

ON THE SITUATION OF CHRISTIANS IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

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"PERSECUTED – Christians are being driven out of the Middle East."¹ This was the headline on the cover of the *Newsweek* magazine on 3 April 2015. The exodus of Christians from the Middle East is not a new phenomenon and its causes are many and varied. However, there is no doubt that the invasion of Iraq by the USA in 2003 and the consequences for Iraq and the entire region, which had not been anticipated in the form they have taken, have had a massive impact in accelerating the exodus of Christians from the entire Middle East.

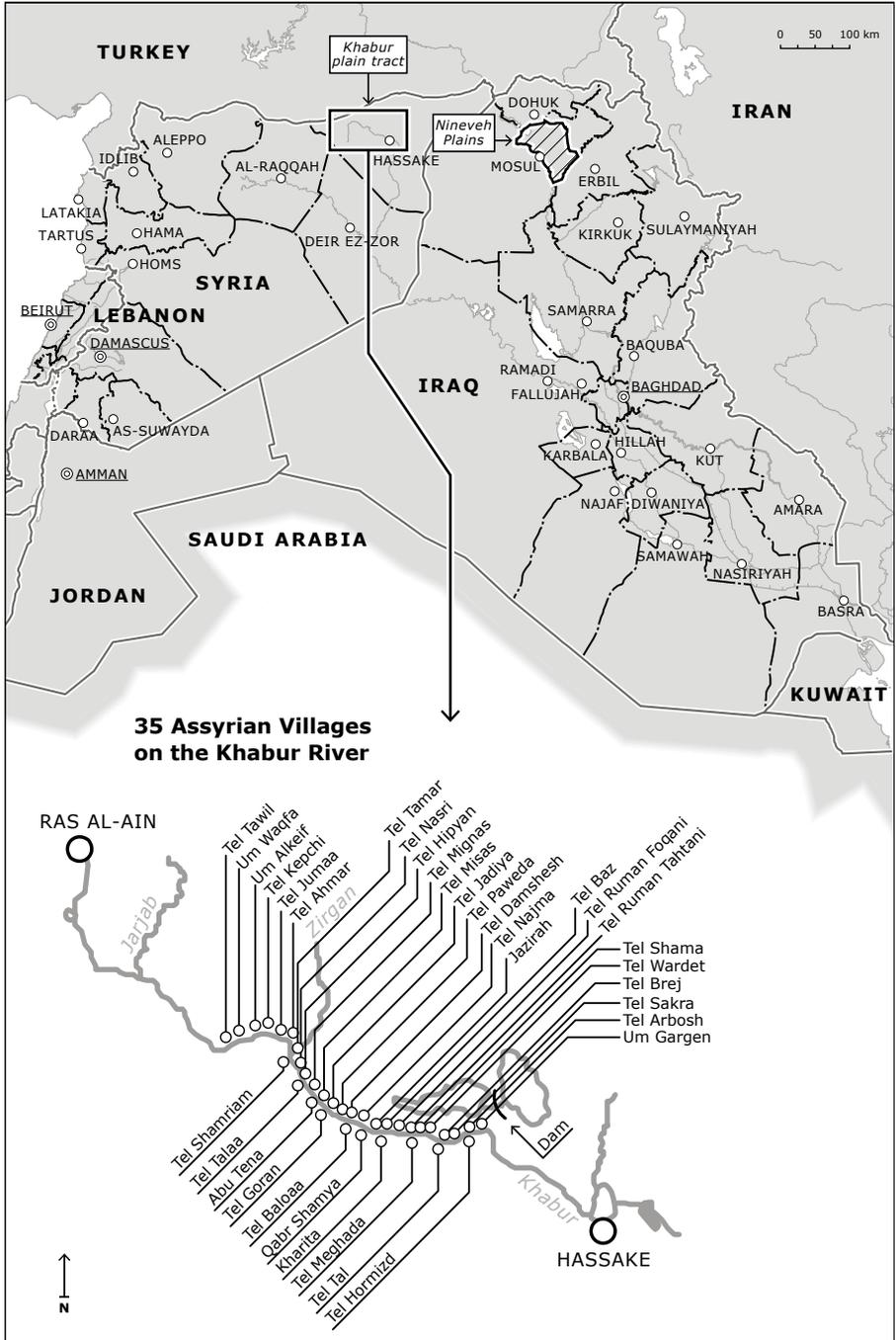
Further drivers for Christians fleeing the region include

- the unresolved conflict in Syria, which has now gone on for over four years;
- the simmering domestic conflict in Iraq;
- and the circumstances of the parliamentary elections in Egypt in late 2011 and early 2012 as well as the presidential elections in May 2012.

While developments in Egypt are now looking more positive with respect to the situation of Christians at least for the time being, the fear is that the situation of the Christians in Iraq and in Syria has still not reached its nadir.

1 | "PERSECUTED – Christians are being driven out of the Middle East", *Newsweek*, 3 Apr 2015, <http://newsweek.com/2015/04/03/emea-issue.html> (accessed 17 Jun 2015).

Fig. 1
**Administrative structure of Lebanon, Syria and Iraq,
Assyrian villages on the Khabur River**



Source: Own illustration based on: Christian Aid Program CAPNI, "Thirty Five Assyrian Villages on the Kabur River in Syria".

PERSECUTION BY ISLAMIC STATE

The conflicts in Syria and Iraq served as the breeding ground for new radical Islamic groupings in those countries. This development culminated in the establishment of the so-called Islamic State (IS). This organisation developed from the jihadist-Salafist terror organisation Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and, respectively, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which has been operating since 2003, itself arising from Al-Qaeda.

From mid-2013 onwards, IS was initially able to bring large swathes of land in the north and east of Syria under its control and establish its "capital" in Raqqa in northern Syria. In the early spring of 2014, IS overran several Iraqi provinces, took the major city of Mosul in north-western Iraq and expelled Yazidis and Christians from their traditional settlement areas in the foothills of the Shingal or Sinjar Mountains² and, respectively, the Nineveh Plains. According to the organisation's own statements, these campaigns were not only about territorial gain, but about nothing less than world domination. What this means for the Christians and other

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religious minorities living in the region becomes clear from a recently published interview with two IS fighters, who had been captured by Kurdish People's Protection Units.³⁴ Asked about the aims of IS, the first

IS fighter responded that IS wanted to rule the entire world and eradicate the non-believers, the Christians. He waved aside the objection that faith was, after all, a matter of self-determination and should not be imposed on people⁵ with the comment that it was what his faith dictated. In an Islamic State, everybody has to be Muslim; anybody who was not Muslim would have to become Muslim, and Christians were non-believers. In response to the

- 2 | In the English-speaking media reporting, the mountain range was generally referred to by the Arabic name Sinjar. The name used locally is Shingal.
- 3 | Kurdish: Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG); combat units of the Syrian Kurdish party Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (PYD), English: Democratic Union Party), which is close to the PKK.
- 4 | "Captured fighters reveal inner-workings of ISIS", *Rûdaw*, 29 Mar 2015, <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/290320151> (accessed 9 Jun 2015).
- 5 | This question relates to sura 2 (Al Baqara), verse 256 of the Quran, which states (in the translation by A. J. Arberry, 1964): "No compulsion is there in religion (i.e. nobody can be forced to adopt the (right) faith."

question regarding what they had been told about the Christians, the second captive replied, "Christians are non-believers".⁶



The leader of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has submitted to the Christians in the capital of the IS – or rather forced upon them – a "protection contract". | Source: © picture alliance / AP Photo.

In fact, Christians, although they are members of a revealed religion ("People of the Book"), are considered non-believers in the Islamic tradition in exactly the same way as all those who do not have a holy book, because they do not believe in the Quran and Mohammed in the role of prophet. Christians accordingly only have the choice of adopting Islam, accepting the *dhimmi* status, i.e. the status of a "protected person" who has to pay the *jizya* tax in return, or of fighting. From the perspective of fighters from radical Islamist groupings, who are either religiously uneducated or ill-informed about Islamic traditions, Christians effectively only have one choice: converting to Islam.

That is surprising insofar as Christians had been presented with – or more accurately had been forced upon them – a "protection" agreement on 26 February 2014 in Raqqa in Syria, the "capital" of the so-called Islamic State, by its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in which Baghdadi granted protection to the Christians, their assets

6 | "ISIS fighter: we wanted to take over the world", *Rûdaw*, 30 Mar 2015, <http://rudaw.net/english/interview/300320151?keyword=christians> (accessed 9 Jun 2015).

and their churches.⁷ But this agreement also includes the following provisions:

- [Christians] will not build in their city or its environs a new monastery, church or priest's hermitage, or rebuild those that have been destroyed.
- They will not display a cross or anything from their books in any of the Muslims' streets or markets [and] they will not use megaphones in the performance of their prayers, or in any of their rites.
- They will not make Muslims listen to the recitation of their books or the ringing of their [church] bells.
- They will not engage in any acts inimical to the Islamic State.
- They will not prevent any Christian from converting to Islam if he desires to do so.
- Christians must pay the *jizya* for each male among them, amounting to four gold dinars for the wealthy, half that amount for the middle-class, and a quarter of that amount for the poor.
- They will not engage in the trade of pigs or wine with Muslims or in their markets, and they will not drink wine publicly.⁸

The comment that Christians must desist from any inimical act against the Islamic State could already be seen in the Spring of 2014 as a prelude to the absolutely arbitrary way in which IS would subsequently treat the Christian minority.

CHRISTIANS IN IRAQ – THE CAPTURE OF MOSUL

In 2011, there were still some 12,000 Christians living in Mosul despite the risk of attacks by radicals. By the time Mosul was overrun by IS, the number had dwindled to less than 3,000.

By the time Mosul was captured on 9 June 2014, there was hardly any further mention of the rules of the above "protection" agreement. The Christians in Mosul essentially only had the choice to flee, convert to Islam or be executed. In 2011, there were still some 12,000 Christians⁹ living in Mosul despite the permanent risk of attacks by radicals allied to Al-Qaeda; by the time Mosul was overrun by IS, the number had dwindled to less than 3,000. No one had foreseen the

7 | Cf. Jürg Bischoff, "Aufbau eines islamischen Staates in der Provinz – Kopfsteuer für Christen in Rakka", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 28 Feb 2014, <http://nzz.ch/1.18252898> (accessed 9 Jun 2015).

8 | Cf. Kamal Shekho, "Christians Leave Raqqa, the Capital of the Islamic Caliphate", *The Syrian Observer*, 16 Jul 2014, <http://syrianobserver.com/EN/Features/27510> (accessed 9 Jun 2015).

9 | Interview with Archbishop Emil Nona, Chaldean Archbishop of Mosul, and Archbishop Bashar Warda, Chaldean Bishop of Erbil, Aachen, 20 Aug 2012.

capture of the city on 9 June 2014. Many Christians – particularly those working in the public sector – had already left Mosul during the preceding months because Muslims of their acquaintance had signalled to them that they were no longer welcome there. During the days following the capture by IS, most of the remaining Christians fled the city – predominantly heading for the Christian villages and small towns of the Nineveh Plains. 15 July 2014 was the first Sunday since Christianity had become established in Iraq that no Christian service was conducted in Mosul.¹⁰

On 18 July 2014, Islamic State forced the remaining Christians to decide whether they wanted to convert to Islam or accept *dhimmi* status, pay the *jizya*¹¹ and remain in Mosul.

IS fighters have marked the homes and businesses of Christians with the Arabic letter nūn, which stands for the term *nasara* (Christians).

The only other options were to flee or suffer death by the sword. IS fighters had previously gone through the city and marked the homes and businesses of Christians with the Arabic letter *nūn*, which stands for the term *nasara* (Christians) used in the Quran. This was very obviously intended to make it easier to keep a check on the remaining Christians and their assets. IS received support in its actions from local Muslims, who no doubt had their own selfish reasons.

In view of the flight of the last Christians from Mosul, the Chaldean Patriarch Louis Sako, who had never lost hope in the continued Christian presence after the 2003 invasion of Iraq despite the violence against Christians, which caused many of them to flee, stated dejectedly: "There are no Christians left in Mosul for the first time in Iraq's history."¹² Christians had become targets of radical Islamist groups in Iraq immediately after the 2003 U.S. invasion. They were branded as supporters of the "Christian" USA, which for its part, fell back on old patterns of behaviour in its rhetoric – there was some talk of a crusade – which could only be to the detriment of the Iraqi Christians. Despite the grim situation, the Patriarch appealed to the Christians from Mosul: "Be brave in front of what you are facing, do not be afraid, you have deep roots in Iraq, do not give up for frustration and despair, confident that "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Matthew

10 | Interview with Archbishop Bashar Warda, Chaldean Bishop of Erbil, Erbil, 22 Jun 2014.

11 | Cf. Hamed Abdel Samad, "Christenvertreibung – Kopfsteuer für Christen", *Die Zeit*, 14 Aug 2014, <http://www.zeit.de/2014/32/christen-vertreibung-irak-tradition> (accessed 9 Jun 2015).

12 | Cf. "Tausende Christen fliehen aus Mosul", *Die Zeit*, 19 Jul 2014, <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2014-07/irak-christen-mosul> (accessed 9 Jun 2015).

26:52) and evil does not last".¹³ However, Sako is akin to the lone voice in the wilderness with this appeal, because it is not likely to elicit any response in view of what the Christians have suffered in Iraq since IS captured Mosul.



Christians in Germany protest against the expulsion of their co-religionists from traditional settlement areas in Syria and Iraq: Unless the region is permanently freed from "Islamic state", a return for Christians is impossible. | Source: Joachim S. Müller, flickr ©①②.

EXPULSION FROM THE NINEVEH PLAINS

This will probably be inevitable, not least because only a short time after the fall of Mosul, areas in the Nineveh Plains where Christians had traditionally settled were also being targeted by IS and finally overrun. The Nineveh Plains is one of the regions in dispute between the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan (ARK) and the Iraqi central government with respect to their inclusion in ARK territory. According to Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution, a referendum was to be conducted by 31 December 2007 for the disputed areas, which were effectively arabised through ethnic cleansing during the rule of the Baath Party under Saddam Hussein. The referendum was repeatedly postponed and has still not taken place. Shortly after IS had captured Mosul, Kurdish Peshmerga established facts on the ground by taking control of the city of Kirkuk, which is located in disputed territory, as well

13 | Louis Raphael I Sako, "Patriarch Sako's Speech to Iraqi Christians and Mosul's Christians Particularly", Saint-Adday, 22 Jul 2014, <http://saint-adday.com/permalink/6326.html> (accessed 9 Jun 2015).

as the oil fields in the surrounding area.¹⁴ The President of the ARK, Masoud Barzani, announced at the end of June 2014 that a referendum would be held in the near future in Kirkuk and the other disputed territories

The President of the ARK, Masoud Barzani, announced in 2014 that a referendum would be held in the near future in disputed territories on whether these regions should all form part of the ARK.

on whether these regions should all form part of the ARK.¹⁵ However, there still has been no referendum. Originally, all disputed areas were inhabited predominantly by Kurds, Christians, Yazidi, Shiite Turkmen and other ethnic-religious minorities, plus some Sunni Arabs.

The Nineveh Plains comprise the districts of Al-Hamdaniya, Tel Keppe (Tel Kaif) and Shekhan. While the population had lately been ethnically and religiously mixed in many areas, some places such as Bakhdida (Qaraqosh), Bartella, Karamlesh in Al-Hamdaniya District and Tel Keppe (Tel Kaif) in the district of the same name had been inhabited mainly by Christians until most recently. These and other towns of mixed population came under IS control as of 6 August 2014. Some 100,000 Christians, who lived in the Nineveh Plains, fled to the ARK, to Erbil, Dohuk and Zakho. The Kurdish Peshmerga, who had been charged with defending the towns now captured by IS and who had demonstrated the Kurdish claim to power by their presence, had fled at the first sign of the arrival of IS fighters, undermining the confidence of the Christian population in them. During the following weeks, Peshmerga forces joined by Christian militias have, in fact, been successful in recapturing some towns formerly inhabited by Christians, such as Bakhdida (Qaraqosh). However, the situation in the entire region remains extremely volatile, which is why the Christian refugees have not returned to any of the recaptured towns. It is also unlikely that they will return until such time as the entire region is permanently liberated from IS. The Christians also expect that there will be no "Arabs" left in and around the towns they previously inhabited – in this context, "Arab" is synonymous with Sunni Muslims. In many cases, these had "forgotten" their previously quite good or at least unproblematic relations with their Christian neighbours during the onslaught by the IS fighters and carried favour with IS, for whatever reason, thereby causing the Christians to lose all trust in them.

14 | Cf. Namo Abdulla, "Kirkuk Under Kurdish Peshmerga Control", *Rûdaw*, 12 Jun 2014, <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/120620142> (accessed 9 Jun 2015).

15 | Cf. "Baghdad must accept Kirkuk is now part of Kurdistan – KRG official", *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 30 Jun 2014, <http://aawsat.net/2014/06/article55333791> (accessed 9 Jun 2015).

Some ten years ago, the situation of the Christians and other minority groups had been similarly precarious. While the threat comes from IS these days, it came from groups affiliated to Al-Qaeda in the years from 2006. At that time, large numbers of Christians were driven out of Baghdad as well as Mosul. Many of those who did not flee to Jordan, Lebanon, Syria or Turkey aimed for places in the Nineveh Plains whose populations were partly or overwhelmingly Christian. Others fled to areas in the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan which were predominantly Christian. Many only speak Arabic – and possibly a Western foreign language – but none of them speak the neo-Aramaic dialects spoken by Christians in northern Iraq, and certainly not the official language Kurdish, which is virtually a prerequisite for acquiring a job in the ARK.

The Christian Churches in Iraq rejected the Nineveh Plains Project at the time, because it contradicted the concept of a centralised state and would have made the Christians more exposed and vulnerable.

The Nineveh Plains Project, which has been under discussion since 2006 among Christian groups in Iraq, but above all among Assyrian nationalists in the diaspora in the USA and Europe,¹⁶ envisages the creation of an autonomous region for Christians in the Nineveh Plains north of Mosul. The Christian Churches in Iraq rejected the Nineveh Plains Project at the time,¹⁷ because it contradicted the concept of Iraq as a centralised state and would have made the Christians even more exposed and therefore vulnerable. It was also unclear how the protection of such an autonomous region could be secured without its own armed forces.

After talks about this project had died down in recent years, the threat posed by IS has rekindled the debate. In a speech before a congress in Berlin organised by the CDU/CSU parliamentary group on the subject of "Religious freedom as a human right – How do we protect persecuted Christians?",¹⁸ the Chaldean Archbishop of Ainkawa, Bashar Warda – previously an ardent opponent of the project – demanded a secure, self-governed homeland for the

16 | On the subject: Jeremy Courtney, "What everyone gets wrong about the persecution of Christians in Iraq", *The Week*, 10 Apr 2015, <http://theweek.com/articles/548138/iraq> (accessed 9 Jun 2015).

17 | Cf. i.e. Saad Hanna Sirop, "Kidnapped Chaldean Priest: No to the Niniveh plain ethnic project", *AsiaNews*, 8 Jun 2007, <http://asianews.it/news-en/-9498.html> (accessed 9 Jun 2015).

18 | CDU/CSU-Fraktion im Deutschen Bundestag, "Menschenrecht Religionsfreiheit – Wie schützen wir verfolgte Christen?", <http://cducus.de/veranstaltungen/menschenrecht-religionsfreiheit-wie-schuetzen-wir-verfolgte-christen-teil-1> (accessed 9 Jun 2015) und <http://cducus.de/veranstaltungen/menschenrecht-religionsfreiheit-wie-schuetzen-wir-verfolgte-christen-teil-2> (accessed 9 Jun 2015).

non-Muslim minorities in the Nineveh Plains. He justified his demand by stating that 1,700 years of coexistence with the majority Muslim population had only resulted in the Christian, Yazidi and Sabian community now being at risk of total annihilation and exodus from the homeland of their forefathers.

That said, the Nineveh Plains Project is no more an option now than it was in 2006. While it may be desirable to have a safe homeland for Christians and other ethnic-religious minorities in northern Iraq, there remains the practically insoluble question of how to ensure the safety of people living in such an area. Even reports indicating that Christians in the region have started setting up their own militias will not change that. Furthermore, such a solution would almost inevitably require an ethnic cleansing of the area. And no one can seriously want that to happen.

EXODUS OF CHRISTIANS FROM SYRIA

Before 2011, some 1.1 million Christians lived in Syria. Since the beginning of the conflict, up to 700,000 Christians are estimated to have left the country, up to 30,000 fleeing from Aleppo and some 10,000 from Homs.¹⁹ And the Exodus continues.

On 23 February 2015, IS began to attack Assyrian villages along a 40-kilometer front line on the southern bank of the Khabur River in the northeast of Syria (cf. fig. 1). While many inhabitants were able to flee and seek

It is thought that the IS attack of Assyrian villages around Hassake had not been part of any long-term planning, and that a new target was merely selected following the defeat in Kobani.

refuge in the town of al-Hasakah, several hundred Assyrians were trapped in their villages and taken prisoner by IS. Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG),²⁰ which had previously controlled the area, tried to bring the villages back under their control.²¹ It is thought that the IS attack had not been part of any long-term planning, and that a new target was merely selected following the defeat in Kobani (Ayn al-Arab). Should this be the case, further attacks by IS can be expected anywhere within Syria for as long as it has not been totally vanquished.

19 | Cf. Janine di Lorenzo/Conor Gaffey, "The New Exodus: Christians Flee ISIS in the Middle East", *Newsweek*, 26 Mar 2015, <http://newsweek.com/2015/04/03/new-exodus-christians-flee-isis-middle-east-316785.html> (accessed 9 Jun 2015).

20 | N. 3.

21 | Archimandrit Emanuel Youkhana, email (1), 24 Feb 2015.



A destroyed Assyrian church in the Khabur area: The trust of the Christian population in the Peshmerga troupe wanes, as they are unable to maintain permanent protection against the IS. | Source: © CAPNI.

REPORTS FROM THE KHABUR AREA

To the southeast of the city of Ras al-Ayn, there are 35 villages on both sides of the Khabur River. They were founded by Assyrians who fled from the surroundings of the city of Simmele, to the west of Dokuk in Iraq, in 1933 and had settled in Syria in the hope that they would be able to return to their homes one day.²² Almost 220 families and 60 individuals, including some Christian militiamen, were taken prisoner by IS in these villages between 24 and 26 February 2015²³ and moved to IS-controlled territory, including the Arab-Sunni village of Um Al-Masamier, with men, women and children being separated in the process.²⁴ The attack resulted in casualties among both the civilian population and the attackers and defenders – YPG fighters and Assyrian militiamen. Some

22 | During the Simmele massacre, troops from the Kingdom of Iraq had used force against the inhabitants of 63 Assyrian villages in the Dohuk and Mosul Districts. There were some 3,000 fatalities to mourn. To this very day, the Assyrians refer to their settlements in the Khabur area not as villages or towns but merely as camps, in which they settled until they could return to Iraq. However, even Simmele and the surrounding villages had not been the original homeland of the Christians who fled the area – they had fled there from villages in the mountainous area around the City of Hakkari during the genocide in present-day Turkey.

23 | Archimandrit Emanuel Youkhana, email (2), 24.02.2015; email, 25 Feb 2015; email, 26 Feb 2015.

24 | Archimandrit Emanuel Youkhana, email, 25 Feb 2015.

1,200 families managed to escape to Al-Hasakah and Qamishli,²⁵ some attempted to flee directly to Turkey, but found the border closed to them.²⁶ On 27 February 2015, no Assyrians were left in the 35 Assyrian villages along the Khabur River.²⁷

As happened in Iraq in the summer of 2014, the Arab-Sunni population showed solidarity with IS here as well.²⁸ Apparently, an announcement was made in the mosque of Bab Alfaraj village that there would be a mass execution of “non-believers” on Friday, 27 February 2015, on Mount Abdulaziz, where the prisoners had been taken²⁹ – although this did not actually take place. There were also reports that the sharia court in the town of al-Shadadi south of Al-Hasakah – in IS-controlled territory – was to decide on the fate of the captured Christians in accordance with sharia law. As *dhimmi*s, they would be subject to the payment of the *jizya* prescribed in Islam. In fact, several Christians were released upon payment of a ransom according to press reports.³⁰ One should not fail to mention that the Arab-Sunni population showed some solidarity with the Christians in individual cases: inhabitants of the Arab-Sunni village of Qaber Shamiat, for instance, gave 15 Assyrians safe passage to Al-Hasakah.³¹

The Syrian Catholic Bishop of Al-Hasakah, Behnam Hindo, complained that the air raids the coalition carried out against Islamic State were too little too late,³² making the IS advance possible in the first place. Air raids

Air raids by the anti-IS coalition from the beginning of March enabled the YPG and Assyrian fighters to free captives and to recapture the northern bank of the Khabur River.

by the anti-IS coalition from the beginning of March enabled the YPG and Assyrian fighters to free 14 Assyrian fighters who were pinned down by IS on Raqba hill between Tel Nasri and Tel Tamar and to recapture the northern bank of the Khabur River.³³ But this

25 | Archimandrit Emanuel Youkhana, email, 26 Feb 2015.

26 | Cf. Elise Harris, “Turkish border closed as Christian hostages in Syria spike to 250”, Catholic News Agency, 26 Feb 2015, <http://catholicnewsagency.com/news/turkish-border-closed-as-christian-hostages-in-syria-spike-to-250-54799> (accessed 9 Jun 2015).

27 | Archimandrit Emanuel Youkhana, email, 28 Feb 2015.

28 | Archimandrit Emanuel Youkhana, email (2), 24 Feb 2015; email, 25 Feb 2015.

29 | Archimandrit Emanuel Youkhana, email, 28 Feb 2015.

30 | Cf. “Terror in Syrien: IS-Miliz lässt 19 Christen gegen Lösegeld frei”, *Der Spiegel*, 2 Mar 2015, <http://spiegel.de/politik/ausland/a-1021228.html> (accessed 9 Jun 2015).

31 | Archimandrit Emanuel Youkhana, email (2), 24 Feb 2015.

32 | Cf. Harris, n. 26.

33 | Archimandrit Emanuel Youkhana, email, 10 Mar 2015.

does not mean the situation has stabilised by any means and the Christians can return. On 5 April 2015, for instance, IS blew up the Church of the Virgin Mary in Tel Nasri, when YPG fighters and Christian militiamen attempted to recapture the village.³⁴



An attack of the anti-IS Coalition in Kobani: The setback moved the IS to attack other targets. | Source: Scott Bobb, Voice of America News ©©.

It is doubtful as to whether the Christians who fled the area will ever return to the villages on the Khabur River because all of them came from families that had experienced expulsion and the need to flee repeatedly for several generations. It is therefore not surprising that the first refugees from these villages arrived in Istanbul and Beirut³⁵ only a few days after the IS attacks – and they will be followed by many more.

THE SITUATION IN IDLIB

Just one month later, at the end of March 2015, the provincial capital of Idlib in the northwest of Syria, which the Assad regime had succeeded in holding over the last few years despite numerous attempts to capture it, was taken by a coalition of Islamist militias allied to Al-Qaeda and several so-called moderate groups. The Salafist Jabhat al-Nusra militia played an important, albeit not the decisive, role, and other groups providing support included

34 | Cf. "ISIS destroys Assyrian Church in Syria", *AINA News*, 5 Apr 2015, <http://www.aina.org/news/20150405112823.htm> (accessed 9 Jun 2015).

35 | Cf. Patricia Khoder, "Le calvaire des exilés chrétiens du Khabour au Liban", *L'Orient le Jour*, 7 Mar 2015, <http://lorientlejour.com/article/914596> (accessed 9 Jun 2015).

the like-minded Ahrar al-Sham, Jund al-Aqsa, Liwa al-Haqq and Failaq al-Sham. Further support was provided by the Free Syrian Army, classed as moderate by Western governments.³⁶ Idlib, with a population of some 165,000, had a sizeable Christian minority – but only a few hundred Christians are said to have remained living there in the end.³⁷ Prior to the city's capture, concerned observers had wondered how the various militias were going to treat the Christians remaining in Idlib. A leading cleric from the Islamist Jabhat al-Nusra tried to allay the Christians' fears with the comment that attacking Christians or stealing from them was *haram* – forbidden under sharia.³⁸ In fact, many Christians tried to flee from Idlib and in some cases actually received assistance from Islamist fighters, for instance when 20 Christian families were given safe passage to the Turkish border.³⁹ Other Christians fled to Mhardeh, Ariha and Banyas on the Mediterranean coast. It appears that those who stayed behind had put themselves into a precarious situation. There were reports, for instance, that the only priest remaining behind, the Greek-Orthodox Father Ibrahim Farah, was abducted by the Jabhat al-Nusra militia with several other Christians at the end of March. They were to be put before a sharia court. It is said that an announcement was made in a mosque in Idlib that the Christians would either have to pay the *jizya* or leave the city.⁴⁰ In a video published on YouTube on 3 April, however, the priest appears to deny the veracity of these reports.⁴¹ What appears to be beyond doubt, though, is that two Christians who ran a liquor

A leading cleric from the Islamist Jabhat al-Nusra tried to allay the Christians' fears with the comment that attacking Christians or stealing from them was forbidden under sharia.

36 | In greater detail: Jeffrey White, "The Battle for Idlib: Military Implications", 30 Mar 2015, Policywatch 2396, The Washington Institute, 30 Mar 2015, <http://washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-battle-for-idlib-military-implications> (accessed 9 Jun 2015); see also: Aaron Kliegman, "Sunni Jihadists Gain Ground in Syria", Center for Security Policy, 1 Apr 2015, <http://centerforsecuritypolicy.org/2015/04/01/sunni-jihadists-gain-ground-in-syria> (accessed 9 Jun 2015).

37 | "al Nusra Kidnapps Father Ibrahim Farah in Idlib", *Notes on Arab Orthodoxy*, 31 Mar 2015, <http://araborthodoxy.blogspot.com/2015/03/al-nusra-kidnapps-fr-ibrahim-farah-in.html> (accessed 9 Jun 2015).

38 | Cf. "After 'united' rebel win, who will rule Idlib city?", *Syria:direct*, 30 Mar 2015, <http://syriadirect.org/main/37-videos/1948-after-united-rebel-win-who-will-rule-idlib-city> (accessed 9 Jun 2015).

39 | "Christians flee Idlib amidst rising death toll", *Syria:direct*, 31 Mar 2015, <http://syriadirect.org/rss/1949-syria-direct-news-update-3-31-15> (accessed 9 Jun 2015).

40 | Cf. n. 37.

41 | "The Priest of the Virgin Mary Church in Idlib denies his abduction", YouTube, 3 Apr 2015, <http://youtu.be/pXjWmRZ2ITl> (accessed 11 Jun 2015).

store were killed – not by the Salafist Jabhat al-Nusra militia as initially reported,⁴² but by the Ahrar al-Sham militia, which is described as moderate.⁴³

The reports from the Khabur area in the northeast and the Idlib area in the northwest of Syria illustrate how tense the situation is for Christians in many places in the country. They have effectively been caught between the fronts. The regime, to which most of them had felt loyal until the conflict broke out, continues to claim their support. But that is precisely what the Islamist opposition now holds against them. Like large numbers of Muslims – Alawites and Sunnis – they have become victims of a conflict that will not be resolved in Syria. It should be resolved as soon as possible, though, if one wants to prevent those areas of Syria which are still relatively peaceful from being sucked into the vortex of violence.

OUTLOOK

It is difficult to anticipate what the future will hold for Christians in the Middle East. There are still some countries including Jordan and Lebanon where Christians continue to feel safe. But these states are also running the risk of being dragged into the conflicts raging in the neighbouring countries. This has been the case for the multi-faith and multi-denominational Lebanon for some time, at least since the Shia Hezbollah started intervening in the fighting in Syria on the side of the Assad regime. The religiously more homogeneous Jordan, on the other hand, appears immune to similar developments. However, what consequences the announced decisive action against Islamic State in the Iraqi border region of Anbar will have for Jordan remains to be seen.

Bringing an end to the current violent conflicts remains the only hope for the affected countries and particularly for the Christians in the Middle East. If there is no resolution to the conflicts, even more Christians will leave the region. But ultimately, this would result in the moderate forces in these countries becoming ever more isolated and radical Islamists finding it easier to realise their vision of world domination – albeit only at a regional level. Surely, there cannot be many who would wish for that to happen.

42 | Cf. n. 37.

43 | Cf. Patrick Poole, "Syrian Rebel Group Ahrar al-Sham Executes Christians in 'Liberated' Idlib", *PJ Media*, 1 Apr 2015, <http://pjmedia.com/tatler/2015/04/01/syrian-rebel-group-ahrar-al-sham-executes-christians-in-liberated-idlib> (accessed 9 Jun 2015).