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Syria war fuels Christian flight from Middle East

BBC News (16.12.2012) - The Lebanese city of Zahle sits high in the Bekaa valley, on the ancient highway that connects Damascus to Beirut and the world beyond.

To reach it from the coast by road in December you climb sharply through a series of hairpin bends - every few minutes you catch a glimpse of the steep highland scenery as a gap appears in the raw, foggy air.

Zahle - a Christian city - has known dark times.

It became a dangerous frontline as the armed forces of Syria intervened in Lebanon's long, complex and bitter civil war in the 1980s.

In a very similar conflict in the 1860s it was torched by besieging Druze and Turkish fighters after its Christian defenders were defeated. Civilians were massacred in the bloody aftermath.

Return and rebuild

These days, Zahle is a place of safety.

Christian families fleeing the violence and chaos of Syria's civil war just a few kilometres further down that ancient highway are arriving in the city where Christian aid agencies care for them.

The question is - will be they be able to return to their homes once the fighting dies down or will they become the latest chapter in the long story of the how the Christian population of the Middle East is continuing to decline?

For now, the refugees I met in Lebanon were optimistic; the talk is of returning and rebuilding.

But the omens are not good.

At moments of crisis in the Middle East, Christians have tended to pack and leave to build safer and more peaceful lives for themselves elsewhere - think of Palestine in 1948 or Iraq in our own turbulent times.

The statistics are striking. A hundred years ago it's thought that around a fifth of the population of the Middle East was Christian, although it's hard to be certain. These days the figure is probably closer to 5%.

Christians are no longer a majority in Lebanon, which was once a political and cultural stronghold - and they're even in a minority in the Palestinian city of Bethlehem, the very birthplace of Christ.

Christian flight

In an age where we tend rather arrogantly to see Christianity as a phenomenon of the developed world - the faith that colonising Europeans took to the territories they conquered - it's worth remembering that the Middle East is the cradle of that faith.

St Paul was travelling to Damascus when he was blinded in a moment of conversion, after all. The street where he stayed as he recovered is still there now.

If current trends continue, then soon Christian influence in the Middle East may dwindle to nothing.

At the moment Egypt is something of a stronghold - about 10% of the population are Copts - descendants of the ancient pre-Muslim inhabitants of the country. But modern Egypt is overwhelmingly Muslim, and many Christians are worried that under an Islamist government, the country will become for them an increasingly cold house.

The new Coptic Pope Tawadros told us that the battle over the nature of the country's new constitution would play an important role in determining how comfortable the new Egypt would be for its original inhabitants.

"We hope that in future there's equality for all Egyptians," he said. "But in the past Christians have not shared completely in social and political life. The constitution has to be under the umbrella of citizenship, not the umbrella of religion."

The fate of the Copts under Egypt's former leader Hosni Mubarak was interesting.

They weren't persecuted but they lived under heavy restrictions which made it clear the country belonged more to the Muslim majority than it did to them. Building a new church or even repairing an old one required absurdly high levels of official approval (up to the president). Building or repairing a mosque was infinitely easier.

And one of the reasons why the flight of Christians from Middle East in general is a difficult story to tell is that it is in general not a story of persecution but of subtler demographic factors.

Underprivileged

There has been anti-Christian violence - most notably in Iraq in recent years.

But the Christian population is falling in statistical terms partly because it has a much lower birth-rate than the Muslim population around it.

And it has a high propensity to emigrate.

Not all Middle Eastern Christians are affluent or well-educated - some of those who fled the violence in Iraq were poor and under-privileged.

But many are well educated, with good language skills learned at religious schools and strong international support networks - many Christian churches are international. So in hard times, it's simply easier for them to leave.

Even in Lebanon, which once had a Christian majority, numbers have dwindled.

In Beirut I met Fadi Halisso, a Roman Catholic former engineer from the northern Syrian city of Aleppo who's now studying for the Jesuit priesthood in the Lebanese capital.

He said Christians tended to want to live peacefully in a turbulent region and were quick to leave as soon as that peace was threatened.

He quoted for me the example of an Armenian Orthodox community in his own home city who had left as soon as the shadow of violence threatened. It's not clear when, if ever, they will return.

"We can't say that Christians are targeted," he told me. " In Iraq they were caught in the middle of war and I don't think they were targeted more than other groups. In general Christians are not numerous, they don't carry weapons and they prefer to retreat."

When I asked Fadi whether Muslim hostility towards Christians, or the rise of political Islam were factors in the declining Christian population, he told me that individual incidents like attacks on churches in Alexandria or Baghdad could have a disproportionate effect.

"We cannot say that Muslims are hostile towards Christians," he told me. "There are some, but of course when you have a few people making troubles, they can affect the whole region. After those church attacks, the Christians of the region felt threatened even though it was in another country or far away. It's an overall impression that we are not welcome anymore even if we have good relationships with our neighbours."

Fear of persecution

Fadi told me he thought it was inevitable that the Christian population of the Middle East would continue to decline because of its own demographic characteristics.

Which leaves the question of what will happen to the Christians who have fled the fighting in Syria so far.

Some of the refugees we met in Lebanon were supporters of the Assad regime - believing in the official line that it has protected religious minorities - and others had worked actively in the opposition movement to bring it down.

Those young activists are optimistic, believing that a new, tolerant Syria can eventually be built on the ruins of civil war, in which Christians and Muslims will be able to live side by side.

The Christian refugees who believe in Assad seem to feel they'll only be able to go back if he somehow eventually prevails over the rebellion, however unlikely that now seems. If he loses, they believe an Islamist state will be created in which minorities will be persecuted and forced out.

An image stays with me of one father living with 25 members of his family in an apartment in Zahle in the Bekaa Valley - their home in Homs was destroyed in the fighting in Syria.

His two-year-old son has sad, wise eyes and soft, long hair.

By local tradition his hair won't be cut until he's baptised and his parents won't have him baptised until they can have it done back home in Syria.

As we sat and chatted, the father absent-mindedly stroked his son's head. You couldn't help but wonder how much more waiting they face before that baptism can eventually take place.

Christians targeted for their politics or their faith?

Incidents of anti-Christian violence appear to increase as war intensifies

Open Doors News (29.11.2012) — Wednesday 28th's twin deadly car bombs in the Christian and Druze suburb of Jaramana in the Syrian capital Damascus appeared to target two communities which so far have not joined the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad's government. State media said "terrorists" were behind the blasts which killed at least 38 and injured at least 83; the government says it is protecting these two minorities from "terrorist extremists". The location was not near any strategic targets such as military or government buildings. However, the area is known for its loyalty to President Assad's government, making it a target for armed opposition groups. No group has yet claimed responsibility.

These are not the first attacks in Jaramana to have been blamed on those seeking to overthrow the government. But in the past, the armed opposition has denied any involvement and repeatedly said it is targeting Mr Assad's forces and not minority groups.

Syria appears to be heading towards deepening breakdown, with sectarian fragmentation likened to its neighbour Lebanon's civil war. Inevitably, Christians have been caught up in the chaos over the past months, as we report here - starting with a Syrian Orthodox priest who was deliberately killed.

In an act of courage 43 year old Father Fadi Haddad set off by car to negotiate the release of one of his parishioners, who had been kidnapped. A week later, it became clear that the parish priest from Qatana, some 20 kilometers south-west of Damascus, had paid the highest price. On Oct. 25th, his lifeless and mutilated body was found on the side of a road. Qatana had been terrorized by radical fighters, locals told Catholic Charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN). "Extremists went through the streets shouting 'Alawites to the grave, Christians to Beirut'. They want to kick us out". A pastor who often provided Haddad with Bibles and who met him a few days before he was kidnapped told us 'Father Fadi's superiors had asked him why he kept traveling back and forth between Qatana and Damascus. He responded: 'I cannot not serve Jesus, I need to help people, that is why I have to move around.'

Christians in Syria say the particularly gruesome death of Father Fadi - his eyes had been gouged out - marks a turning point for them. Before, Christians were caught up in the war in the same way as Kurds, Druze, and all other ethnic groups. Also, a part of the Christian community in Syria has been actively supporting President Assad, thus being an actor in the civil war.

But some Syrian Christians say a series of incidents recently points to a trend of violence against Christian civilians, including priests. Particularly worrying, they say, is the

growing presence of foreign radical Islamic fighters in the country, and the many Islamist brigades within the opposition Free Syrian Army. Yet there is fear of government forces as well. On Nov. 14, four missiles struck the Christian village of Tel Nasri in northeast Syria. St. Mary's Church was severely damaged, as were many houses. As the Assyrian International News Agency reports, a 14-year old boy was killed and many were wounded, apparently by Assad's fighter planes, though that is not confirmed.

Before that, on Oct. 21st, a car bomb exploded near the gate of Bab Touma, the historical Christian neighbourhood in Damascus. The car was parked next to two churches, a Maronite and a Latin church in Bab Touma street, which emerges into 'the straight street' mentioned in the Bible. The explosive detonated at a time when local Christians were heading to church for Sunday Mass. At least 10 people were killed and more than 16 injured. While the nearby police station may have been the target, the timing of the explosion meant that churchgoers would be hurt.

Also, another bomb is said to have been found before it detonated near two churches in the residential district.

The two churches were warned and they told all their parishioners to go home, in case the authorities were unsuccessful in disabling the bomb.

A month before this week's twin car bombs, on Oct. 29, a bomb in Jaramana killed 11 people and wounded 69. Except for one victim, all belonged to the Christian part of the population. On Sep. 3rd a car explosive took the lives of at least 5 residents of the same locality. A clear distinction is often hard to make between violence specifically aimed at Christians on the one hand, and on the other hand the reality of war which Christians, like other groups, get caught up in. Christian support and aid agency Open Doors received a letter from a Christian in Aleppo, telling about a hundred insurgents who came into the Christian area and infiltrated a main street. The Syrian army quickly retook the zone and no lives were lost. Many Christians in war zones left their houses behind and are staying elsewhere with family- like their Muslim neighbours. That is how much of the city of Homs became a ghost town. But 84-year old Elias Mansour refused to leave and on October 30th, the war took his life. He was the last Christian in Homs, as media worldwide reported.

Maybe less devastating but of high symbolic value are the stories about destroyed, battered or desecrated churches. In Homs and Aleppo, and many other cities and towns, historical church buildings have been damaged as a result of the war.

There are two more reasons why Syrian Christians may find themselves targeted at this lawless time, beyond the indiscrimination of a country at civil war. First, Christian communities in Syria don't arm themselves in any organized way, which makes them vulnerable to criminal groups. This is particularly the case in those regions where the police and the military are almost absent due to war efforts elsewhere in the country. On July 19th, Staefo Malke was trying to make some extra money for his family as a taxi driver. When several men got into his car and started arguing about the deal they wanted to make with him, a row started. Knowing he was a Christian and not protected by any police or armed group, they shot him dead on the spot, as a family member told Dutch public radio. The same principle may have been applied on Sep 25th to 150 - 240 unarmed Greek-Catholics who were kidnapped from their village of Rableh, and released the next day.

Second, many Syrian Christians are relatively prosperous and are considered to have family in the West - making them an attractive objective for kidnapping for money. In the case of an Assyrian Christian from the Aleppo area, his family paid a lot of money before he was dropped off in a deserted area, alive but in shock. He and his wife and

children then joined the 400,000 plus refugees from Syria, according to latest figures from the UNHCR, including at least 150,000 in Turkey.

Situation for Christians in Syria deteriorates, but Ministry continues

Religion Today (29.08.2012) - The situation in embattled Syria is getting worse for Christians.

That's what a contact in Syria told Open Doors.

"The Christians who have a way out of the country are leaving, but unlike the time after the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, when hundreds of thousands Christians fled Iraq, the surrounding countries have closed their doors to Syrians," the contact says.

For the Syrian Christians who want to flee the country during the civil war, there are not many possibilities left. They are trying to flee to countries which have a degree of freedom of religion, but Jordan and others have closed their borders to them.

The contact adds: "Only Lebanon is still a way out. Whoever has the money and the ability to leave is leaving, especially from Aleppo. Another contact person said that there are rumors in the country that the number of Christians has decreased significantly with hundreds of thousands fleeing."

The population of Syria is an estimated 22.5 million. Open Doors estimated in 2011 the number of Christians at least 1.6 million. "We don't believe hundreds of thousands of Christians have left the country," the spokesman for Open Doors says in reaction to the mass exodus rumors. "Many stay in the country because they can't go anywhere. Only the wealthier ones can go to Lebanon. Among the Internally Displaced People (IDP), there are a number of Christians, but they certainly don't number hundreds of thousands."

According to the Syrian contact, the Christian leaders are "still standing strong."

He adds: "The pastors and leaders want to stay for now and want to encourage their congregations. Some of them have received advice from recently emigrated relatives to leave. But they are refusing, wanting to stay and help others."

In the midst of the chaos of war, Open Doors continues its ministry through local churches.

"In spite of the delicate situation in the country, we continue our work with the churches in Syria," the Open Doors spokesman says. "This summer we supported churches for their summer camps for children and helped them with their discipleship programs. We also continued supporting several churches that distribute food and other relief articles."

Open Doors USA president/CEO Dr. Carl Moeller notes that "churches are reaching out to others and serving faithfully in Syria. The message of the gospel is being spread and people are more receptive to it. Praise the Lord that He is working in the midst of violence and chaos. Continue to pray for the brave believers in Syria."

Anti-Assad forces in Syria are growing more Islamist

Haaretz (29.08.2012) -"If I die, and they find my body, don't give me an Islamic burial, and I ask that no Muslim, no matter which sect he belongs to, be present at my funeral." Those were the instructions of Syrian intellectual Nabil Fayad in the will he wrote. Fayad is still alive. But the kidnapping attempt that he recently endured made it clear to him that his days are numbered and that he had better plan his funeral already.

Fayad, who is in his 40s, is a pharmacist and a scholar of comparative religion who has written many books about Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Among other things he studied Hebrew and Aramaic. He is a strong opponent of the radical Islamic parties.

In the same will he directly accuses his family of the kidnapping attempt that took place a few days ago when he was on his way to buy food for his household. He describes how a group of men in their 30s were waiting in ambush for him, and when he realized they were planning to kidnap him, he fled in the direction of a Syrian army checkpoint, and from there he continued under protection to his home.

A Sunni for Assad

Among the kidnapers, Fayad identified several members of his family, whom he names fearlessly. He says his family tried to kidnap him and perhaps even kill him because he opposed the extermination of Alawites by Sunnis, some of the latter being members of his family, and because he is a harsh and public critic of the Islamic movements. What apparently infuriated his relatives and his opponents were his penetrating statements on the program "The Opposite Direction" on Al Jazeera in early August, when he warned that bringing down the regime of Bashar Assad meant Syria would fall into the hands of the radical groups and that the extremist movements would take over the country. Fayad participates regularly in the regime's programs on Syrian television and expresses similar opinions, and is therefore considered a supporter of the regime, although he supports democratic reforms. Despite the threats to his life, he explains that he is unwilling to leave the country for Germany, Qatar or England. He travels to work by public transportation and continues to lead a normal life.

Fayad is not the head of any Syrian political movement and has no government post, but his words are a good reflection of the profound internal disputes among various groups in the Syrian opposition - as well as between the opposition and part of the Syrian public, the part that wants to bring down Assad's regime but is afraid of the alternative that will run the country in the future.

An example of this division is the reaction published on one of the Islamic websites to a program on Al Jazeera in which Fayad participated. The writer, Mohand Khalil, one of the radical Islamic commentators, attacked the anchor of the program, Faisal Qasim, himself a Syrian who has fled the country, for letting Fayad speak. "Fayad claims that he hates the United States and Israel, but at the same time he presents himself as a liberal who is protecting the Jews. Fayad is a scoundrel whose family has rejected him."

Khalil also had a serious complaint against the program's host for allowing "in a preplanned way" a man named Nidhal Naisa to speak. "Naisa is a thug, a man of the regime who claims that he opposes the regime," wrote Khalil. "But the difference between Naisa and Fayad is that Naisa is a member of the Nusayri community, who is defending his heretical community and its tyranny in the country, whereas Fayad is a dog who is barking for the regime, and nothing more."

Nusayris is the ancient name of the Alawites, which is a Shi'ite sect. This name was "replaced" by Alawites, because the former was too reminiscent of the people's closeness to the Nazarenes (Christians) and isolated them from Islam. Now the term "Nusayri" is used by Sunnis in Syria to emphasize the "heresy" of the Alawites who rule the country. Fayad is a Sunni, and that is the source of the principal complaint against him, because how can a Sunni possibly support the regime?

Fear of Free Syrian Army

This dispute does not end with insults and curses on Internet sites and television programs. It leaks into the street and kills people. The fear of a takeover by religious groups, the frequent photos of fighters from the Free Syrian Army adorned with thick beards, the ancient Islamic names that the brigades of the free army have adopted, and the religious slogans that accompany their broadcasts have already caused tens of thousands of Christians to flee Syria. The Christians, a minority of about 2 million Syrian citizens, are a doubly "suspicious element": The Free Syrian Army sees them as supporters of Assad's secular regime, which has protected them over the years, whereas the regime sees them now as part of "the Western Christian world" that aspires to bring it down.

But murderous power struggles are taking place not only among the religious nationalist sects. The political opposition doesn't know exactly where it is headed, either, or with whom. For example, last week Abdel Basset Sayda, head of the Syrian National Council - the largest opposition group in exile - said, "Manaf Tlas and Riad Hijab will have no place in the temporary Syrian government because they didn't join the rebellion from the start." Tlas, the son of former Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas, who deserted the army last month, has become a celebrity. He travels around the world waiting for a high position in the new regime. Hijab was the prime minister who deserted to Jordan.

With all the discussions about the possibility of establishing a temporary government in Syria, it seems that even before Assad's downfall, the mediators will have to find a common denominator among the rival parties within the opposition and among various other groups inside Syria. Bringing down Assad is likely to seem like a simple task compared to the political battle that is expected to take place among his potential successors.

What does it mean to be Alawite, and why does it matter in Syria?

By Emily Alpert

Los Angeles Times (08.02.2012) - If you've been reading about the uprising in Syria, you may have heard that Syrian President Bashar Assad is an Alawite. What does that mean - and why does it matter in Syrian politics?

What do the Alawites believe?

The major divide in Islam is between Shiite and Sunni Muslims, who initially split over who was supposed to succeed the prophet Muhammad. Alawites identify as Shiite Muslims, but the sect carried over older beliefs that predate Islam. For instance, Alawites celebrate some Christian and Zoroastrian holidays.

There are a few other things that distinguish Alawites. Although most Muslims have five pillars of faith, the Alawites have seven. They believe in the divinity of Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad; other Shiites revere Ali but do not believe he was divine.

Middle East scholar Malise Ruthven writes that Alawites include Socrates and Plato in their line of prophets, and they also believe in "transmigration," in which the souls of the wicked pass into dogs and pigs but righteous souls go on to more perfect human bodies. Many of their beliefs are not known to the outside world. Alawites tend to be secretive about their faith because they have been oppressed.

Like Jews, Alawites also are seen sometimes as more of a cultural group than a strictly religious one. "Many Alawites nowadays consider themselves outright atheists but are still within the cultural sphere of Alawis and are accepted into the sect and treated like any other (myself, included)," wrote Yazan Badran, a Syrian blogger in Japan who comes from an Alawite family.

Muslims have sometimes questioned whether Alawites can really be considered Muslims. A fatwa in 1973 declared that they were Shiite Muslims, but orthodox Muslims still call them heretics sometimes.

How do the Alawites fit into Syria?

In Syria, most of the population is Sunni. Alawites are a minority, believed to make up 12% to 15% of the population. The Assad family, which has ruled Syria for more than 40 years, is Alawite. The religious group also dominates the Syrian security forces.

If the Alawites are such a small sect, how did they come to dominate the Syrian military?

It might seem logical that the Assads put them there, but it was actually the other way around. After World War I, French colonial officials tried to make Syria more inclusive by encouraging minorities to fill government positions. The Alawites ended up finding their place in the military.

"The only meeting ground or assembly point for Alawis, where we didn't have to pretend that we were something we weren't, was deep in the inner sanctums of the security state," an Alawite using the pseudonym Khudr wrote on the blog Syria Comment.

As Alawites were recruited to the military, wealthier Sunni urbanites often shunned the military as a career path for their children. "Nobody else would go," said Camille Otrakji, a Syrian analyst now living in Canada. "The rich in Damascus weren't interested."

That led to the military becoming heavily Alawite. Ultimately, the Syrian military was the springboard from which Alawite air force officer Hafez Assad staged his 1970 coup, beginning the Assad regime.

Why does it matter that the Assads are Alawites?

Alawites have been persecuted throughout their history, perhaps because their religious identity is confusing to the authorities. The Assad regime has played on Alawite fears to help it stay in power.

When Syrians began to protest against Assad, Alawites were fearful that "the fall of the regime would bring disaster for their community," wrote Leon Goldsmith, a Middle East researcher in New Zealand. Some Alawites fear that other Syrians might want to take revenge against them for the 1982 massacre in Hama, where human rights activists say thousands of Sunnis were slain -- and a big statue of Hafez Assad was erected as an unsubtle message.

"The recurrent suggestion [from the Assad regime] is that the choice is between this regime or chaos and civil war; something which to an Alawi only means a violent Sunni revenge for the past 40 years of (perceived) Alawi control of the state," Badran said in an email.

But Assad is not guaranteed Alawite support. Some do not see Assad as truly Alawite, considering he married a Sunni woman and grew up in Damascus, not the rural areas other Alawites come from. The Assad family has also repressed dissent from Alawites just as it has other Syrians.
