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Armenian Catholic priest killed in Syria; ISIS claims responsibility

Catholic News Agency (12.11.2019) - <http://bit.ly/2rp7DHw> - The Islamic State (ISIS) militant group on Monday claimed responsibility for the shooting of an Armenian Catholic priest and his father in northeastern Syria.

Father Hovsep Bedoyan was the head of the Armenian Catholic community in the the Kurdish-majority city of Qamishli, near the border with Turkey.

He and his father, Abraham Bedoyan, were traveling south to the province of Deir Al-Zor when unidentified gunmen ambushed their vehicle Nov. 11, Vatican News reported.

Fati Sano, a deacon from the region, was also in the car, and was badly wounded and reported to be in critical condition.

The priest and his father were traveling to Deir ez-Zor to inspect an Armenian Catholic Church which had suffered damage in the Syrian civil war, according to International Christian Concern (ICC).

Pope Francis said Tuesday he was praying for the priest, his father and his relatives. Father Bedoyan, a married priest, reportedly is survived by a wife and children.

Dozens of mourners attended the funeral today in Qamishli for the victims.

The area that the victims were traveling from is largely controlled by Kurdish forces, against whom Turkey launched an incursion last month after the US decision to move troops from the area.

The same day as the shooting, two bombings in Qamishli, one of them close to a Chaldean Catholic church, reportedly killed at least five people and wounded 26 others.

ISIS was declared officially declared militarily defeated in Syria this past March, ICC reports. President Donald Trump announced in October the death of ISIS leader Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi.

Kurdish leaders have warned of the threat Islamic State sleeper cells still pose in the area and warn that the Turkish offensive at the border would allow a jihadist resurgence in the area, Reuters reports. At least 1,000 ISIS supporters have escaped from detention during the conflict so far, according to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces.

Bishops in Syria and Iraq have called for worldwide prayer as the fighting between Turkish and Kurdish forces further destabilizes northern Syria. Aid groups working in northeastern Syria are pulling out of the area, saying that it is becoming too dangerous.

The Armenian Catholic Church is a church *sui iuris* and in full communion with Rome, and constitutes approximately 600,000 members.

Towards an international alliance of governments to support persecuted Christians

Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Russia and the USA are the first candidates



Source: en.kremlin.ru

HRWF (02.11.2019) - At the end of October, Viktor Orbán, Hungary's Prime Minister, organized a conference to which he invited Russia's President Putin and leaders of various Christian denominations from the Middle East to pave the way to an international alliance of European and other governments ready to **prioritize** support Christians in the Middle East and Africa persecuted by the Islamic State and other driving forces of political Islam.

A number of European governments - Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic - are planning to join such an alliance. The Vatican is interested in these developments.

Building up on his political and military success in Syria, Putin is now finding new allies in Europe where he wants to appear as the sole protector of Christians in the Middle East.

Russia and Hungary to discuss persecuted Christians

Vatican News (01.11.2019) - Hungary wants to set up an international alliance of governments to support persecuted Christians in especially the Middle East, Africa, and other areas. The announcement came a day before Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Russian President Vladimir Putin were to discuss the issue in Budapest with Middle East church leaders.

By Stefan J. Bos

Hungary's state secretary, for the aid of persecuted Christians, Tristan Azbej, is worried. He told Vatican News that Christians are now the most persecuted people in the world.

That's why, he says, Hungary wants to set up an international alliance to help Christian believers and other faith minorities during an upcoming conference next month. "We have an aim of collecting and mobilizing governments on one platform. That would coordinate its efforts to help the persecuted Christians of the Middle East, Africa, and also other minorities who are persecuted for their religion and belief," he explained.

Coordination underway

The Hungarian government is already coordinating efforts with the United States and Poland it seeks cooperation with other countries of Central and Eastern Europe such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Hungary says the move is also aimed to help persecuted to stay in their own countries rather than emigrate to the West.

The country has spent tens of millions of dollars on humanitarian aid, including such as rebuilding hospitals, schools, and churches in war-torn Syria and other nations.

The aid was welcomed at a conference in Budapest Tuesday attended by crucial church leaders representing Catholic, Orthodox and other Christians in the Middle East.

Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II of the Syriac Orthodox Church noted that Christians feel alone amid ongoing violence that even killed infants. "Many times, we feel we are abandoned as Christians of the Middle East. We feel that we have no friends. That nobody cares about us," he said.

Own interests

"We have seen throughout these years of war that countries and governments are most interested in their interests about imposing their ideas and their agendas. But they don't want to really care about the people," the patriarch stressed.

He cited plans by the United States to protect oilfields in Syria as examples of such alleged egocentric behavior.

The patriarch and other church leaders warned there is little time to prevent the extinction of Christian communities in the Middle East.

Most Christians have fled the troubled region amid attacks by Islamic State and other extremist groups.

Recommended reading

<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/world/news/2019-11/russia-hungary-protect-persecuted-christians-middle-east.html>
<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61937>
<https://mospat.ru/en/2019/10/31/news179377/>
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<https://cruxnow.com/church-in-europe/2019/10/31/hungarys-orban-good-relationships-with-russia-are-a-necessity-can-help-middle-east-christians/>

Putin pledges to 'do everything to protect Christians in the Middle East'

by [Jeffrey Cimmino](#)

Washington Examiner (31.10.2019) - <https://washex.am/2PCCOcu> - Russian President Vladimir Putin pledged to protect Christians threatened by the conflict in Syria, appealing to the plight of religious minorities as justification for Russia's involvement.

After a meeting with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban on Wednesday, Putin expressed sorrow over the persecution experienced by Christians in the Middle East, [according](#) to the Associated Press. Russian leaders have [worked](#) to develop close ties with Syria's Christian communities. Melkite Catholic Archbishop Jean-Clement Jeanbart [has called](#) Russia's intervention in the country a source of "hope for the country's Christians."

"The Middle East is the cradle of Christianity, and Christians are in peril there, facing persecution, being killed, raped, and robbed," said Putin. "Russia will do everything to protect Christians in the Middle East. We must help them restore and preserve their holy sites, preserve their congregations."

At a meeting later in the day, Putin expressed concern for the "massive exodus of Christians from the Middle East."

"We are watching what's happening to the Christians in the Middle East with tears in our eyes," said Putin.

Russia's efforts to work closely with Syria's Christians have also earned praise from Syrian President Bashar Assad, who [called](#) Putin "the sole defender of Christian civilization one can rely on." Putin has propped up the Assad regime against his opponents in the country's civil war.

But some Syrian Christians are [skeptical](#) of the Assad-Putin alliance and want the United States to pressure Putin to agree to a political solution that yields a secular, democratic Syria. President Trump [promised](#) in 2017 to prioritize protecting persecuted Christians in Syria, and his administration has supported free elections and a new Syrian constitution. But the recent U.S. troop withdrawal from northern Syria raises questions about the strength of America's influence in the country.

And while many Syrian Christians are concerned about Assad and his Russian backers, they also fear that any new government would either be weak or filled with extremists.

Fresh threat to Syrian Christians, says human rights group

The Christian population in the region had already declined significantly in recent years



La Croix Int'l (10.10.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2OFA8dW> - Turkish soldiers with armored vehicles and tanks during a military operation in Kurdish areas of northern Syria, near the Syrian border, in Akcakale, Sanliurfa, Turkey Oct. 9. (Photo by EPA/STR/MaxPPP)

President Trump's decision to withdraw troops from northern Syria has created a new threat to the safety of Christians in the region, says the group **In Defense of Christians** (IDC).

The White House admitted Oct. 6 that its decision to leave the area, which in recent years has been controlled by the Kurds, would leave the way open for Turkish forces to increase their own presence there.

Turkey, a member of NATO, regards the Kurds as terrorists, even though they helped the United States and its allies by dismantling Islamic State (ISIS) and other extremist groups in the area.

The Americans' withdrawal is widely seen as increasing the threat of ISIS troops rebuilding their strength and posing an existential threat to the Kurds in northern Syria and neighboring Iraq.

Observers said the biggest threat to the region would arise if Turkey went further and launched a full-scale invasion of the Kurdish-inhabited area of northern Syria.

IDC said they were "deeply concerned for the Christian and Yazidi communities of Northeast Syria should the Republic of Turkey move into the region."

They also pointed out that the Christian population in the region had declined significantly in recent years.

"There are over 40,000 Christians in the Northeast, which is a dramatic decrease from the 130,000 Christians who lived in this area before the impact of ISIS and the Syrian Crisis," said IDC, Catholic News Agency reported.

The group pledged to put pressure on the U.S. to apply economic sanctions on Turkey should they threaten the region's inhabitants.

The U.S. did indeed impose economic sanctions on Turkey when it held an American pastor, Andrew Brunson, for over a year without charge. He was finally released two months later.

Targeting Christian places of worship in Syria is a threat to world heritage

The Syrian regime bears primary responsibility for 61% of the targeting of Christian places of worship in Syria

Syrian Network for Human Rights (05.09.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2kGzwrD> - The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) stated in its [report](#) released today that the Syrian regime bears primary responsibility for 61 percent of the targeting of Christian places of worship in Syria.

The report, entitled "Targeting Christian Places of Worship in Syria is a Threat to World Heritage", says that targeting Christian places of worship is a form of intimidation against the Christian minority in Syria and a means of displacing them, noting that the Syrian regime is indifferent to the damage which this causes to the Syrian state, including the nation's millennia-old history and civilizational heritage that has passed through Syria down the ages; some of the country's Christian places of worship, for example, were built in the first century AD, such as the Church of the Lady of the Holy Belt (Um al Zennar) in Homs city, while Qalb al Lawza Church in Idlib suburbs was built in the fifth century AD.

While the specious claim to be a protector of the Syrian people, opposing sectarianism was always central in Bashar al Assad's efforts to cling to power, the reality and all the evidence, however, directly contradict this claim, with the regime reliant on fomenting and exploiting sectarianism, as well as attacking and threatening all sections of the population, both from the minority and majority groups, who oppose its tyrannical practices, hereditary status, and totalitarian nature intent on retaining dynastic power forever.

The 22-page report stresses that the current Syrian regime bears direct responsibility for the destruction, displacement and collapse of the Syrian state at various levels because it is the main cause of Syrian state institutions being used to launch a systematic war against the popular uprising, which called for doing away with the hereditary the rule of the Assad family and moving towards a democratically elected government that represents all the components of Syrian society, not one sect or one family.

Fadel Abdul Ghany, Chairman of SNHR, adds:

“The Syrian regime has always invoked good slogans, but on the ground, it has done the opposite. While the regime claims that it has not committed any violations, and that it is keen on protecting the Syrian state and the rights of minorities, it has carried out qualitative operations in suppressing and terrorizing all those who sought political change and reform, regardless of religion or race, and of whether this causes the destruction of the heritage of Syria and the displacement of its minorities. Syria will not become calm without transition to democracy and respect for human rights ”

This report includes the record of attacks carried out by the main parties to the conflict in Syria against Christian places of worship from March 2011 to September 2019. The report also outlines the most notable attacks against Christian places of worship that occurred since the SNHR’s last study at the end of April 2015. The report notes that the record of attacks includes bombings that targeted civilian places of worship, with no military headquarters or equipment nearby, turning Christian places of worship military headquarters by some parties, and places of worship have regularly been subjected to more than one attack, and we document each attack as a separate violation.

The report stresses that under international humanitarian law, civilian objects are classed as being protected from military attacks unless they are used for military purposes, with this protection suspended when these objects are used for military purposes and for the duration of such use; once the civilian object is no longer being used for any military purpose and returns to its former civilian status, military attacks are once again prohibited and the object’s protected status is resumed.

According to the report, at least 124 attacks were documented against Christian places of worship by the main parties in Syria between March 2011 and September 2019, 75 of which at the hands of Syrian Regime forces, 10 at the hands of ISIS, while Hay’at Tahrir al Sham was responsible for another two attacks. According to the report, 33 attacks occurred at the hands of factions of the Armed Opposition, and four others at the hands of other parties.

The report reveals that these attacks have caused damage to at least 76 Christian places of worship, six of which have been attacked by more than one party.

According to the report, the record of attacks against Christian places of worship includes the conversion of 11 places of worship into military or administrative headquarters by the main parties to the conflict, six of which at the hands of Syrian Regime forces, while two at the hands of ISIS and faction of the Armed Opposition each, and one at the hands of Hay’at Tahrir al Sham.

The report adds that the weapons possessed by the Syrian regime, including missiles and barrel bombs, have caused the greatest damage to buildings and contents compared to those of other parties, with the regime followed by ISIS in terms of the scale of damage. Despite the large number of attacks carried out by factions of the Armed Opposition, the damage resulting from their bombing was minor compared to that inflicted by the Syrian regime and ISIS.

The report stresses that international humanitarian law strongly prohibits attacks on protected objects, which must be protected in times of international and internal armed conflict, and prohibits indiscriminate or deliberate attacks and reprisals against these objects, or their being used in the work of the war effort according to (Protocol 2, Article 16).

According to the report, intentional attacks on places of worship constitute war crimes, and repeating such attacks on the same place of worship is a strong indicator of

deliberation in regard to these attacks and of a desire to destroy a place of worship. Also, some of the incidents of bombing have inflicted collateral damage that involved loss of civilian lives or injuries. There are strong indicators suggesting that this damage was excessive compared to the anticipated military benefit.

According to the report, the incidents of bombing have included targeting civilian targets, with the attacking forces thereby violating Articles 52, 53, 54, 55 and 56 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions.

The report calls on Security Council to take further action following the adoption of resolutions 2139 and 2254, to refer the Syrian issue to the International Criminal Court and to hold all those involved in perpetrating crimes accountable, as well as to impose sanctions that include the Syrian and Iran regimes, primarily the imposition of arms embargoes, and to place those directly involved in committing war crimes on the lists of sanctions and international arrest warrants, and to include militias fighting alongside the Syrian government on the international terrorism list.

The report calls on the international community to protect the Syrian people from daily killing and to lift sieges, as well as to increase support for relief efforts. Additionally, the report calls on the international community to enact the principle of universal jurisdiction in local courts regarding these crimes in order to ensure that fair trials are held for all those who were involved, as well as to implement the 'Responsibility to Protect' doctrine and to impose further sanctions on the Syrian regime, which continues to use aircraft fuel to bomb and destroy places of worship.

The report also calls on OHCHR to submit a report to the Human Rights Council and other organs of the United Nations on the incidents mentioned in this report.

The report calls on the European Union and the USA to make greater efforts to protect civilians and places of worship in Syria, to use force in the event of repeated attacks on world heritage sites, and to target airports that bomb civilians and places of worship.

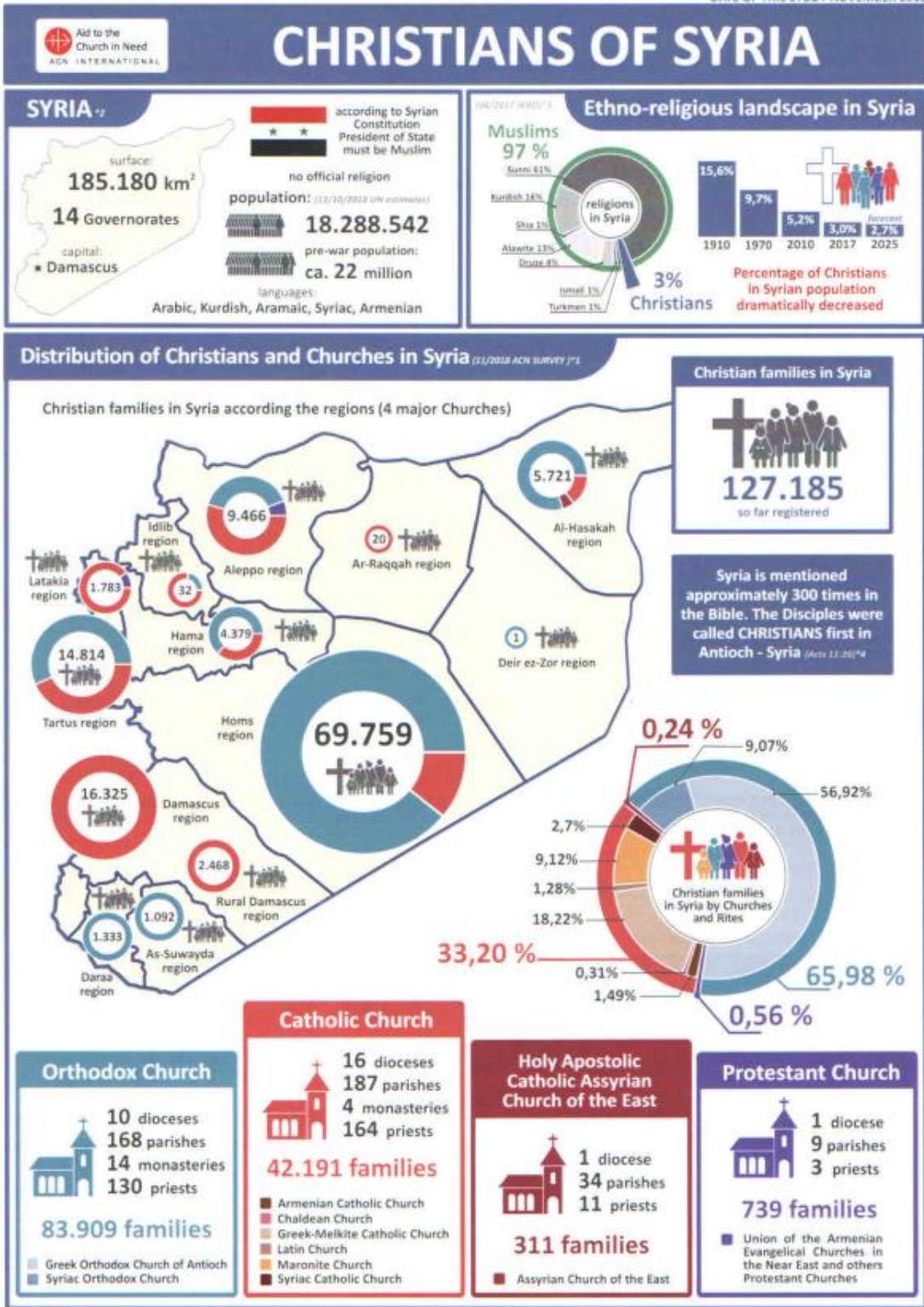
The report calls on the Russian regime to put pressure on its ally the Syrian regime to stop bombing Christian places of worship and to take a serious stance in the event of repeated targeting, to put pressure on the Syrian regime to remove its forces and military equipment from Christian places of worship, and to undertake to respect and protect these properties, noting that the Syrian regime is the greatest threat to society, the state, societal stability and minorities.

The report also calls on factions of the Armed Opposition to ensure the protection of civilians and civilian objects in all areas, to open investigations into incidents reported in this report, to hold those involved in the targeting of Christian places of worship accountable, and to restore and protect Christian places of worship in areas under their control.

Click [here](#) to read the full report.

Mapping Christians in Syria

Infographic and excerpt of Aid to the Church in Need report on religious freedom in Syria (<https://religious-freedom-report.org/report/?report=877>)



Excerpt from the 2018 religious freedom report of Aid to the Church in Need

Full report: <https://religious-freedom-report.org/report/?report=877>

Aid to the Church in Need - The UN-created Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights found that Sunni Muslims accounted for most civilian casualties and detainees, and that the Syrian government used the blockading of Sunni-majority opposition areas as a weapon of war.[7] Because of the recruitment of foreign Shia fighters in countries including Afghanistan and Pakistan, Sunni communities have launched attacks on Shia communities in those countries, indicating that the Syrian conflict is exacerbating Sunni-Shia tensions elsewhere. Traditionally Sunni area of Damascus, Homs and Deir-ez-Zor Province (eastern Syria) were reportedly being settled by Iranian, Iraqi, and Lebanese Shia fighters and their families. Some reports suggest that Christians in areas of Damascus, including Bab Tuma and Bab Sharqi, were pressured to sell to Iranians.[8]

Ismailis and Druze have been easy targets for armed groups, because of their concentration in certain areas. Both groups have also complained of government pressure to serve in the military. The regime has seized Ismaili and Druze men, aged 18 to 42, who resisted conscription, driving most of them out of the country.[9]

The presence of Islamist groups among the numerous opposition militias has caused major problems for the country's minority communities. For example, Al-Nusra Front - subsequently renamed Fateh Al-Sham Front, which then merged with other groups to become Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham in early 2017- has been implicated in many of the atrocities against Christians during the course of the war including Ma'aloula and Sadad. The complex relations between different rebel groups have meant that the so-called moderate opposition militias have - whether intentionally or not - collaborated in the attacks on Christians. For example, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) fought alongside Al-Nusra to prevent Sadad being retaken in 2013 when the latter were committing war crimes against the town's Christian inhabitants. However, as the war has progressed there have been attempts by groups including the FSA to distance themselves from both Al-Nusra and Daesh (ISIS).[10]

Many members of religious minority groups held by Daesh are still missing, including 25 Christians. The liberation of Daesh-held territory in 2017 highlighted that some of Syria's most prominent Christian leaders are still missing, such as Italian Jesuit priest Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, Syriac Orthodox Archbishop of Aleppo Mar Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim, Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Aleppo Paul Yazigi, Armenian Catholic priest Father Michel Kayyal, and Greek Orthodox priest Father Maher Mahfouz.[11]

In October 2017 Daesh seized a bus full of Druze travellers in Hama on their way from Damascus to Idlib. It initially held the 50 people as hostages but later released all but two, who it is suspected were killed.[12]

On 1st October 2017 Daesh militants retook Al-Qaryatayn, Homs Province, a town with a large Christian population. In the three weeks the extremists held Al-Qaryatayn before it was liberated by Syrian regime forces, Daesh executed 116 people.[13] The town, home to 2,000 Christians before the rise of Daesh, had only a few hundred Christians by the time the extremists first took control of Al-Qaryatayn in August 2015, as many had fled in anticipation of the group's arrival. When Daesh first occupied the town, the militants took 200 Christians hostage until they agreed to pay the jizya tax, which is levied on non-Muslims. Payment would allow them to remain in the city, Daesh said.[14]

In May 2017, Daesh fighters launched attacks on Aqarib Al-Safiyah and Al-Manboujah, two villages in Hama Province inhabited predominantly by Ismailis, a minority Shia Muslim group, killing 52 people.[15]

In 2017, the Syrian government, along with its Russian and Iranian allies, recaptured much of the territory formerly under the control of opposition groups. As a result, fewer

violations of religious freedom occurred in areas held by the armed opposition perpetrated than in previous years.

In general, all armed groups have violated human rights in the areas they control throughout the course of the conflict. For example in 2015, Al-Qaeda affiliate Al-Nusra forced the small Druze community in an area once controlled by Daesh to convert to Sunni Islam. In 2017, the Druze were unable to freely practise their religion and traditions.[16]

A January 2017 report by a coalition of mainly UK-based Christian charities working in Iraq and Syria asserted that it was "vital that Christians and other minority populations have support for their political and security concerns if they are to feel reassured enough to return [...], rebuild their communities and undertake any reconciliation process".[17] In an interview given to Hungary-based news agency BosNewsLife the same month, Patriarch Ignatius Ephrem Joseph III Younan, the leader of the Syriac Catholic Church, urged the West and the United Nations to end without delay sanctions against his country and to stop supporting rebels. He said: "I still hope that the Western countries, that means the Western politicians, would accept to stop financing and arming so-called rebels because there would be otherwise no end to the sectarian war."[18]

In March 2017, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (Al-Nusra Front) carried out a double bomb attack in the car park of the Bab Al-Saghir cemetery, a well-known Shia pilgrimage site, killing 44 and wounding 120, mostly Shia pilgrims.[19]

Armed groups have kidnapped people for ransom or prisoner exchange with the government or other armed groups. As of September 2017, up to 100 men from the Damascus suburb of Adra Al-Omalayah belonging to religious minority groups were still held as hostages.[20]

In Kurdish-controlled areas, minority groups have complained of human rights abuses by Kurdish groups that de facto administer about 30 percent of north-eastern Syria. According to the Assyrian Monitor for Human Rights (AMHR), non-Kurdish communities in the area have reported demographic changes, including the displacement of Armenian and Assyrian Christians and Sunni Arab Muslims in favour of Kurds, and the imposition of Kurdish language and culture in some areas. The AMHR also noted growing pressure on private Christian schools in Al-Hasakeh Province to change their curriculum or risk being closed. Changes include teaching Kurdish, hiring Kurdish teachers, and learning the ideas of Abdallah Ocalan, the jailed leader of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), which the US has designated as a terrorist organisation.[21]

In September 2016 the Kurdish Peoples Protection Unit was accused of carrying out acts of violence and intimidation against Christians in Al-Hasakeh. Listing a numbers of incidents, Syriac Catholic Archbishop Jacques Behnan Hindo of Al-Hasakeh-Nisibi told Agenzia Fides that he believed the Kurds were planning to force out Christians. He said: "The epicentre of their raids and acts of force is always the area of the six churches, where most of the Christians live. In many cases they expelled the Christians from their homes under the threat of Kalashnikovs. And where they enter, they loot everything".[22]

Christian community leaders have also complained that Kurdish authorities seized homes abandoned during fighting. In late 2017, under a new regulation, abandoned Christian homes in the city of Tabqa, Raqqqa Province, were to be given to Kurdish families if their owners had not yet returned. Christians and Sunni Muslims have also accused the largely Kurdish Syrian Defence Forces of working with Kurdish authorities to sideline, discriminate against, and at times even attack non-Kurdish populations.[23]

In December 2017, the World Watch Monitor news agency published an article on Christian families going back to the Syrian city of Homs five years after fleeing it. Despite "little incentive" to return, some of them were able to rebuild their homes [24]. Many Christians interviewed for the article said that "the Middle East is no longer a home for [them]".[25] Interviewees insisted on the need for a "national accountability mechanism" to deal with incidents of religious and ethnic persecution and discrimination in Iraq and Syria, in order "to restore faith in a system that ensures all religious and ethnic communities are [treated] as equal citizens and deserving of protection, while also deterring negative actors from taking adverse actions against these communities." [26]

A new law introduced in April 2018 by President Bashar El-Assad, calling on Syrians to register their private properties with the Ministry of Local Administration within 30 days, could allow the government to seize the properties of displaced Syrians. As such, the law could be seen as part of a plan to change the demographics of Syria, settling Shias from Syria, Lebanon and Iraq in previously Sunni areas. It could also be seen as a way for the government and its allies to further pursue their strategic interests by creating Shia areas under their direct control.[27]

From January to March 2018, bombs fired from rebel-held East Ghouta hit Christian areas of Damascus. This prompted Church sources in Syria to allege that these were targeted attacks, such as were seen during the repeated bombing of the Christian quarter of Aleppo. Maronite Archbishop Samir Nassar in Damascus was almost killed when a bomb landed in his bedroom in the Maronite Cathedral complex. He only survived because he had got up to use the bathroom shortly before the shell exploded. In Bab Touma, the Melkite Cathedral and Patriarchate on Straight Street, which is mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles, was hit. The nearby convent of Mary and Jesus in Bab Touma was hit twice.[28] Christians criticised the western media and other organisations for downplaying the casualties, which they stressed were occurring on both sides. Writing to the World Council of Churches (WCC) on 2nd March 2018 about the bombing of Damascus, Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II of the Syriac Orthodox Church wrote:

"You mention 550 victims killed in Eastern Ghouta... However, you neglect to mention hundreds of civilians including many children killed by the mortars and missiles coming from Eastern Ghouta, especially when most of these mortars have long targeted areas populated by Christians from churches which are members of WCC...Your statement clearly shows a biased position concerning what is happening in Syria in general, and in Damascus in particular."

Footnotes

[7] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, op. cit.

[8] "Syria", 2018 Annual Report, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, <http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2018USCIRFAR.pdf> (accessed 10th July 2018).

[9] Ibid.

[10] See for example "Frustration drives Aarsal's FSA into ISIS ranks," Daily Star (Lebanon), 8th September 2014, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Sep-08/269883-frustration-drives-arsals-fsa-into-isis-ranks.ashx> (accessed 19th July 2018)

[11] "Four years later, family reports 'silence' on kidnapped priest in Syria", Crux Now, 30th July 2017, <https://cruxnow.com/global-church/2017/07/30/four-years-later-family-reports-silence-kidnapped-priest-syria/> (accessed 14th July 2018).

[12] "Syria", 2018 Annual Report, op. cit.

[13] "IS recaptures 'symbol of interfaith coexistence' Syrian town", World Watch Monitor, 6th October 2017, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/10/syria-islamic-state-retakes-christian-enclave/> (accessed 11th July 2018); "Syria", 2018 Annual Report, op. cit.

[14] "Syria", 2018 Annual Report, op. cit.

[15] Ibid.

[16] "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Formerly Jabhat al-Nusra)", Mapping Militant Organizations, Stanford University, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi->

bin/groups/view/493?highlight=Al+Nusrah+front (accessed, 16th July 2018); "Syria: Situation of the Druze, including whether they are perceived to be loyal to President Assad by the insurgent groups; treatment by the authorities and the insurgent groups (January 2015-November 2015)", 25th November 2015, Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, <https://irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/country-information/rir/Pages/index.aspx?doc=456249> (accessed 16th July 2018).

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[18] Stefan J. Bos, "Syria's Catholic Leader Urges End To Western Sanctions", Bos News Life, 13th January 2017, <http://www.bosnewslife.com/37393-syrias-catholic-leader-urges-end-to-western-sanctions> (accessed 13th July 2018).

[19] "Syria", 2018 Annual Report, op. cit.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] "Archbishop Hindo: violence and intimidation of the Kurd militias on Christians increase in Hassaké", Agenzia Fides, 20th September 2016, www.fides.org/en/news/60791 (accessed 19th July).

[23] "Syria", 2018 Annual Report, op. cit.

[24] "Syria: Homs Christians return to rebuild homes and lives", World Watch Monitor, 5th December 2017, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/12/syria-homs-christians-return-rebuild-homes-lives/> (accessed 13th July 2018).

[25] "Security not only concern for Syrians returning home", World Watch Monitor, 4th July 2017, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/07/security-not-concern-syrians-returning-home/> (accessed 13th July 2018).

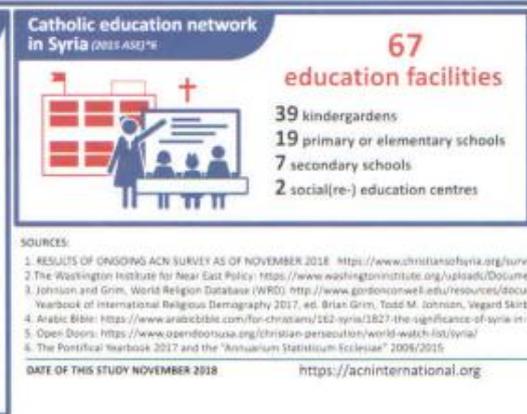
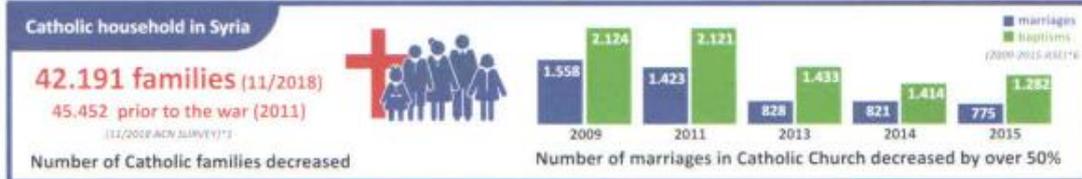
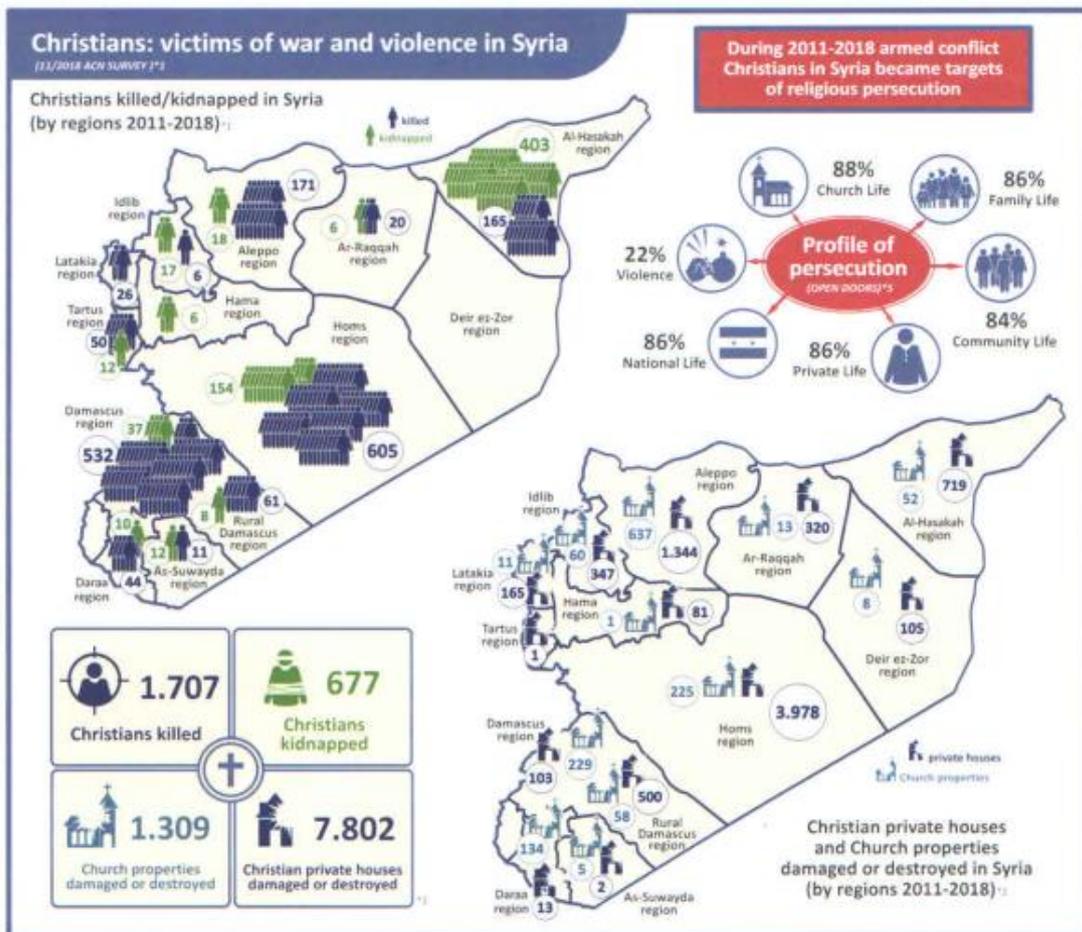
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Christian victims of war and violence: Infographic

Ecumenical humanitarian assistance by Aid to the Church in Need



HRWF (20.04.2019) - According to a survey covering the period 2011-2018 carried out by Aid to the Church in Need, the number of Christian victims as of March 2019 was as follows:

Killed: 1889
Kidnapped: 664
Church property destroyed or damaged: 1249
Christian houses destroyed or damaged: 9855

On the eve of Easter, it was reported that tens of thousands of ruined homes in Syria cannot be repaired or restored because they are damaged beyond repair or, in some cases, unrecognisable by their owners who have gone back home.

Such conditions are not conducive for large-scale returns of refugees from Syria but *Aid to the Church in Need* supports the few who are voluntarily returning.

To stabilise the country and put Syria on the path to recovery, it will be necessary to construct new housing, rebuild infrastructure and public services, create jobs, restore the education and health sectors, and find a way to demobilise armed groups in a safe and sustainable manner. Syria's agricultural sector and food supply, which were decimated over the years of military strife, also need a boost. It is an enormously expensive undertaking, but funding is nowhere in sight.

Since the beginning of the conflict, in March 2011, and up to the end of 2018, *Aid to the Church in Need* has allocated **29.5 million EUR for 738 projects** to support the local churches in need throughout the country.

The projects were implemented by various Christian Churches: **Roman Catholic Church, Melchite Greek Catholic Church, Maronite Catholic Church, Chaldean Catholic Church, Syrian Catholic Church, Latin Catholic Church, Armenian Catholic Church, Armenian Orthodox Church, Syrian Orthodox Church, Greek Orthodox Church;**

with the cooperation of 130 project partners on the spot:

Homs (11,458,069 EUR)
Aleppo (8,719,775 EUR)
Damascus (4,347,646 EUR)
Tartus (3,148,846 EUR)
Al-Hasakah (777,459 EUR)
Damascus countryside (403,721 EUR)
Latakia (269,070 EUR)
Daraa (154,240 EUR)
Hama (95,400 EUR)
where high numbers of Christians were living.

Some 80% (23.5 million EUR) were in the form of emergency aid, among them some 308 for basic necessities of Christian families who have not left the country.

Some 11% for construction projects and 3% for pastoral aid. The rest was devoted to mass stipends, subsistence aid, religious formation, vehicles and transport, religious literature, media apostolate...

Aid to the Church in Need devoted over 3 million EUR for reconstruction projects in the following governorates:

Homs: 1,442,031 EUR
Aleppo: 753,700 EUR
Latakia: 540,800 EUR
Damascus/ Rif Dimashq: 218,600 EUR

Hama: 18,000 EUR
Al-Hasakah: 20,000 EUR
Tartus: 10,000 EUR
Daraa: 10,000 EUR

Without emergency massive reconstruction projects of general infrastructure and restoration of public services (education, health...) by the UN, the EU, donor countries and humanitarian NGOs, refugees in the Middle East and in Europe will not be interested in going back to Syria.

The participation of other religious charities around the world (Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim and others) in reconstruction programs will contribute to slow down and stop the flow of refugees as well as to the voluntary return of those who have left Syria since 2011. Incentives to their return and strong signals are urgently needed.

Source of the infographics, statistics and data: Aid to the Church in Need International (Giving a Hope for Peace - The Middle East Complex Situation in the Magnifying Glass of Syria, Fr Andrzej Halemba)

Russia to restore church complex in Syrian city of Arbil

Interfax (29.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Gb3FIZ> - Russia will continue restoring Christian sites in Syria, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia told the Patriarch John of Antioch and All the East.

"At your request, an important project will be implemented in the very near future: the restoration of the church complex in the city of Arbil and of a church in the town of Al-Zabadani near Damascus," Patriarch Kirill said at a meeting with John X in Moscow on Tuesday.

Russia also will help install necessary equipment at the patriarch's Al-Hosn hospital.

Restoration work in the ancient Orthodox Convent of Saint Thecla in Maaloula is nearing completion, Patriarch Kirill said.

"We hope that pilgrims will again be able to visit these places and rejoice at coming into contact with the spiritual and church tradition of your Church," he said.

Patriarch John X of Antioch has arrived in Russia on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Russian Church Local Council that elected the incumbent patriarch of Moscow.