion.com, 21 August 2018)

### ***Putin the Savior of Christians in Syria?***

Putin wants to appear as the Savior of Christians in Syria while the EU and most EU member states are reluctant to side with the local historical Christian minorities. In an article entitled "Moscow Patriarchate promotes the Kremlin's interests and its own in the Middle East", published in Eurasia Daily Monitor on 12 December 2017 (<http://bit.ly/2nUW74J>), Paul Goble writes:

"The Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is intensifying its efforts to promote the Kremlin's interests and its own in the Middle East. Although the Church, either directly or as a cover for Soviet and Russian security agencies, has long been active in that region-the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society is the only Russian post there that lasted from Imperial times through Soviet ones to the present (<http://bit.ly/2CbKHYM> Mospat.ru, October 11; <http://bit.ly/2CemnKD> Portal-credo.ru, December 9) the Moscow Patriarchate is now expanding its efforts. These activities help Vladimir Putin in his drive to expand Russian influence in the Middle East, given the waning of US power there (see <http://bit.ly/2nX4Q6h> Jamestown.org, October 5). At the same time, they ensure that Orthodox Churches in the region will continue to back the Moscow Patriarchate against the Universal Patriarchate in Constantinople on issues like autocephaly for Ukraine and the Moscow Patriarchate's claim of "canonical territory" over the entire former Soviet space.

The Kremlin is currently convinced it can fill the niche that Washington had in the Middle East for three reasons: First, as Putin's recent visit to the region shows (<http://bit.ly/2AkuIuz> Kremlin.ru, December 11), the perception of victory of Russian forces over the Islamic State in Syria as well as Moscow's successful backing of President Bashar al-Assad are popular. Second, the Russian president has presented himself as the

chief defender of Christians in the region, something popular even among Donald Trump's base in the United States; it is, thus, yet another means of projecting influence at Washington's expense. And third, the Kremlin has positioned itself against Trump's declaration that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, a widely unpopular view in the region (<http://bit.ly/2j0FSOk> Yerkramas.org, December 12).

In support of those policies, Moscow Patriarch Kirill organized a meeting last week (December 4) between Putin and eleven patriarchs and two heads of delegations of Orthodox Churches who were in the Russian capital for a major conclave of the Russian Orthodox Church. Most of the churchmen attending were the leaders of the historical Orthodox patriarchates in the Middle East, and all appeared more than willing to lend their support to the idea that cooperation at the Church-to-Church level would boost the policies Putin and Kirill now back (<http://bit.ly/2BhEUbg> Russkaya Liniya, December 5).

A major reason behind their agreement on this point is that the Russian president promised to offer his support to all the Orthodox Churches in the entire world, including, as the Russkaya Liniya religious affairs portal noted, "in the Middle East in particular." That was music to the ears of many if not all in attendance, who are under pressure not only from the predominantly Muslim populations in which they function but also from the Universal Patriarchate in Constantinople. The latter has pretensions, as the senior Orthodox body, to becoming a kind of eastern papacy that can give orders to the others, including making decisions-as it has already-on the autocephaly of groups within their canonical areas that want independence from the existing patriarchates (<http://bit.ly/2CbJ8yD> Russkaya Liniya, December 5)."

### **Conclusion**

The West's policy to first oust Bashar al-Assad before rebuilding Syria politically has led to an unending war in the country, massive migration waves to Europe, an increase in terrorist attempts in EU countries, the rise in power of extreme-right parties and the dangerous banalization of anti-Muslim attitudes.

Putin has become the kingmaker in the region and wants to appear as the protector of Muslims against radical Islamism and the savior of Christian minorities.

Is it what the EU wanted?

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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 co-ordinates 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.

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## **‘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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