

Table of Contents

- ***The untold story of Syrian Kurdish Christians***
-

The untold story of Syrian Kurdish Christians

By Nadine Maenza & David Alton

Providence Magazine (12.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/35Oqo89> - "We feel forgotten and abandoned sometimes. The world does not know much about the challenges and difficulties that face us. All countries in the region do not recognize conversion from Islam. This makes life very difficult for us, especially in terms of marriages, funerals, and obtaining birth and death certificates, because we are still considered Muslims by law."

These were the words of Pastor Nihad Hassan, who leads one of three Kurdish churches in Beirut, Lebanon, whose members are mainly Syrian Kurds who fled the war in their home country. Pastor Nihad estimates the number of Kurdish Christians living in Lebanon at over 5,000. "Fifty families have emigrated to the West recently, and we used to have a flourishing church and over 250 families in Afrin [in northern Syria] before the Turkish invasion."

Pastor Nihad, who is originally from Afrin, converted from Islam to Christianity when he was a political prisoner in Damascus in 2008. He became a pastor in 2017 after he graduated from the Arabic Baptist Theological School in Beirut. He also serves Kurdish congregations outside Beirut in Farzal, Qub-Elias, and Zahleh. Last month Nihad baptized 21 new Christians, and 15 others are still awaiting baptism. Last year he baptized 26 people.

Living in fear

Today the vast majority of Kurdish Christians are evangelicals, and it is possible to find evangelical Kurdish churches in Erbil, Selimani, and Duhok in Iraq, and in Hassakeh, Qamishli, Kobani, Amouda, and Afrin (until 2018) in Syria. Their numbers are estimated in the low tens of thousands and include a combination of native Christians and converts, a small percentage of the 200,000 Christians left in Iraq and less than 100,000 left in Syria.

In Kobani near the border with Turkey, 50 families from Muslim backgrounds (approximately 300 persons), worship at the Brethren Church, the first-ever evangelical Kurdish church in the town. Pastor Nihad said, "We are grateful that our community has this church in Kobani, where they can worship and celebrate Easter and Christmas. They even commemorated the anniversary of the Armenian genocide last April. But they live in anxiety and fear that Turkey and its Islamist loyalists will attack them anytime and destroy their lives as they did in Afrin in 2018." In September 2014 the Islamic State (IS) invaded Kobani, which is home to 450,000 people, but the Kurdish YPG (The People's Protection Units) liberated the area after a fierce battle in January of 2015. Later in 2015, the YGP joined with others to become the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

As partners to the United States and International Coalition, the SDF were the boots on the ground in the fight against IS. Losing over 11,000 lives, they were responsible for the defeat of the IS caliphate while the US and international community provided air support and military guidance. They also understood that permanently defeating IS required

more than just military action; it required governance. After liberating an area from IS, they would immediately set up local self-governance with neighborhoods electing dual co-chairs, a man and a woman. They would then set up economic co-ops, an education committee, a health care committee, etc., and start meeting their own needs as a community, while promoting religious tolerance, human rights, and women's rights.

Rather than instituting a military dictatorship as many may have done, they formed a democracy, now called the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). In war-torn Syria, it is the only place where people are free to worship without hindrance. In fact, it is the only place in the region where people can proselytize and legally change their religion. Because of these conditions, the Kurdish Christian community has continued to grow. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) highlighted the remarkable degree of religious freedom in the AANES in its 2020 Annual Report on Syria and other publications.

Since their invasion in January 2018, Turkish forces have controlled the nearby city of Afrin, which previously enjoyed rights and freedoms under the AANES. One Muslim resident said, "Islamist groups loyal to Turkey have turned Afrin into a gangland. Arbitrary arrests, kidnapping and ransom, rape, and assassinations have become part of our daily life. Afrin is no longer that open, tolerant, and diverse city it once was. Turkey has transformed it into another Tora Bora."

The 300 Christian families who once resided in Afrin have fled, and the church has closed. Music and art schools have been shut down, and schoolgirls must wear veils and niqabs. Authorities have imposed sharia law across the city and its neighboring towns and villages. The presence of several Islamist groups, which often compete and fight each other for spoils and influence, adds to a prevailing sense of insecurity and fear.

Despite the precarious position for many Christians in the region, on October 6, 2019, President Donald Trump ordered the US military to withdraw from northeast Syria. Turkey swiftly took the opportunity to launch a full-scale offensive codenamed "Operation Peace Spring" (Barış Pınarı Harekâtı), which resulted in several hundred civilian deaths, the displacement of over 200,000 civilians, and widespread human rights violations that many call war crimes. During the chaos, Russia claimed a military base as the US was leaving, and Assad regime troops entered northeast Syria for the first time in years.

Kumi Naidoo, secretary-general of Amnesty International, commented on the Turkish offensive, saying it "wreaked havoc on the lives of Syrian civilians who once again have been forced to flee their homes and are living in constant fear of indiscriminate bombardment, abductions and summary killings. Turkish military forces and their allies have displayed an utterly callous disregard for civilian lives, launching unlawful deadly attacks in residential areas that have killed and injured civilians."

Both Nadine Maenza and Lord David Alton sought to obtain first-hand information by visiting the Bardarash Refugee Camp in the northern part of the Nineveh Plain in neighboring Iraq. Visiting in their own capacities and without government agencies, Maenza was able to visit in November of 2019, and Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) and Alton visited in December. The camp was established in October 2019 to provide a place of safety for refugees fleeing Turkey's bombardment and invasion of northeast Syria. The camp is in a desolate area and is home to 2,520 families—some 9,894 individuals. Tents and makeshift shelters have replaced homes bombed by Turkish planes. Most of the refugees in Bardarash come from the Syrian cities of Hassaka, Qamishli, Kobani, and Rass Alein.

Bardarash resident Salem Farhim Mohammed is from the town of Tal-Tamr in northeast Syria. He is 53 years old and has a family of five. His grandfather was an Armenian who

fled from Mardin, a Christian enclave in southeast Turkey, when the Armenian Genocide began in 1914. The Kurds in Tal-Tamr provided him with food and shelter, and he settled there. In October 2019, his grandson and great-grandchildren were forced from their home. "We were told that we are infidels," Mohammed said. Their generators, tools, and possessions were seized. It took ten days of difficult travel to reach Bardarash. They have since learned that a mortar attack killed one of his cousins. He said, "Erdogan thinks he is God. Mr. Trump says we Kurds are 'not angels.' No, but we are human beings."

Nadine was also able to travel to the town of Tal-Tamr and see for herself the destruction Turkey's airstrikes brought to this Christian area. While visiting the Tal-Tamr hospital, doctors and nurses wept and described the civilians they treated and the ones they were unable to save. Nadine also met with Christians and Yazidis in other areas of AANES and heard about the environment that promotes human rights, freedom of religion or belief, and gender equality. Kurdish, Syriac, and Armenian Christians, Arab and Kurdish Muslims, Yazidis, and other religious groups live peacefully together and serve in all levels of the AANES and Syrian Democratic Forces. While the AANES may have residual issues to address, it has nevertheless produced conditions unparalleled in the rest of the Middle East.

Unfortunately, conditions in the areas Turkey invaded and occupied have only deteriorated since the October invasion. A USCIRF hearing in June, entitled "Safeguarding Religious Freedom in Northeast Syria," documented how Turkey's forces target Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities, including Christians and Yazidis, with killings, kidnappings, rapes, forced conversions, exhortations, detentions, and the destruction of religious sites. They are also forcing demographic change by moving Syrian internally displaced persons (IDPs) from other parts of Syria into the homes of those who have been forced to flee. Genocide Watch termed these actions war crimes and crimes against humanity. Fortunately, the President decided to keep a small footprint in Syria as part of the International Coalition to fight IS and protect the oil.

On September 15, the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic released a report documenting these crimes. They called on Turkey to "respect international law and halt violations committed by armed groups under Turkey's control, including killings, kidnappings, unlawful transfers, seizures of land and properties and forcible evictions." Panel Chair Paulo Pinheiro said, "the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army may have committed the war crimes of hostage-taking, cruel treatment, torture, and rape."

In Afrin, recent news indicates that Turkish-backed forces are now targeting Kurdish Christians, particularly converts. Radwan Muhammad, a Kurdish Christian, was arrested for having a Christian funeral for his wife, even though they both converted many years ago. He has been charged with apostasy and is currently being held pending further charges. USCIRF and CSW have urged Turkey to facilitate his release. The international community must speak up and pressure Turkey to intervene or further arrests and persecution are likely. The prevailing repression, of a kind only seen in an authoritarian country, has forced Kurdish Christians to go underground.

A call to action

Freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right that governments should ensure for every human being without any discrimination or limitation. In a region like the Middle East, which is riddled with conflict and sectarianism, religious minorities are particularly vulnerable, especially converts from Islam, including Kurdish Christian converts. The international community must continue to stand up for these communities, press Middle Eastern governments to prioritize freedom of religion or belief, and support

those that do. In order to preserve this right in Syria, USCIRF has made important recommendations to the US government, although it would benefit the UK and international community to consider them as well. For instance, they recommended that the US government exert pressure on Turkey to provide a timeline for its withdrawal from Syria.

Since Western governments use sanctions against Syria to punish and weaken the Assad regime, the US and EU should also lift sanctions from areas the AANES governs, expand engagement with this organization, and grant political recognition to it as a legitimate local government. The AANES was created to function under a central government in a post-Assad Syria, and it must be included in all activities pursuant to UN Resolution 2254, which calls for a ceasefire and political settlement in the country. As the only successful government in Syria representing a third of the country, the AANES deserves to play a part in the formulation of any political solution for Syria. The future of freedom of religion or belief very likely depends on its inclusion.

The story of Kurdish Christians and all other religious minorities in the Middle East is one of great suffering, but it is also a story of survival and great resilience. Fortunately, there is time to save northeast Syria as a refuge for these communities, but only if the international community offers immediate support.
