Facts & Findings

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Christians in Syria: Current Situation and Future Outlook

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Key points

- Christians are under serious, tangible threat: from radical Islamic groups, from the regime but primarily - like all Syrians - from the warfare surrounding them.
- Syria’s Christian population is split into supporters of the regime, opponents of the regime and those who, under the present circumstances, simply fail to see a future in Syria.
- Christians fight for and against the regime or decide to flee in order to escape military service.
- The future of Christians in Syria depends on the outcome of the conflict and the political forces that will determine the country’s future.
- With that in mind, the church leaders’ persistent support of the Assad regime may pose a problem as regards the future of Christians in Syria.
- Moreover, the criticism voiced by church leaders of Christian opponents of the regime is threatening to divide the Christian community and to alienate at least some of its members from the churches.
- The return of Christian internally displaced persons and refugees to their former settlements is uncertain and will depend in no small measure on whether coexistence with their former neighbours will once again be possible and whether these have become perpetrators.
- Nonetheless, examples of the peaceful coexistence of Christians and Muslims persist - examples of solida rity.

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It is often said that Christians in Syria hope the Assad regime will survive so that they can resume the lives they led prior to the so-called Syria crisis after a peace agreement has been reached place.

But is that really true?

It is certainly the case that all those Christians who were interested less in political involvement and more in good business and a pleasant life did not question the conditions laid down by the Assad regime.

It is also correct that the Christian churches have exploited the liberties and leeway granted them by the Assad regime. In return, they have pledged themselves to compliance. Finally, it is also accurate to state that the Christian churches and the vast majority of their leaders continue to cling to this position – right up to the present day.

At the same time, however, the example of the Christians in Syria reveals a host of fault lines, which doubtless existed prior to the start of the conflict within Syrian society but are only clearly emerging now.

It has been reported, for instance, that the previously ubiquitous fear of speaking freely has now given way to the courage to do precisely that. It is said that the regime's repressive apparatus has been impeded to such an extent by the circumstances of the conflict that complete control over the population has been lost. Recently, indeed, some have dared to question the regime's ideological stipulations on Arab identity, emphasising their individual ethnic-religious identity instead.

Furthermore, Christians in Syria continue to number not only supporters of the regime, but also many who oppose it – both at home and abroad. It is thus fair to assume that neither the regime nor the opposition can be sure of the support of a majority of Christians.[1] Christians fight as conscripts and militiamen both for the regime and for oppositional groups struggling against it. Others have escaped military service by fleeing.

Many Christians have abandoned their ancestral settlements to escape the violence – irrespective of who is responsible for it. They live as internally displaced persons in Syria or as refugees in neighbouring states. Yet others have already moved further afield either illegally or as part of resettlement programmes, relocating to Europe or overseas.

The Syria conflict has long since developed into a civil war with no end in sight. Nonetheless, it makes sense to explore the future prospects for Christians in Syria. That applies to those who are still living in their ancestral settlements or who now live as internally displaced persons in other parts of Syria as well as to those who have already left the country.

What follows is an attempt to shed a little more light on the current situation and wherever possible to address the issues raised.

The relationship between the state and the religious communities in Syria

The international legal framework

Syria acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) of 16 December 1966, which entered into force on 23 March 1976 in accordance with Article 49 of the Covenant[2], on 21 April 1969.[3] Article 18 of the ICCPR contains a definition of religious freedom which is binding for the Syrian Arab Republic under international law:

(1) Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

(2) No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.

(3) Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

(4) The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions. To date, Syria has not acceded to the Optional Protocol allowing individual complaints of 16 December 1966, which also entered into force on 23 March 1976 and permits individuals to submit complaints to the United Nation's Human Rights Committee.[4]

As a result of its signing of the ICCPR and thus of these regulations, the Syrian state is generally depicted as a secular state. However, this conflicts with the Syrian Constitution, Article 3 of which states:

"The religion of the President of the Republic is Islam. Islamic jurisprudence shall be a major source of legislation. The State shall respect all religions, and ensure the freedom to perform all the rituals that do not prejudice public order. The personal status of religious communities shall be protected and respected."[5]

Not a secular state

In the light of Article 3 of the Syrian Constitution, the question of whether the Syrian state is indeed secular must be answered in the negative. In terms of its constitution, Syria is no more a secular state than are Egypt, Iraq or Jordan, whose constitutions contain comparable regulations. This is not altered in any way by the fact that Islam is not explicitly named as the state religion in the Syrian Constitution, it being postulated instead that the religion practised by the President of the Republic is Islam. In addition, although the constitution guarantees the freedom to practise [religious] rites, i.e. freedom of worship, provided that public order is not compromised, this does not signify an explicit assurance of religious freedom.

No guarantee of religious freedom

Government policy in practice

Regime and Christian minorities: fear of Sunni dominance

In practice, however, the Assad regime has understood the need to present the Syrian state as a secular state and thus succeeded in convincing the country's Christian minority groups that the reigning Alawite elite has the best candidates for the formation of a government. The uniting factor here has invariably proved to be the joint fear of Sunni dominance on the part of both the regime and Christian minority groups, the outcome of which would be a situation potentially threatening to both parties. This aspect has consistently informed the regime's discourse since the outbreak of hostilities in 2011.

Consequently, church leaders have displayed little interest in a change in the political status quo. Instead, they have frequently, and very clearly, reiterated their support for the regime. Their demands for security, on the other hand, are treated by the regime as individual requests, the fulfilment of which is deemed by the state to be a favour and certainly not a self-evident obligation.

Moreover, the regime is aware of the fact that its political opponents include individuals from all ethnic and religious communities, e.g. Christians like Anwar al-Bunni[6], Michel Kilo[7] and George Sabra[8]. As a result, the previous state-supporting significance of the churches appears to be in decline and the regime has legitimate grounds to fear that calls for reforms and a possible change of government by a (steadily) growing section of the relevant communities could well increase in volume.

Church leaders and regime: millet system retained

It is, therefore, in the interests of both church leaders and the regime to maintain the millet system, which is aligned to the country's current needs. In its day, the Ottoman millet system regulated the relationship between Ottoman rule and the religious communities, which were recognised as 'millet' (nation). The Ottoman state exploited the structures of these groups in order to control and secure access to them. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the millet system underwent further development and continues to apply in Middle Eastern Arab states and in Israel in that all issues concerning civil status law, family law and inheritance law are still regulated in accordance with the respective 'nation's' (religious community's) religious group law.

In 2006 in Syria, for instance, a revised 'Catholic Law' agreed between the Melkite Greek Catholic Church and the Syrian regime was adopted and entered into force[9]; it relates to civil status law, family law and inheritance law for the corresponding nation – in this case all Catholics.[10]

The attitude of the churches

The common interest of the churches and communities in preserving a reformed millet system is one reason why they cling to their present relationship with the regime in the current situation. Another factor in may well be that the ruling Ba'ath party has consistently adhered to its promise to involve the various groups in its vision of a Syrian nation. It cannot be excluded – indeed it is distinctly possible – that a future regime of a different ideological calibre would act in a quite different manner.

I doubt that the Christian communities in Syria might, under certain circumstances, attempt to ensure they are institutionally prepared for a change in the political

setup by holding on to the millet system, as posited by Fiona McCallum of the University of St. Andrews.[11] This approach would require church leaders and churchgoers to address the positive aspects of a possible regime change. With very few exceptions, however, the church leaders see the possibility of a change in government solely as a worst-case scenario, in which they have no interest and would prefer to avoid. The same applies to a large number of church-goers.

Churches: preserve the status, placate the regime

At all events, it must be assumed that the Christian religious institutions have preferred to maintain their status and not to challenge the regime. While the position taken by church leaders is understandable, there can be no sidestepping the criticism that, despite the Assad regime's inhuman conduct since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, the nature of the debate pursued by church leaders – with some individual exceptions – has not changed.[12]

The conflict has now been going on for over five years and has inflicted immeasurable suffering on the country. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the warring factions were responsible for the deaths of 203,097 civilians, including 23,863 children and 22,823 women, between March 2011 and November 2016; 92.92 % of these casualties were caused by government troops and their allies. As early as April 2016 the UN Special Representative for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, put the number of victims at around 400,000.[13] The Syrian Centre for Policy Research puts the figure even higher. Its assumption is that 470,000 deaths have occurred since the beginning of the conflict, 11.5% of the population have been killed[14] or injured, 6.5 million Syrians, 2.8 million of them children, have joined the ranks of the internally displaced[15], and 4,810,710 Syrians have become refugees.[16]

Church leaders risk bringing Sunni wrath down on Christians

In the light of such figures, the accusation continues to apply that the "Christian churches [in Syria] [have been] "bought" and … have allowed [themselves] … to be bought." In fact, the stance of the churches is, in a sense, distinctly schizophrenic. On the one hand, they (justifiably) fear an uncertain future in a country which may, in time, be dominated and ruled by Islamic or even radical Islamic Sunni groups. On the other hand, their stance risks igniting the wrath of the aggrieved Sunni masses after the possible end of the Ba'ath regime. However, with the exception of the activities of the radical Islamic groups, no other anti-Christian propaganda is currently being peddled in Syria. This may well be linked to the fact that the Assad regime has so far succeeded in maintaining its repressive character. However, should radical changes take place in Syria, the churches' loyalty to the regime could prove extremely dangerous.[17] As a result, the patriarchs introduced below all hope that such an upheaval will not occur.

The patriarchs

Patriarchs in Syria support Assad regime

Three of the nine patriarchs in the main churches of Syria reside in the country:

- **John X. Yazigi**[18], Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and All the East (Head of the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch),
- **Gregor III. Laham**[19], Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, and Alexandria and Jerusalem (Head of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church),
- **Moran Mor Ignatius Aphrem II Karim**[20], Patriarch of Antioch and All the East (Head of the Syriac Orthodox Church)

Four patriarchs reside in Lebanon:

- **Aram Pedros Kiskisian Keshishian**[21], Armenian Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia (Head of the Armenian Apostolic Church),
- **Patriarch Krikor Bedros XX Gabroyan**[22], Patriarch of Cicilia (Head of the Armenian Catholic Church),
- **Ignatius Joseph III. Yonan**[23], Patriarch of Antioch (Head of the Syrian Catholic Church),
- **Béchara Boutros Cardinal al-Rahi**[24], Patriarch of Antioch and All the East (Head of the Maronite Church).

Two patriarchs reside in Iraq:

- **Mar Louis Raphaël I Sako,** Patriarch of Babylon (Head of the Chaldean Catholic Church),
- **Mar Gewargis III,** Catholicos-Patriarch of the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East.

The Head of the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch, John X Yazigi, has given the Assad regime his unrestricted support. In line with his own stance, the patriarch has forbidden Greek Orthodox Christians to express opinions about both the situation in Syria and the regime - only the Church may speak for the Christians.[25]

The Head of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, Gregory III Laham, makes frequent statements on this issue. All his comments, public or private, express nothing but praise for Bashar Assad. He is, therefore, reputed to be jostling for position to become the Syrian dictator's favourite church leader.[26] In an interview with the German daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*[27] he criticised the fact that Western media are dominated by manipulation, ignorance and the desire to peddle only bad news, claiming that Bashar Assad was the victim of systematic defamation. During personal encounters, he continued, the President appeared cultivated and full of sympathy and respect for the Christian religion. The patriarch said he had no idea what people had against Assad. In the light of such statements it is hardly surprising that the patriarch, when interviewed by the Swiss daily *Tagesanzeiger*, should have responded as follows to the question of whether he really believed in a future for Syria with Assad: "He has to be there for the future of the country. I am allowed to say this; after all, I am no supporter of Assad, nor do I enjoy his special protection." Responding to the remark that the Christian authorities faced accusations of being exploited by the Assad regime, the patriarch said: "As Christians we are free. It is not true that we are manipulated by Assad. During the four years of the war we have lived very freely, without encountering pressure from any group, without pressure from the army or from a general. In that time I have travelled regularly and met representatives of very different groups. I have never had to submit reports to Assad. It was before the war that we had to account for our activities." In the light of these remarks, the nature of the patriarch's response to the interviewer's comment that a future with Assad was simply unthinkable will come as no surprise: "Why not? Syria used to be considered a paradise. Why shouldn't the situation we had before the war, when all the groups lived peacefully with one another, not return again afterwards? Syria was a police state under Assad's father. Now the situation has relaxed - his son's politics are different. He can rebuild Syria using all the country's forces. Of course he can't do it alone, but without him it won't be possible either." In answer to the question of whether he feared a terror regime might seize power after or without Assad, Gregory III replied: "Yes, the result would be pure chaos. Because who has a plan? What would the alternative be? Fighting

between Sunnis and Shiites, fighting between the religions, fighting between the neighbours. That would make the threat to Christians even greater. The most effective protection for Christians in the Middle East is Arab unity. As long as in-fighting among the Arab states persists, there is no future for the country, for its youth, and no future for democracy. It is the conflict that threatens us Christians, not Islam."[28]

The Head of the Syriac Orthodox Church, Moran Mor Ignatius Aphrem II Karim, says: "We recognise legitimate rulers and pray for them, as the New Testament teaches us. We also see that there is no democratic opposition on the other side, only extremist groups. Moreover, in recent years we have come to see that these groups base their activities on an ideology brought here by so-called 'hate preachers', who come from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Egypt and find popular support. These groups procure their weapons from Turkey, as the media have shown us." The patriarch also observed that the majority of Syrian citizens have always supported the Assad government and continue to do so.[29]

If patriarchs issue personal comments in favour of the Assad regime and the dictator in this manner, it can come as little surprise that the overwhelming majority of bishops and priests also accepts the President's repressive policies, not to say supports them wholeheartedly. They justify this by reference to the security in which Christians have lived since Hafez al-Assad, father of the current president, to the fact that many Christians occupy positions in the state apparatus and the military, and that Christians are also government ministers and members of parliament.[30] There can be no denying that the degree of freedom experienced by Christians in Syria under Hafez and Bashar Assad as regards their religious affiliation – a freedom they continue to enjoy – is impressive when compared with other Middle Eastern countries. However, this relative freedom has been bought at the cost of complete political abstinence and absolute compliance with the regime. As a consequence, coercive action by the state, such as the nationalisation of the church schools in 1967, is deemed regrettable but must be accepted without any further ado. Christians may nominally continue to occupy important posts within the state apparatus, including in the secret services, the police and the military, but it is frequently forgotten that, despite their high positions, they have never actually numbered among the crucial "decision-makers". (In the event of a change in regime, no one would then ask whether the Christians had any real influence or not. They would quite simply be accused of out-and-out collaboration with the Assad regime). Syria's ecclesiastical authorities have also condoned the disappearance of church personnel, including members of the clergy, without filing any formal protests with the relevant authorities.[31]

To date, the patriarchs residing in Lebanon have only issued the occasional one-sided statement in favour of the Syrian regime and its ruler Bashar Assad. This may be due not least to the fact that, in contrast to the patriarchs living in Syria itself, they do not feel continually obliged to praise the Syrian regime and its power broker Assad.[32]

The heads of the Armenian Apostolic and Armenian Catholic Churches have repeatedly spoken positively of Syria's stance on the Armenian genocide and of the welcome given to victims of that genocide within Syria. At the same time they have largely refrained from justifiable criticism of the Assad regime and the dictator himself.[33]

Similar things are said of the Syrian Catholic Patriarch Mar Ignatius Joseph III Yonan.[34] Statements have been attributed to him which, while they may be understandable, are nonetheless problematic. "A dictatorship in which the law is respected is preferable to Islamist totalitarianism," he said in an allusion to the situation of Christians in Syria under the Assad government, without naming the latter explicitly. He went on to remark that the orderly circumstances under Assad, an Alawite, were the exact opposite of the system that would be installed by the "murderous jihadist gangs" of the Islamic State (IS).[35] On the other hand, in an interview with the TAZ newspaper, the Syrian Catholic patriarch made unmistakable – and quite critical – remarks about the Syrian regime and the necessity of a regime change, while also expressing fear of a violent upheaval: "Syria was a type of dictatorship, a one-party dictatorship or a sectarian dictatorship. ... I'm not saying that we Christians need to be protected by a regime of this kind. But we do fear violent change. ... There are Christians who oppose the so-called established regime and others who are against would-be revolutionaries. In my opinion, most of them want a stable regime, regardless of the form it takes. The Christians have no militias and no desire to fight just to transform the regime into an autocratic Muslim system. You can call them the silent majority or say they're on the side of the regime. But ultimately most people want a genuine change of regime. The Christians do not wish to violently overthrow one regime in the hope that the next one will be better."[36] The patriarch elaborated on these thoughts in a detailed interview with the FAZ newspaper, in which he also advocated a dialogue between the government and the opposition.[37]

Stance of the Maronite patriarch as the preserver of Lebanese sovereignty influences relations with the Assad regime

In recent decades, relations between the Maronite patriarchs and the Assad regime have been shaped by the former's position as guardians of Lebanese sovereignty. Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad both repeatedly invited the Maronite patriarchs to visit Syria, adding that such visits, of a pastoral and political nature, could serve the purpose of reconciliation. The former Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Cardinal Sfeir[38] always refused to visit Syria, even standing by this decision when Pope John Paul II visited the country in 2001. The Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros Cardinal al-Rahi broke with this tradition by participating in the installation of the new Greek Orthodox Patriarch John X Yazigi. Al-Rahi expressed a desire to visit Syria immediately after his appointment as cardinal in November 2012. He also refused to be influenced by the negative reactions arising from the March 14 Alliance[39], which opposes Hezbollah and Syria and accused him of being biased in favour of an alliance of minorities in the region, which would completely undermine the coexistence of Christians and Muslims.[40] He even maintained his stance when, after visiting the former French President Sarkozy, he was accused of describing the Syrian regime as the most democratic in the Arab world. Al-Rahi made it clear that he had intended to say the secular Syrian regime was the most tolerant towards Christians. He defended his participation in the installation of Patriarch John X Yazigi by stating that he also attended the inauguration of the Coptic Patriarch Tawadros during the reign of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and would likewise attend that of the Syrian Catholic Patriarch Ignatius Joseph III Yonan in Baghdad. Moreover, if a new patriarch was installed in Jerusalem, he would also attend the relevant ceremony. In addition, he said, there was a Maronite community in Syria. In order to avoid any misunderstandings the patriarch was at pains to point out during talks with the Syrian ambassador to Lebanon that he would not be meeting any state representatives in the course of his visit to Syria.[41]

There is no record of any statement made by Mar Louis Raphaël I Sako, Patriarch of the Chaldean Church, on Syria, the Syrian regime or Bashar Assad. The patriarch frequently makes remarks on the future prospects for Christians in the Middle East in general and in Iraq, in particular, where the Chaldean Church is the largest of the

Christian churches. Antoine Audo, the Chaldean Bishop of Aleppo, regularly makes remarks on behalf of the Chaldean Church about the situation in Syria. Mar Gewargis III, Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, is not known to have made any statements on Syria, the Syrian regime or Bashar Assad either. However, the presence of Assyrian Christians in Syria is now minimal as a result of the military campaign conducted by the so-called Islamic State in the Khabur region in north-east Syria in the spring of 2015. A large number of the residents of the 35 villages once inhabited by Assyrian Christians have now left Syria.

The most noteworthy church representative is the Apostolic Nuncio, Cardinal Mario Zenari

The most noteworthy church representative active in Syria today is the Apostolic Nuncio to Syria, Mario Zenari[42], who was appointed to the post by Pope Benedict XVI on 30 December 2008 and made a cardinal by Pope Francis on 19 November 2016. He is one of the few emissaries to have remained in Damascus after the outbreak of the Syria conflict, this for a total of eight years so far, despite the very challenging conditions which have prevailed since 2011. He has repeatedly opposed the Assad regime and is not one to mince his words. In consequence, it is widely assumed that Bashar Assad would welcome Mario Zenari's rapid departure from Syria, although he has not yet dared to declare him persona non grata. Zenari not only has a functioning network with access to the regime, but also maintains ties with the opposition. Moreover, he has good connections with Catholic Church leaders.[43] As a result, Zenari's appointment as cardinal must also be understood as a message to the Christians in Syria and to Assad – purple for the people of Syria.[44]

Persecution of Christians in Syria?

Christians have not been subject to persecution in Syria in the sense of systematic state-related discrimination and existential threats on the grounds of their belief. This was not the case during the tenure of Hafez al-Assad, nor has it been since Bashar al-Assad's accession to power. Instead, the country has been hailed repeatedly, both under Hafez al-Assad and under his son Bashar, for the considerable degree of religious freedom that flourishes in Syria. It is correct that the Syrian state guarantees "the freedom, ... either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching" (Art. 18, para. 1 ICCPR). Even the adoption of a different religion (apostasy or conversion) (Art. 18, para. 1 ICCPR) is not expressly forbidden. However, "the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice" is restricted in legal practice. This is due to the fact that specific civil status, family and inheritance law regulations only apply to certain religious communities. All religious communities without their own regulations are subject to Sharia law.

Regime grants religious freedom in line with political rationale

Before the outbreak of the Syrian conflict the Assad family regime granted religious and ideological freedom in line with its own political rationale. The Assad government tolerated the country's smallest religious minorities, including the Christians, and allowed them to perform acts of worship, so long as the regime did not reject such acts for political reasons.[45] At the same time, however, Christians repeatedly fell victim to the regime's repressive measures, not on the grounds of their affiliation to one of the Christian religious communities, but because of alleged, purported or actual subversive activities – even discussion of an individual ethnic-religious identity other than that specified by the state was deemed to be out of order.

Christians also victims of regime's repression

No section of the population has been spared since the armed conflict began in 2011; Alawites, Sunni Muslims and Christians alike have been among the killed and injured. Civilians have been displaced and abducted and, in many cases, have abandoned their ancestral settlements voluntarily to flee the violent clashes. This helps to explain

the large number of internally displaced persons – around 8.7 million[46] – and of refugees – 4.8 million.[47]

Yet at the same time it is clear that since 2011 both Christians and other religious minorities have been subjected to targeted attacks by the regime and radical Islamic groups.

To a large extent the religious minorities, including Christians, Druzes, Ismailis and other non-Alawite groups, have made efforts to obviate the conflict. However, circumstances are increasingly compelling them to take a clear stance in favour of either the regime or the opposition. From the very outset of the conflict the Assad regime has employed sectarian [= denominational] rhetoric and military strategy as a tactical means of preventing Christians and other religious minorities from supporting or joining the opposition. The regime describes the opposition and all Sunni Muslims as extremists and terrorists who are attempting to turn Syria into an Islamic state in which religious minorities would be unwelcome. Assad and government representatives have referred to the plight of Coptic Christians in Egypt and Christians in Iraq in order to fuel fears among the Syrian Christians of what might happen if the opposition were successful.[48]

Regime has destroyed churches and imprisoned and killed Christians

Nonetheless, according to statistics published by the USCIRF[49], between 50% and 63% of all Christian places of prayer have been attacked by government forces since 2011. Unconfirmed reports say that at least 50 Christians have been killed and at least 450 are still in custody. Raids were carried out on the offices of Christian pro-democratic and charitable groups. Those detained and killed include high-profile Christian civil rights activists, employees of charitable organisations and religious leaders.[50]

IS has destroyed churches and abducted and murdered Christians

By contrast, the so-called Islamic State has murdered at least 100 members of religious minority groups, including 50 Christians, also abducting approximately 450 Christians since 2014. Smaller groups of abducted individuals – 10 to 20 at a time –have been released following negotiations between the IS and Sunni clans, while 150 remain in captivity, including the Italian Jesuit Paolo Dal'Oglio.[51] No information is available on the whereabouts of the Syriac Orthodox Bishop Yohanna Ibrahim and his Greek Orthodox colleague Boulos Yaziji, both of whom were abducted on 22 April 2013 near the town of Kafr Dael in the vicinity of Aleppo.[52] Most people claim they were kidnapped by opposition militants, although some opposition groups allege that members of the regime abducted the bishops in order to fuel fear and insecurity.[53] The IS has closed all church buildings in its sphere of influence, re-designating some of them administration buildings or military institutions, or destroying them entirely. There are also strong indications that ISIL and other extremist groups have sold Christian relics and works of art on the black market.[54]

Persecution of Christians as a media topic

Media coverage of these developments is compromised by the fact that many occurrences cannot be verified immediately or objectively. The German news magazine *Der Spiegel* commented on this as follows: "What emerges from Damascus cannot be described simply as disinformation. It is disinformation targeted at specific groups which exploits existing enemy images. ... Are you worried about the Christians? No problem, you can read reports on beheaded bishops and vandalised churches. The fact that the images show no bishops and the churches were bombed by the Syrian air force is beside the point."[55] However, even accounts supplied by organisations which ought not be thought of straightaway as disseminating propagandistic views in this context can only be used conditionally, since it is largely

Sources on attacks frequently biased by specific interests

impossible to corroborate the stated sources. That applies, for instance, to an overview of attacks on Christians in Syria published by the Society for Threatened Peoples in 2016[56]. A similar overview on the website *"Christenverfolgung.org"* by the Austrian organisation Kirche in Not (Aid to the Church in Need) even dispensed with source references entirely.[57] Moreover, reports are frequently motivated by specific interests – and not only when the information comes from Damascus. That said, even the few verifiable facts are horrifying in themselves and utterly sufficient to provide a clear impression of the actual situation, as is demonstrated by the following examples.

- On 25 March 2012, the website clarionproject reported that "Rebels Cleanse Homs of 90% of Christians".[58] In actual fact, the Christian inhabitants of the Homs districts of Bustan Al Diwan and Hamidieh left the city out of sheer fear, caught as they were in the crossfire between the government forces and the rebels; they were not under immediate threat from radical Islamic militia, nor were they forced to leave their homes. This was reported by Jesuits active on the ground.[59] During the first half of 2014 the districts in Homs previously controlled by the rebels were recaptured by government troops. As a result the situation in the severely damaged city returned to normal – to the extent that this is possible in the context of a civil war. Many residents who had previously fled, including 1,700 Christians, returned to Homs, despite the fact that the so-called Islamic State simultaneously began extending its military campaigns in Syria to the province of Homs[60].

- In early summer 2013, Father François Mourad met his death in the Franciscan monastery in Ghassanieh. The Franciscan Custody of the Terra Sancta reported that the circumstances of his death were unexplained. According to one version, a stray bullet entered the monastery building and hit the priest, while other sources report that he was murdered when the monastery was pillaged by rebels.[61] The Swiss commuter magazine 20minuten evidently considered this account too harmless, so it reported that extremists close to Al-Qaeda had beheaded the Catholic priest François Mourad.[62]

- On 7 April 2014, the 75-year-old Dutch Jesuit Frans Van der Lugt, who had lived in Homs since 1966, was first assaulted and then shot in the head and killed by two armed individuals who entered his apartment that morning. Van der Lugt had refused to leave the embattled city to the very last, as long as hunger and deprivation prevailed there.[63]

- Between 24 and 26 February 2015, Islamic State militias captured 35 villages inhabited by Assyrian Christians along the Khabur River in north-eastern Syria, taking prisoner, and subsequently abducting, 220 families and 60 individuals in the process. Some 1,200 other families succeeded in fleeing to Al-Hasakah and Qamishli.[64] A Sharia court in the city of Al-Shaddadah, south of Al-Hasakah, which is under the control of the Islamic State, was charged with deciding the fate of the abducted Christians. As dhimmis[65] they are forced to pay the jizya prescribed by Islam.[66] In actual fact, the abducted persons were released in the following months in return for ransom payments.[67]

- In summer 2015, the Islamic State captured the city of Al-Qaryatayn in the Homs Governorate. Initial reports referred to at least 230 abducted persons, including 60 Christians.[68] Other reports mentioned 230 Christians.[69] In fact, around 250 Christians, including the Syrian Catholic priest Jacques Mourad, were kidnapped by the Islamic State and taken to Raqqa. Some of the kidnapped, including Jacques Mourad, were returned to Qaryatayn, then still

under Islamic State control, after spending almost three months in captivity in Raqqa.[70] In early April 2016, Qaryatayn was recaptured by the Syrian army with Russian support. Of the approximately 300 Christians who attempted to flee, either after the city's capture by the Islamic State or later on, 21 were killed because they had contravened the rules of the "dhimmi contract".[71] [72]

This list of verified violent attacks on Christians could be continued indefinitely. However, it is important to point out that, during the Syria conflict or Syrian civil war, members of other minorities in Syria such as Alawites and Druzes have also been regularly subjected to violent attacks and will continue to experience such brutality. The same applies to many Sunni Muslims who think and behave in a manner contrary to the expectations of radical Islamists. However, by far the greatest number of casualties can be attributed to daily warfare – with the government troops and their allies blamed for over 90% of these deaths.

Christians have also received solidarity from Muslims

Last but by no means least, it is important to recognise in this context that, in individual cases, Christians have received solidarity and practical support from Sunni Muslims. In the spring of 2015 the Islamic State took control of a large number of villages along the Khabur River in north-eastern Syria, after which inhabitants of the Arab Sunni village Qaber Shamiat, for example, led Assyrian Christians from the captured villages to safety in Al-Hasakah.[73] Father Jacques Mourad who, along with other Christians, was abducted by Islamic State militias in the summer of 2015 and taken from Qaryatayn to Raqqa before being returned several months later to Qaryatayn (at that time still under Islamic State control) received help from a Muslim friend from that city.

Fighting – for or against the regime

Many young men who left Syria as refugees, including many Christians, say that they decided to flee in order to evade military service which, in theory at least, is mandatory for all Syrian male citizens once they reach the age of 18. Military is service generally lasts 18 months, but men who have completed only five years of primary education are required to serve 21 months. Service for men studying at college or university can be postponed. Up to 2014, compulsory military service ended at the age of 42, but this limit has now been extended up to the age of 50.[74] It is surprising that, until recently, the Syrian authorities failed to take any precautions to prevent young men just under the age of 18 from leaving Syria.[75] At the same time, numerous reports indicate that conscripts were able to leave the country even when they reached the age of 18, provided they paid a substantial bribe (up to $US10,000).[76]

Christians fight for or against the Assad regime, others escape military service by fleeing

Although it is clear that a not inconsiderable number of young Christians see little point in doing their military service in Syria, thereby possibly ensuring the continuation of the status quo ante 2011, others are complying with their compulsory conscription into the armed forces. At the same time, a certain number of Christian men have joined forces to form militias or joined Christian militias fighting on the side of the Assad regime. The latter evidently deems this a valid equivalent to military service. It is highly unlikely that this will apply to the Christian militiamen opposing the regime.

Several Christian militia groups have been founded in Syria since the outbreak of the conflict. The best known of these are ***Sutoro*** and the ***Syriac Military Council***, whose members oppose the Assad regime and are active in the north-east of the country in the Al-Hasakah Governorate. Others include ***Sootoro***, or the ***Gozarto Protection Force*** (a splinter group of ***Sutoro***) which is allied to Bashar Assad's Ba'ath regime.

Sutoro – known originally as the ***Syriac Security Office***[77] – is a police force set up in 2012 by the *Syriac Union Party*[78], which was founded in 2005 to represent the interests of the Assyrian and Syrian Christians in Syria and to protect the towns, districts and villages inhabited by these population groups – initially the towns of Al-Qahtaniyah (Qabre Khworeh) and Al-Malikiyah (Dayrik)[79] and later on Qamishli.[80] It is active in Jazira Canton in the Federation of Northern Syria – Rojava, above all in Al-Hasaka Governorate, where it draws recruits from Assyrian and Syrian Christians and works closely with the local general police force (Asayish). The *Syriac Union Party*[78] is a member of the *National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change*, an alliance of left-wing and Kurdish parties – including the Kurdish *Democratic Union Part*y (PYD)[81] –, which opposes the Assad regime. The *Sutoro* militiamen are trained by the *People's Protection Units* (YPG)[82] of the *Democratic Union Party* (PYD). Sutoro is alleged to have over 400 militiamen[83] or, according to other sources, more than 1,000[84].

The ***Syriac Military Council85***[85] is the name of the paramilitary equivalent of Sutoro. Founded on 8 January 2013, the ***Syriac Military Council*** is reported to have over 2,000 militiamen (men and women).[86] It pursues the same goals and has the same geographical frame of reference as Sutoro. On 8 January 2014 it formally joined the campaign of the *People's Protection Units* (YPG) against the Islamic State.[87]

Sootoro[88] or the ***Gozarto Protection Force***[89] arose out of the Sotoro unit in Qamishli, which in late 2013 broke away from the Sutoro militia founded in 2012. Its members are Assyrian, Syriac Orthodox (and Syrian Catholic) Christians plus a number of Armenian Christians. Sootoro claims to be affiliated to the Civil Peace Committee of the Syriac Orthodox Church[90] and is allied with Bashar Assad's Ba'ath regime.[91] Following an Islamic State attack on the town of Sadad in the Homs Governorate[92], where Syriac Orthodox Christians live, Gozarto / Sutoro militiamen were transported from Qamishli to Sadad to support the Russian air force.[93]

In the past there used to be a single militia with ambivalent political ties in the Christian district of Wusta in Qamishli. Now there are two independent militias with radically different links: Sutoro and Sootoro. After Sootoro broke away, Sutoro founded a new offshoot in Qamishli.

Other Christian militias, all of them smaller, have been established in the west of the country. The Christian pro-Assad website Junud al-Massih ("Soldiers of Christ") proclaimed in February 2016: "Syria is beautiful in its Assad. At your service in soul and blood, my lord President Bashar al-Assad. We began with 5 groups on the ground and today we have become more than 15 armed Syrian Christian factions."[94]

Usud al-Cherubim ("Lions of the Cherubim") is a rather obscure group. Its name is a reference not so much to the cherubim mentioned in the Book of Ezekiel[95] as to the Cherubim Monastery near Saidnaya[96], which up to 2011 was used as a prison, mostly for Islamists. Released by the regime, the Islamists subsequently founded rebel groups such as *Ahrar al-Sham* and *Jaysh al-Islam*.

Usud al-Cherubim was allegedly founded in 2013 in connection with a terrorist attack on the monastery, which was reportedly repelled by the *National Defence Forces*, an association of pro-regime militias,[97] together with the Syrian army. Public references to *Usud al-Cherubim* date to January 2014. Initially set up as a local 'monastery defence' force, the group has subsequently participated in a number of military engagements beyond the Saydnaya area. Engagements have included "all

the battles of East Ghouta, Darayya, Homs countryside, the battles of al-Qalamoun, and in Jobar in Damascus." In November 2015, the group was reported to be operating together with *Nusur al-Zawba'a* ("Whirlwind Eagles")[98], the ultra-nationalist *Syrian Social Nationalist Party* (SSNP)[99] and the Christian Sootoro militia from Al-Hasaka in areas of the Homs desert near Al-Qaryatayn such as Mahin and Sadad, fighting against the Islamic State. Reports on Usud al-Cherubim's combat missions would suggest that it is a militia with a sizeable number of men. The real military significance of the group can be deduced from the fact that it reported just three 'martyrs' and twelve casualties by the end of 2015.

State and Christian militias seek partners with similar political interests.

It is safe to assume that players in the government's security apparatus and the pro-regime militias are on the lookout for the right partners. It seems that one of these state players, the air force secret service, has succeeded in forging ties with *Quwwat an-Nimr*,[100] a special forces unit of the Syrian Arab Army, *Quwat al-Ghadab* ("The Forces of Rage"), a Christian militia from Suqaylabiyah[101], and recently *Hurras al-Fajr* ("Guardians of the Dawn")[102], a group of Christian militias. The *"Guardians of the Dawn"* have adopted a nationalistic stance in keeping with their slogan "We do not deserve to live in a homeland we do not defend." Other members of *Hurras al-Fajr*, apart from *Usud al-Cherubim*, include the militias *Ararat*, *Usud Dwel'a*[103] and *Usud al-Wadi*[104], the *Intervention Regiment*[105] and *Usud al-Hamidiya*[106].

Aymeen Jawad Al-Tamimi[107], who works at the Rubin Center for Research in International Affairs, IDC Herzliya, Israel, has made it clear that players from the state security apparatus – such as the air force secret service – have an interest in forging ties with organisations they consider to be the right partners. The same is true of the militia leaders, who pursue their own political interests, although they are not always successful in their efforts. Usud al-Hamidiya, for instance, has now left the *"Guardians of the Dawn"* and is associated with the military secret service through its links with *Fawj Maghawir al-Ba'ath* ("Ba'ath Command Regiment").[108]

Prospects of Christians being able to stay in, or return to, their original settlement areas

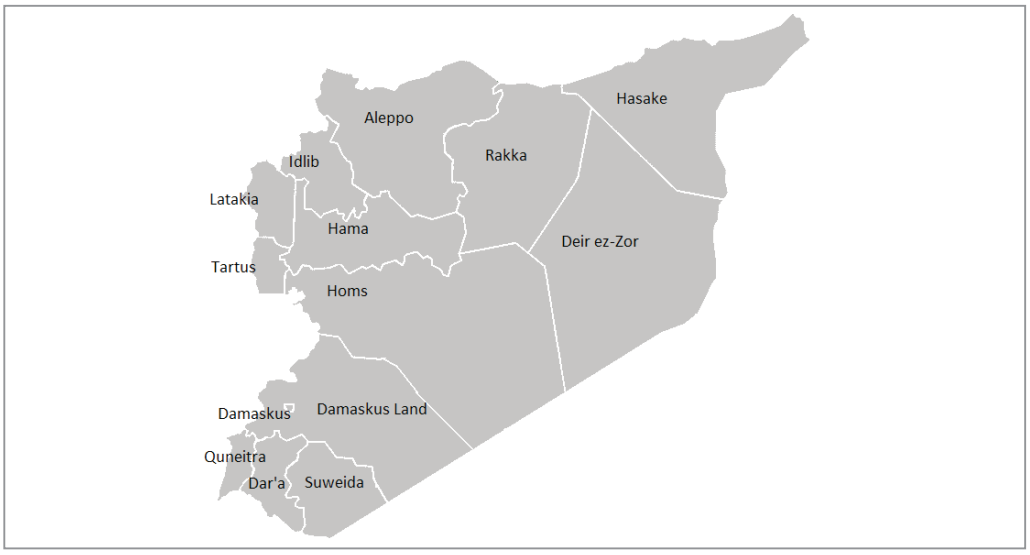
Internal migratory movements

Exodus from combat areas- migration to peaceful regions

Since the outbreak of the conflict there has been a considerable migratory movement of internally displaced persons inside Syria. This applies in equal measure to all the population groups. While there are settlements and regions from which large numbers of people have fled because of the fighting, others have witnessed extensive immigration because of developments in the country.

There has been a sharp decline in the numbers of Christians living in Aleppo (Aleppo Governorate), Deir ez-Zor (Deir ez-Zor Governorate), Hama (Hama Governorate), Al-Hasaka (Al-Hasaka Governorate), Homs (Homs Governorate), Idlib (Idlib Governorate), Qamishli (Al-Hasaka Governorate), Al-Malikiyah (Al-Hasaka Governorate), Al-Nabek (Rif Dimashq Governorate), Al-Qusayr (Homs Governorate), Al-Raqqa (Al-Raqqa Governorate), Yabrud (Rif Dimashq Governorate) and Zabadani (Rif Dimashq Governorate). Some places, such as Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa, no longer have any Christian inhabitants. In other places, e.g. Al-Hasaka and Idlib, the continued presence of Christians will depend on how the conflict unfolds.

The original Christian population in Damascus, Latakia and Tartus has remained largely stable, as it has in the Valley of Christians (Wadi Nasara). The influx of internally displaced persons – Christians and Muslims – in the course of the Syrian conflict has led to a massive population increase in these places. There has been a marked rise in the Christian population, for example, in the coastal towns of Latakia (Latakia Governorate) und Tartus (Tartus Governorate). The population has also swollen in all the villages in Wadi Nasara (Valley of the Christians), including the town of Safita (Tartus Governorate). No Muslims lived here before the start of the conflict, whereas now there are many Muslim refugees from the towns of Hama and Homs and the surrounding areas.



Source: Anas (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Syria-blank-governorates.png), "Syria-blank- governorates", names of the governorates added, https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by- sa/3.0/legalcode

Prospects for a return movement

In the course of the conflict there has not only been migration away from certain settlements and regions, but also a return movement. Homs is a good example. After a siege lasting almost three years, the Syrian government and rebel groups reached an agreement in May 2014 on the withdrawal of rebel groups from the parts of the city they controlled. The rebels subsequently withdrew to the eastern city district of Al-Waer, which the government troops continued to besiege. In September 2016, the government and the rebels finally agreed on the withdrawal of the rebels from Al-Waer, which then began. In November 2016, however, the government troops resumed their attacks on Al-Waer. Even before the agreement of May 2014 many residents of Homs, including Christians, who had previously fled the city, decided to return.

Prospects of a return to rural settlements difficult to assess

The likelihood of Christians returning – especially to rural settlements – after the conflict has ended is hard to assess. That depends not least on the extent to which the original Sunni population offered to help the radical Islamic rebel groups and joined them in attacking the Christian population.

However, it would be wrong to claim that all the Sunni Muslims behaved in this way. The question of whether the Christians will return therefore depends on whether the Sunni population

- took part voluntarily in attacks
- was clearly forced to participate in attacks

  or
- was not involved in any attacks.

Just how difficult it is to give an unequivocal answer, even taking those categories into account, can be illustrated by the following example. Before fleeing from Syria with his family, George M. made a living from a small apricot plantation in a Christian village in Qusayr district in the Homs Governorate. The village was seized by radical Islamic militiamen and all the apricot trees in his little plantation were felled. George M. then fled with his wife and two small children into nearby Lebanon. Under no circumstances do they wish to return to the village with their children. Were he to go back, he would have to plant new trees and could only expect a modest return on his investment after three or four years. How he would provide for himself and his family in the meantime is completely unclear. Moreover, he has no intention of living together with people who destroyed his livelihood. Asked who felled the trees, he answered vaguely: "the Muslims".

"The Muslims" might be former neighbours of George M., but they could also be members of the radical Islamic militia which seized the village. It is conceivable that these militiamen come from George M.'s immediate environment, since in the current situation in Syria the art of warfare is a reliable source of income for a lot of people and many reports indicate that radical Islamic militiamen have often been deployed in areas close to their homes. At all events, the question as to whether George M. and his family will return to their native village remains unanswered for the moment.[109]

In other cases there has long been a negative response to the issue of a possible return to original rural settlements. In spring 2015 the so-called Islamic State waged a military campaign in the area around the River Khabur in the Al-Hasaka Governorate in north-eastern Syria. As a result 35 villages mostly inhabited by

Assyrian Christians were overrun[110] and the population was forced to flee. These villages are now deserted and the former residents are not expected to return.

Summary of the prospects

Zusammenfassend kann man die Perspektiven für einen Verbleib in den ursprünglichen Siedlungsgebieten bzw. für die Rückkehr in die ursprünglichen Siedlungsgebiete wie folgt kategorisieren:

- In towns that have so far escaped the conflict, e.g. in Latakia and Tartus as well as in Safita in Wadi Nasara (Valley of the Christians), the present demographic conditions can be expected to stay as they are, provided these towns continue to be spared the fighting. In the coastal towns of Latakia and Tartus, for instance, Alawites, Sunni Muslims and Christians will in all likelihood continue to live peacefully side by side. The same can be said of the town of Safita with its originally exclusively Christian population, which has taken in Sunni refugees from the towns of Hama and Homs and the surrounding areas.
- In towns affected by the fighting the prospects ultimately depend on how the c onflict has evolved over the years and on the extent to which the majority Sunni population has joined forces with the radical Islamic rebel groups in attacks on the Christian population, for instance.
  It is highly unlikely that Christians who lived in Raqqa before it was taken over by the so-called Islamic State will want to return there, since the Sunni population has taken sides with IS. Even after a peaceful solution to the conflict the Christians would not countenance returning to a joint life with the Sunni population of Raqqa and will probably never go back.
- In cities such as Aleppo, Damascus and Homs, where for the moment Christians and Sunni Muslims pursue the same, primarily business, interests and there have been no attacks on the Christians by the traditional Sunni Muslim population during the conflict, the Christian population, which has so far not left these cities, can be expected to stay on in the period immediately after the conflict. The question of whether the Christians who fled these cities in the course of the conflict will return once the conflict is over is harder to answer. Those who remain in the country as internally displaced persons are more likely to return than those who have already left Syria. The latter will presumably be more inclined to come back if they have lived so far in Lebanon or Turkey, for instance, but with little prospect of settling there. It is difficult to assess whether those who have already settled in Australia, Canada or the USA thanks to UNHCR programmes will wish to return to Syria.
- As pointed out earlier, the least likely development is that Christians from rural settlements will return. For the moment at least it is barely conceivable that Christians and Sunni Muslims can again live peacefully together in settlements in which the Sunni population supported the radical Islamic rebel groups in the course of the conflict.

Appendix

Demography: Christians in Syria

In the more recent literature the Christian population in Syria is often still put at around 10 percent even though that figure dates to the late 1940s.[111] The last census in which respondents were asked to indicate their religious affiliation was conducted in 1960. This showed that the total Syrian population amounted to 4,403,172 inhabitants, of whom 344,621 or 7.8% were Christians.[112]

The World Bank assumed that for 2010 – in other words before the start of the ongoing conflict – Syria had a population of 21.53 million.[113] On the premise that the Christian percentage of the total population of Syria matched the development of the overall population since the 1960 census, it could be assumed that the number of Christians in Syria in 2010 amounted to 1,679,340. In actual fact, all the sources for 2010 assume that the Christians numbered between one million (4.749%) and at the most 1.5 million (6,967%). The negative development in the Christian share of the total Syrian population in the period from 1960 to 2010 is attributable to two factors. The first is the much lower population growth among Christians as compared to Muslims (Sunnis and Alawites). The second is the large migration of Christians after the merger of Egypt and Syria to form the United Arab Republic in 1958[114], which nurtured fears among the Christian middle classes – as well as many Muslim businessmen – that their property and assets would be confiscated, as had happened previously in Egypt after Gamal Abdel Nasser seized power. The same concern worried many Christian small businessmen when the socialist-style Baath party under Hafez al Assad took power in Syria in 1963. This again led to the emigration of large numbers of Christians. The increasing tensions and, ultimately, the violent conflicts between the Baath regime and the Muslim Brotherhood between 1978 and 1982, which culminated in the Hama massacre and the deaths of 32,000 people, were another reason for many Christians to leave Syria. In all three cases the emigrants initially headed for Lebanon, where Syrian Christians were not only taken in, but also given Lebanese nationality.[115]

Before the conflict Christians made up 4.6% to 7% of the population; now that figure is much lower

The World Bank assumes that in 2015 Syria had a population of 18,502,413[116], which amounts to a drop of 8.59% compared to 2010. On the premise that the Christian population has experienced a corresponding loss in numbers, it ought now – based on the 2010 figures of between one million (4.749%) and a maximum of 1.5 million (6.967%) –to be roughly 914,100 to 1,371,150.

Salam Kawakibi, Deputy Director of the Arab Reform Initiative, says in an article for the Middle East Institute in Washington that, according to a recent unpublished study, the percentage of Christians had already dropped to just 4.6% by 2008. Several Church representatives would now put the Christian population at barely 3%.[117] Proceeding once again from the figures given by the World Bank, according to which Syria had a total population of 20.35 million in 2008, then there can only have been between 936,100 Christians at best living in the country in 2008 and at worst just 610,500.

It is almost impossible to establish whether those figures are realistic or not. This has to do not least with the fact that figures in the Middle East are often used for propaganda purposes – a tendency of which the Christian churches are also not free – and so need not necessarily correspond with the facts.

Collecting reliable data has been made even more difficult due to the large migratory movements involving internally displaced persons in Syria since the outbreak of the conflict. Before it started, the town of Latakia on the Mediterranean coast, for example, had a population of 600,000. Now some two million people are reportedly living there.[118] That is certainly a credible figure, bearing in mind that of the roughly 150,000 to 170,000 Christians who used to live in Aleppo (2010)[119] one third has emigrated to the Valley of Christians (Wadi Nasara) or to Latakia and Tartus while another third has gone abroad.[120] Many contacts remain a little vague about the destination of the Christian emigrants from Aleppo, but they confirm the dimensions of the migration by stating that a maximum of 40% of the former Christian population – that would be 85,000 people at the most – but more likely around 30,000 Christians remain in Aleppo.[121] The most plausible figure concerning the number of Christians still in Aleppo comes from the director of a Catholic relief organisation which sponsors a project in the city to provide infants with milk. Based on the number of children profiting from this scheme, he puts the number of Christians remaining in Aleppo at 28,000 at the most.[122] This means that the Christian share of the total population of Aleppo is now between 16.47% and 18.66% as compared to 2010.

Contacts who are very well networked in Syria assume that the Christian share of the Syrian population is now "perhaps half"[123] or even "less than half"[124] of what it was in 2010. This means that in a best-case scenario – based on the World Bank's 2010 figures for the overall Syrian population – the Christian share can now be assumed to total between 500,000 and 750,000 at the most. However, it is probably safer to assume a lower percentage figure for the Christians. Based on the numbers cited above by Salam Kawakibi, it makes sense to assume that the Christian population now amounts to less than 500,000 and, in the worst case, to perhaps just 300,000.

Conversations held in the region in November 2016 suggested more positive figures. Whether they are factually correct is impossible to say with any degree of certainty, particularly since even the contacts themselves were not fully convinced of the figures they were passing on.

The Christian population in Damascus, the coastal towns of Latakia and Tartus and in the Valley of Christians (Wadi Nasara) to the east of the coast are put at between 500,000 and 700,000.[125]

Clearly, though, the Christian percentage of the overall population has suffered a steep decline in the past few years – and not just in Aleppo. The same is true of Homs, the north, the north-east and the south of Syria.

The fighting has led to the departure of at least 164,000 Christians from Homs, which before 2010 was the city with the second largest Christian population in Syria.[126] Raqqa in the north of the country[127] was never a Christian centre, but it did have a significant Christian population, which has now left the city since the so-called Islamic State took it over and made it its capital. The same applies to Deir ez-Zor in the south-east of Syria,[128] which is still controlled by the Assad regime but has been under siege from the so-called Islamic state for the past two years. Before the conflict began, the north-east of Syria with the towns of Al-Hasaka and Qamishli was a region with a relatively large Christian population – Assyrian, Syriac Orthodox, Armenian, Chaldean and Syrian Catholic. Whereas some 40,000 Christians lived here in 2010 – 25,000 of them Syriac Orthodox and 8,500 Armenian Christians – no more than half that number were still there in 2014.[129] A military campaign waged by the so-called Islamic State in the spring of 2015 in the area of the

River Khabur, during which 35 villages inhabited mostly by Assyrian Christians were overrun,[130] led to a further exodus. These villages are now deserted. Many Christians have also fled from Al-Hasaka in the wake of the military campaign by the so-called Islamic State. There are now allegedly no more than around 1,000 Christians living there.[131] Particularly large numbers of Christians have also migrated from the conurbation of Suwayda, Dar'a and Bosra in the south of Syria.[132]

Settlements with a large Christian population[133]

Aleppo (Aleppo Governorate) was the city with the largest Christian population in Syria before 2011. The majority of the Christians living in the city belonged to the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Armenian Catholic Church, the Syriac Orthodox Church and the Syrian Catholic Church. Other churches still present in Aleppo include the Greek Orthodox Church, the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, the Chaldean Church and the Latin (i.e. Roman Catholic) Church.

Damascus (Damascus Governorate) had a significant Christian population prior to 2011. The Christians belong(ed) to all the churches present in Syria. The Greek Orthodox Christians form(ed) one of this church's largest congregations in Syria.

Al-Hasaka (Al-Hasaka Governorate) had a large Christian population before 2011 (members of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Armenian Catholic Church, the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Syrian Catholic Church, the Chaldean Church and the Assyrian Church of the East).

Homs (Homs Governorate) had the second largest Christian population in Syria prior to 2011. The majority of the Christians in Homs belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church.

Khabur-Region along the River Khabur in the north-east of Syria was home, up to the spring of 2015, to for the most part members of the Assyrian Church of the East living in 35 Christian villages (Abu Tena, Jazirah, Kharita, Qar Shamya, Tel Ahmar, Tel Arbosh, Tel Baloaa, Tel Baz, Tel Brej, Tel Damshesh, Tel Goran, Tel Hipyan, Tel Hormizd, Tel Jadiya, Tel Jumaa, Tel Kepchi, Tel Meghada, Tel Mignas, Tel Misas, Tel Najma, Tel Nasri, Tel Paweda, Tel Ruman Foqani, Tel Ruman Tahtani, Tel Sakra, Tel Shama, Tel Shamriam, Tel Tal, Tel Talaa, Tel Tamar, Tel Tawil, Tel Wardet, Um Alkeif, Um Gargen, Um Waqfa).[134]

Latakia (Latakia Governorate) has a sizeable Christian population, the majority of whom are members of the Greek Orthodox Church, which has (had) one of its largest congregations here. The rest are members of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church.

Maalula (Rif Dimashq Governorate) has a large Christian population, the majority of whom are members of the Greek Orthodox Church.

Mhardeh (Hama Governorate) has a mostly Christian population.

Wadi al-Nasara (Valley of the Christians) encompasses the villages of Wadi al-Nasara, Al-Huwash (gk, go)[135], Al-Mazinah (go), Al-Mishtaya (go), Al-Nasirah (go), Amar al-Husn (gk, go), Anaz (go), Ayn al-Ajuzi (go), Ayn al-Barda (go), Ayn al-Ghara (go), Bahzina (gk, go), Ballat (go), Daghla (go), Habnamrah (go), Ish al-Shuha (go), Jiwar al-Afas (gk, go), Joineyat (go), Kafr Ram (go), Kafra (gk, go), Kimah (go), Marmarita (gk, go), Mashta Azar (gk, go), Masraa (go), Muklous (go, alaw), Muqabara (go), Qalatiyah (go), Rabah (go), Tallah (gk, go), Tannurin (gk, go) and Zweitina (gk, go),

which prior to 2011 were home to an almost exclusively Christian population – for the most part (98%) members of the Greek Orthodox Church, with members of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church and a few Maronites living in some of the villages. Sunni Muslims settled in individual villages before 2011, which has triggered concerns that the demography of Wadi al-Nasara might change dramatically in a few years' time.[136]

Qamishli (Al-Hasaka Governorate) had a large Christian population before 2011 (members of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Armenian Catholic Church, the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Syrian Catholic Church, the Chaldean Church and the Assyrian Church of the East).

Qusayr (Homs Governorate) had a mostly Christian population (10,000) before 2011.[137]

Rableh (Hama Governorate) had an exclusively Christian (Melkite Greek Catholic and Maronite) population prior to 2011.[138]

Sadad[139] (Homs Governorate) lies to the east of the road linking Damascus and Homs. Some 15,000 Syriac Orthodox Christians lived here until the summer of 2015. The city was attacked by the Islamic State in the autumn of 2015. Although the attacks were repelled, the majority of the population fled. Some 2,000 Syriac Orthodox Christians now live there.[140]

Safita (Tartus Governorate) is a city about 35 kilometres to the east of the port town of Tartus which has a Christian population (mostly members of the Greek Orthodox Church and the Greek Catholic Church).

Saidnaya (Rif Dimashq Governorate) has a predominantly Christian population (mostly members of the Greek Orthodox Church).

As-Suqaylabiyah (Hama Governorate) has a mainly Christian population (the majority of whom are members of the Greek Orthodox Church).

Suwayda (Governorate As-Suwayda) had a considerable Christian population (mostly members of the Greek Orthodox Church) before 2011.

Tartus (Tartus Governorate) has a significant Christian population, mostly members of the Greek Orthodox Church which has (had) one of its largest congregations here. The rest are members of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church.

Zabadani (Rif Dimashq Governorate) has a majority Sunni population. Prior to 2011 a large number of Christians lived there.

Churches in Syria

The following data should be seen as no more than a general guide, since they refer to different years and it is not possible to clarify beyond all doubt whether the figures are estimates or based on entries in church registers, for example.

Greek Orthodox Church[141]

The second largest Christian church in Syria is thought to have had about one million members before the start of the Syrian conflict. No more than 15% of the Greek Orthodox Christians at the most are believed to have left Syria since the fighting began, some of them for Beirut and others for a destination overseas. Hardest hit by the emigration are Aleppo, Damascus and suburbs of Damascus, Dara'a and Homs.[142]

	2010	2016
Damascus and suburbs of Damascus 450,000	450,000	No details
Homs and surroundings: 250,000	250,000	No details
Tartus and surroundings: 100,000	100,000	No details
Latakia and surroundings: 120,000	120,000	No details
Aleppo and surroundings: 37,000	37,000	No details
Suwaida and Dar'a : 30,000	30,000	No details
Hama and surroundings: 35,000	35,000	No details
TOTAL	**1,022,000**	**868,700**

Syriac Orthodox Church[143]

Before[144] the start of the Syrian crisis some 170,000 Syriac Orthodox Christians[145] lived primarily in Djezire [(north-)east Syria], Homs, Aleppo and Damascus.[146]

Armenians

The figures for the number of Armenians living in Syria are comparatively well documented. For the period before the outbreak of the Syrian conflict they vary between 65,000 and 70,0001[47][2009], 80,000[148] [2010] and 100,000[149]. In the meantime [2015] the number of Armenians living in Syria is put at 35,000,[150] although other sources say there are no more than 15,000[151].

Most Armenians continue to live in Aleppo. In 2010 there were about 40,000 there, but that figure has now dropped to between 12,000 and 15,000. The number of Armenians living in Damascus has fallen over the same period from 10,000 to 8,000, in Qamishli from 10,000 to 5,000 and in Kasab from 2,000 to 1,500. Over the same period the Armenian population of Latakia has increased from 5,000 to 7,000 due to the influx of internally displaced persons.[152] Armenians are now no longer to be found in Raqqa, Tal Abyad, Hasaka and Yakubiyah.[153] Before the conflict broke out, the Syrian border towns of Kasab and Yakubiyah had a majority Armenian population. Kasab was attacked by radical Islamic rebels operating from Turkish territory and then pillaged[154], while the population of Yakubiyah was driven out by the Jihadist-Salafist Al Nusra Front. Some 10,000 Armenians from Syria have moved to Armenia and a further 7,000-8,000 to Lebanon.[155]

Assyrian[156]

The Assyrian Church of the East is reputed to have 46,000 members in Syria.[157]

Catholic Churches

Melkite Greek Catholic Church

Archeparchy of Damascus:	150,000 (2010)[158]
Archeparchy of Aleppo:	18,000 (2015)[159]
Archeparchy of Bosra and Hauran:	27,000 (2012)[160]
Archeparchy of Homs:	30,000 (2014)[161]
Archeparchy of Latakia:	14,500 (2013)[162]

Around 100,000 Melkite Greek Catholic Christians are currently said to be living in Syria.[163]

Syrian Catholic Church

Archeparchy of Aleppo	10,000 (2012)[164]
Archeparchy of Damascus	14,000 (2013)[165]
Archeparchy of Hasaka-Nisibis	35,000 (2011)[166]
Archeparchy of Homs-Hama-Nabk	5,000 (2013)[167]

Maronite Church

Archeparchy of Aleppo	4,000 (2012)[168]
Archeparchy of Damascus	20,300 (2013)[169]
Archeparchy of Latakia	35,000 (2011)[170]

Chaldean Church

Eparchy of Aleppo (= entire national territory of Syria)	30,000 (2012)[171]

Armenian Catholic Church

Eparchy[172] Aleppo	18,000 (2012)[173]
Patriarchal Exarchate of Damascus	4,500 (2012)[174]

Roman Catholic (Latin) Church

Apostolic Vicariate of Aleppo[175]	13,000 (2014)[176]

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20| *b. 3 May 1965, Qamishli, Syria; resides in Sednaya, Syria*
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