

# The Situation and Prospects of Christians in North and North-East Syria

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Otmar Oehring



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Cover photo: Entrance doors of St. George's Church with clearly visible bullet holes.

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# 1. Introduction

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Two years have passed since the publication of the article on *Christians in Syria: Current Situation and Future Outlook*. Whereas in spring 2017 there was still hope that the violent conflict in the country might be resolved in the near future, there is little reason now for any optimism. Syria has seen many changes, nonetheless.

Whereas in spring 2015 the Assad regime controlled less than a fifth of Syrian territory, it recaptured large parts of the country after Russia entered the war in the autumn of that year. Today the regime again controls more than half of Syria, especially the most populous areas including the coastal strip and cities in the west and south, the territory along the border with Lebanon and Jordan as well as large swathes of the central Syrian desert with the most important gas fields.<sup>2</sup>

The military conflicts have forced people living in these areas to flee. In April 2018 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) put the number of refugees at 5.6 million and the number of internally displaced persons (IDP) at 6.6 million.<sup>3</sup> Over 1.8 million people were internally displaced in 2017 alone, many of them for a second or third time.<sup>4</sup> In 2017 there were some 840,000 'returnees' in Syria, including over 764,000 internally displaced persons (IDP) and 77,000 refugees, who organised their return home from other countries themselves. The UNHCR stresses that in the current phase "the necessary conditions are not in place for a safe and dignified return" and that therefore "return should not be encouraged".<sup>5</sup>

The Assad regime has nevertheless repeatedly called on refugees to return to Syria. His appeals have met with a relatively muted response among refugees, however, not least because Syrians who returned to the country in the past had to reckon with arrest, torture and enforced recruitment. Moreover, there appears to be no clear purpose to a current law requiring refugees to provide documentary proof of their proprietary right to plots of land they abandoned in the reconstruction zones. Many people think the intention behind the law is to exert pressure on refugees to return to Syria. Others think it is merely designed to expropriate opponents of the regime who have fled.<sup>6</sup>

All population groups without distinction have become victims of the violent conflict in Syria, regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation. It is already apparent, however, that the share of members of the Christian minority among the Syrians who have left the country as refugees since 2011 is disproportionately high.

The World Bank put the population of Syria in 2018 at 16,906,283<sup>7</sup>, which amounted to a drop of 20.86% as compared to 2010. If we assume a corresponding fall in the number of Christians over that period, the Christian population – based on the figures given for 2010 of between one million (4.681%) and a maximum of 1.5 million (7.021%) – ought now to be somewhere between 793,000 and 1,189,000.<sup>8</sup>

Sharp decline in the Christian population.

Even in the most favourable circumstances, however, the Christian share of the total population in 2017 could only have been 500,000 to 750,000 at the most. However, it was conceivable even then that the Christians numbered less than 500,000 and in the worst case no more than 300,000 persons.<sup>9</sup> At a conference held by the Pázmány Péter Catholic University (PPCU) in Budapest on 22 January 2019, Cardinal Mario Zenari, the Apostolic Nuncio in Syria, said the Christian population had fallen to around two percent.<sup>10</sup> Based on the World Bank population development figures for Syria – and the latest data available are for 2018 – a two per cent share would have meant no more than about 338,125 Christians.<sup>11</sup>

The decline in the overall population between 2010 and 2018 – based on the population statistics provided by the World Bank<sup>12</sup> – amounted to 20.68%. If we assume there were still 338,125 Christians living in Syria in 2018, the drop in the number of Christians between 2010 and 2018, based on a population share of one million in 2010, would be 66.18% or, based on a share in the population of 1.5 million in 2010, would be as high as 77.45%.

As regards the aforementioned returnees – refugees and internally displaced persons – it should be pointed out that among the Christians, too, there were internally displaced persons who returned to their homes after the situation ‘stabilised’. They included Christian IDPs who had fled from Aleppo or Homs to Wadi al-Nasara (Valley of Christians) or cities on the Mediterranean coast and later went back home. However, it must be assumed that the majority of Christians who abandoned their homes in Syria have left the country for good. Those who have fled Syria are unlikely to return. This situation will be not changed by well-intentioned statements, for instance by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who in talks with the Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kyrill said he was convinced that, once stability had been restored in Syria, it was important to ensure that Christians could return to their homes.<sup>13</sup> He thus joined the ranks of all those who describe a return to Syria as a matter of urgency, because without the presence of Christians in the countries of the Middle East the social fabric there will not only suffer extensive damage but will to all intents and purposes be destroyed.

Most Christian refugees have left the country and are unlikely to return.

However, this flies in the face of the Christian refugees’ experience at the hands of radical Islamic groups in Syria and of their concern that the ideology of these groups, even after they have been defeated, will continue to influence the thinking of the majority Sunni population.

In this respect Christians from Syria (and from other countries in the region) frequently cite slogans by radical Islamist groups such as

*“Alawites to the grave, Christians to Beirut”*

or

*“Christian women for pleasure, Alawite men for the sword.”<sup>14</sup>*

With this in mind, it is difficult to gauge whether Christians can be expected to return after the conflict has been resolved, especially if they live in the countryside. This depends not least on the extent to which the original Sunni population offered its services to the radical Islamist groups and joined forces with them against the

Christian population. Another issue at stake here will be whether the Sunni population played a voluntary part in attacks, was recognisably coerced or forced into participating in attacks or did not take part in attacks at all.

It should be emphasised that, even at times when radical Islamist groups associated with Al Qaida or the Islamic State took over regional control, Sunni attacks on Christians did not take place everywhere and, where they did, not all the representatives of the native Sunni population were involved. Equally it cannot be asserted that, in the 'liberated' areas in which radical Islamist groups associated with Al Qaida or the Islamic State previously exercised control, all the representatives of the native Sunni population continued to endorse the radical ideas of these groups.

Mention must also be made of long-standing fears that the occasionally clear-cut stance taken by certain church leaders in favour of the Assad regime<sup>15</sup> might well place a severe burden on the future coexistence of Christians and the majority Muslim (Sunni) population. Whether that turns out to be the case or not will ultimately depend not least on who holds sway over Syria in the future.

Finally, a decisive role as regards the possible return of the Christians to their original settlements will be played by the "collective memory" of Christians in Syria. This refers to the keen awareness Christians have of their experiences over several generations in living side by side with the majority Sunni population. Of crucial significance here is their memory of the genocide perpetrated on Armenians<sup>16</sup> and Syrian Christians<sup>17</sup> between 1915 and 1917. The ancestors of many Christians who used to live or now live in modern-day Syria came from the south-east of what is today Turkey, from where they fled to Iraq or Syria. Often this was not the only experience of displacement in the families concerned. Assyrian (Nestorian) Christians, for instance, who fled in 1915 from their region of origin in the Hakkari mountains in the south-east of present-day Turkey to Sêmêl or Simele<sup>18</sup> in the Iraqi province of Duhok<sup>19</sup>, were the victims of a pogrom there in 1933.<sup>20</sup> Forced to flee again, they moved to the Khabur region of North-East Syria and set up 35 villages there. These villages were attacked and seized by the IS between 24 and 26 February 2015 and many Christians were abducted.<sup>21</sup> Hence it was unlikely that those who had fled would return to their villages. Most of them have now already left Syria. However, some Assyrian Christians have in fact returned to their home villages in the Khabur region in the meantime – whether temporarily or for good remains to be seen.

The situation in Syria has changed since February 2017, although there is still no solution to the violent conflict in sight. Are the hopes for a possible return of the Christians greater now than they were two years ago? Apart from the issues already raised, current developments in Northern Syria, in particular, are of significance for the future of Christians in Syria.

Whether Christians will return depends on how the Muslims behaved towards them.

"Collective memory" crucial for possible return of Christians.

Situation in the north of the country is important for the future of Christians in Syria.

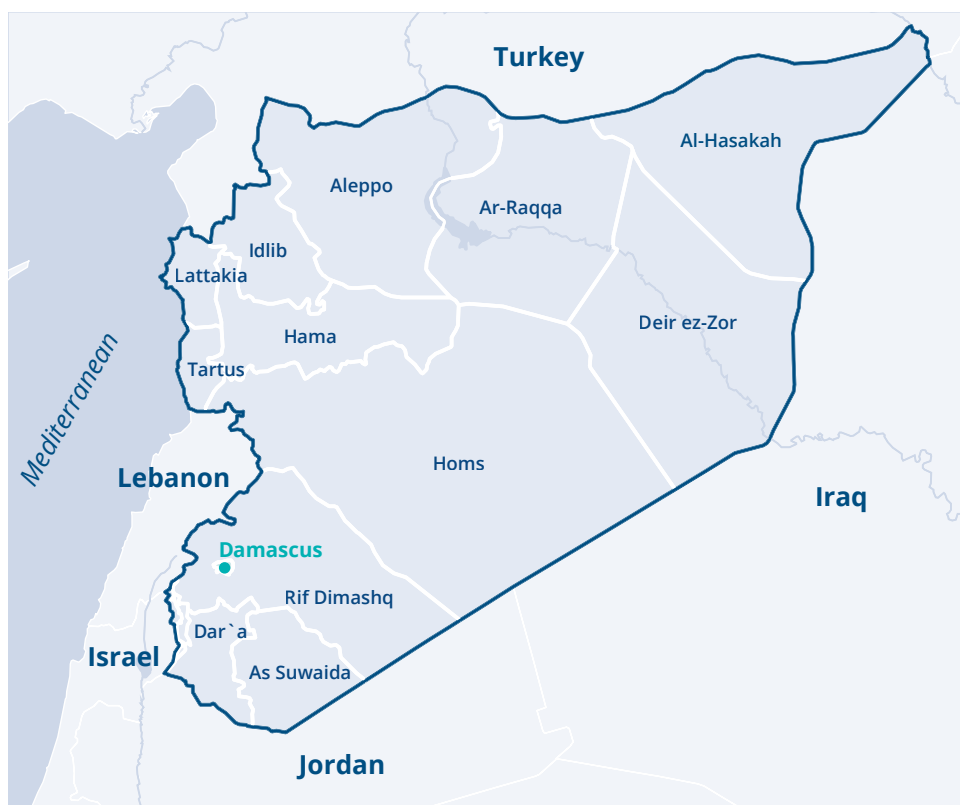
- 1 Otmar Oehring, Christians in Syria: Current Situation and Future Outlook, Facts & Findings, No. 237 – [https://www.kas.de/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=2d06e96e-3a30-9ba2-95d7-b0cabb070188&groupId=252038](https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=2d06e96e-3a30-9ba2-95d7-b0cabb070188&groupId=252038)
- 2 Factbox: Who controls what in Syria? REUTERS, 5 September 2018 – <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-areas-factbox/factbox-who-controls-what-in-syria-idUSKCN1LL0TP>; Alia Chughtai, Syria's war: Who controls what? A map of the Syrian war showing who controls what after seven years of fighting. ALJAZEERA, 19 December 2018 – <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2015/05/syria-country-divided-150529144229467.html>
- 3 <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html>
- 4 <https://www.unhcr.org/sy/internally-displaced-people>
- 5 [UNHCR] COMPREHENSIVE PROTECTION AND SOLUTIONS STRATEGY: PROTECTION THRESHOLDS AND PARAMETERS FOR REFUGEE RETURN TO SYRIA. February 2018 – <https://data2.unhcr.org/ar/documents/download/63223>; See also: Samantha Urban Tarrant, When can Syrian refugees return home? WORLD VISION ADVOCACY, 6 November 2018 – <https://www.worldvisionadvocacy.org/2018/11/06/when-can-syrian-refugees-return-home/>
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- 16 The Armenians refer to it as "Aghet" ("disaster"). For more information in brief see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armenian\\_Genocide](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armenian_Genocide); for more detailed information see: Benny Morris, Dror Ze'evi, The Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of Its Christian Minorities, 1894–1924, Harvard University Press, 2019
- 17 They refer to this as "Seyfo" ("the year of the sword"). For more information in brief see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assyrian\\_genocide](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assyrian_genocide); for more detailed information see: Joseph Yacoub, Year of the Sword: The Assyrian Christian Genocide – A History, Oxford University Press, 2016 and: Benny Morris, Dror Ze'evi, The Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of Its Christian Minorities, 1894–1924, Harvard University Press, 2019
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## 2. Christians in Northern Syria

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The first groups that spring to mind in respect of the Christians in Northern Syria are the traditional Christian communities in the North-East of Syria in the Governorates<sup>22</sup> of Ar-Raqqa<sup>23</sup>, Deir ez-Zor<sup>24</sup> and above all in Al-Hasakah<sup>25</sup>. Their numbers have dropped dramatically since the start of the Syrian crisis in 2011 caused by the civil war. In some places there are no Christians left at all. At the same time new Christian communities have been established in Afrin and Kobanê in Aleppo Governorate<sup>26</sup>. However, as a result of the Turkish military offensive against Afrin the Christians who settled there have left the town again. There follows a detailed description of developments in the different regions.



*Governorates (government districts)*

It should be noted that the withdrawal of the Syrian regime from large areas of Northern Syria in 2012 and the gradual assumption of control by the Autonomous Administration of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria<sup>27</sup>, which is dominated by the Democratic Union Party (PYD)<sup>28</sup> – a Stalinist-style Marxist-Leninist party – and its affiliated militias grouped together in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)<sup>29</sup> have brought new challenges for the Christians to face.

**The future of the Christians in Syria depends on the outcome of the conflict.**

The future of Christians in Syria depends on the outcome of the conflict and on which political forces will hold sway in future. For a long time it was expected that there could only be a future in Syria without Bashar Al-Assad. In the meantime, however, the tables have turned in favour of the Assad regime. It is not possible to foresee at the moment what a post-civil-war system will hold in store as regards responsibility for Northern Syria. It must be assumed, however, that in the long term a revitalised Syrian regime will not simply leave Northern Syria in the hands of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria and, in particular, of the influential Kurdish forces in the Autonomous Administration there.

**Many Christians dream of a return to the status quo ante bellum.**

As is the case elsewhere in the country, many Christians in Northern Syria still hope that Syria will return to the situation that prevailed before the civil war once the fighting is over, i. e. that the Assad regime will not only survive, but also continue to determine the country's destiny. A minority of the Christians in Northern Syria – above all the supporters of the left-wing, nationalist and secular Dawronoye ideology – refused to declare their loyalty to the Assad regime after 2012 and decided to support the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration instead. Should the Assad regime not only survive, but also continue to determine the country's fate, they would probably have to pay for their 'disloyalty' to the regime.

But

*"regardless of when the civil war ends and a peaceful solution is found for Syria, it can be stated even now that – contrary to the wishes of the church leaders and the Christians – nothing will be as it was before 2011. The Alawites (about 11 per cent), who currently back the regime, will no longer be in charge. The Sunnis (around 75 per cent) will assert their claim to power. Whether moderate, orthodox or Islamist Sunnis call the tune will be of crucial importance for the Christians."<sup>30</sup>*

## 2.1 Supporters of the Dawronoye ideology

### Dawronoye

Dawronoye was established on the initiative of young Christians from Tur'Abdin in South-East Turkey who, in view of their experiences, decided to join the local network of supporters of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the late 1980s. Having been arrested and subsequently released, they decided to resume their efforts in the countries to which Christian migrants were heading in Europe – Germany and Switzerland – where they set up their own secret network. They called themselves Tukoso Dawronoyo Mothonoyo d'Bethnahrin (Patriotic Revolutionary Organization of Bethnahrin).

Dawronoye's objective was not just to secure national rights, but also to bring about broader social, political and cultural change among the 'Syrian Christians'. They wished to free themselves from subjugation to the respective state, social and church authority. Although Christians, the supporters of Dawronoye were not fighting for their faith but for their national identity, for their nation. They adopted a neutral position in the name dispute among the members of the various Syrian churches, who described themselves as Assyrians, Arameans or Syrians. Their argument was that they were all one and the same people with the same roots and the same homeland, i. e. Bethnahrin (Mesopotamia).

In the beginning the movement received non-material support from the PKK, which meant it was regarded as a group of “Syrian Christians” within the PKK. Dawronoye consistently asserted its independence, nevertheless. Its activities were financed by donations from businessmen from within the community of “Syrian Christians”, although the churches talked of the businessmen being blackmailed. It is virtually impossible to ascertain the truth. However, the business model is certainly reminiscent of that practised by the PKK in the countries of Central and Northern Europe.

While Europe became a platform for political activities, crucial among which were efforts to achieve recognition of the genocide perpetrated on the Syrian Christians (Seyfo) in 1915, Dawronoye’s aim from the very outset was to return to Bethnahrin. It did not regard the struggle against the government in Turkey as in any way promising. From 1995 onwards, therefore, it concentrated on Iraq, where it first became involved in the region of Badinan and later on, from its base in the Qandil mountains, in the PKK’s struggle against Turkey. However, it quickly became clear that its involvement in Iraq involved the risk of it being drawn – along with the PKK – into the conflict between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and consequently wiped out.

Dawronoye held its first congress in 2000, at which the movement decided to reorganise and give itself a new name: Bethnahrin Freedom Party [Gabo d’Hirutho d’Bethnahrin (GHB)]. Its relations with the PKK, which was not invited to the congress, cooled as a result. They continued their cooperation, however, although the PKK eyed Dawronoye with suspicion.

The movement’s involvement in Iraq was hindered by the fact that Dawronoye, for its part, was pursuing a dream of Bethnahrain [= Mesopotamia (in the Aramaic language)] as the object of its yearnings, while the target groups in Iraq were living in a real ‘Bethnahrain’ where they suffered fear, hunger and repression.

It was not least with this mind that the Dawronoye organisation, European Syriac Union [Huyodo Suroyo d’Urifi (ESU)], began lobbying in Brussels in 2004 in connection with the issue of accession negotiations with Turkey. The following year – Turkey was already on its long path towards the ‘Kurdish Opening’<sup>31</sup> – Dawronoye was able to celebrate the Syrian Christians’ festival of Akitu in Midyat with the blessing of the Turkish authorities. President Erdoğan took the opportunity to send a message of greeting. But that is now history.

Dawronoye is currently strongest in Syria, where together with the Syriac Union Party, with which it has joined forces, it forms part of the multi-party coalition Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM)<sup>32</sup>, the ruling coalition within the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.

The military arm of the Syriac Union Party is made up of the militias Syriac Military Council (Suryoye Military Council) and Bethnahrain Women’s Protection Forces (HSNB)<sup>33</sup>, both of which form part of the military alliance of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The Syriac Union Party<sup>34</sup> is also in charge of the Sutoro<sup>35</sup> police force set up to protect “Syrian Christian” communities in the North-East of Syria (Gozarto).

The supporters of the Dawronoye ideology have not only tolerated, but also supported the activities of the PYD and its military arm (YPG<sup>36</sup> inter alia). The Syriac Union Party joined the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), founded largely by the PYD, in 2011, at an early stage and on 12 November 2013 resolved together with the PYD to establish a transitional administration in Northern Syria. The militias Syriac Military Council (Suryoye Military Council) and Bethnahrain Women's Protection Forces (HSNB), which constitute the military arm of the Syriac Union Party, have become part of the military alliance of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Assuming it were benevolent, the Syrian regime could credit the Christians who support the Dawronoye ideology with joining others to fight the enemies of the Assad regime, Islamist militias and, in particular, the Islamic State.

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- 22 List of the Governorates of Syria – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Governorates\\_of\\_Syria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Governorates_of_Syria)
  - 23 Ar-Raqqqa Governorate – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raqqqa\\_Governorate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raqqqa_Governorate)
  - 24 Deir ez-Zor Governorate – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deir\\_ez-Zor\\_Governorate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deir_ez-Zor_Governorate)
  - 25 Al-Hasakah Governorate – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Hasakah\\_Governorate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Hasakah_Governorate)
  - 26 Aleppo Governorate – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aleppo\\_Governorate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aleppo_Governorate)
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### 3. The Democratic Federation of Northern Syria

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After Syrian government troops had withdrawn from the Kurdish-dominated regions of Northern Syria in 2012 and left control to local militias, the Assad regime also pulled out of the areas along the border with Turkey in late 2013. To all intents and purposes it therefore relinquished control of these areas.

As early as 26 October 2011 the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council<sup>37</sup>, an alliance of Kurdish parties and civil society organisations, merged to form the Kurdish Supreme Committee<sup>38</sup> in Erbil, the capital of the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan in Iraq. Even though the governing body consisted in equal numbers of members of the PYD and the Kurdish National Council, Masoud Barzani, the leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Northern Iraq and President of the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan in Iraq, initially played a major part in efforts to secure the future of Northern Syria. However, differences of opinion soon emerged between the Kurdish National Council and the Democratic Union Party (PYD).<sup>39</sup> The PYD subsequently strengthened its influence and control in the Kurdish regions of Northern Syria. The Kurdish National Council felt increasingly marginalised and ultimately withdrew from the Kurdish Supreme Committee in November 2013. The PYD promptly exploited the potential offered by the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), which had been founded largely on the PYD's initiative in 2011, and on 12 November 2013 several regional parties, the most important of which was the PYD, resolved to set up an interim administration in Northern Syria. Whereas the Syriac Union Party supported the project, other regional parties refused to cooperate with the PYD<sup>40</sup> after the Kurdish National Council had withdrawn. In its efforts to set up a functioning state and society the new administration was guided by the ideology of *democratic confederalism*<sup>41</sup> developed by the PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan. The objective was to set up a decentralised administration designed, amongst other things, to reflect the multi-ethnic and multi-religious situation in Northern Syria.<sup>42</sup>

The PYD's militia, the YPG, and a separate police force, Asayish<sup>43</sup>, were founded in mid-2012. In July 2012 they both initially took control of the majority Kurdish towns of Kobanê, Amuda<sup>44</sup> and Afrin and later also of Al-Malikiyah/Dêrik<sup>45</sup>, Ras Al-Ayn<sup>46</sup>, Al-Darbasiyah<sup>47</sup>, Al-Muabbada<sup>48</sup> as well as parts of Al-Hasakah<sup>49</sup> and Qamishli<sup>50, 51</sup>.

At a conference in Rmelan<sup>52</sup> on 16 and 17 March 2016 attended by parties from Northern Syria a declaration<sup>53</sup> was adopted which was intended to extend the "democratic autonomy" that was already in place. This was to be the basis for the establishment of an 'interim government' led by the strongest party, the PYD, which would take account of all the ethnic and religious minorities in Northern Syria.<sup>54</sup> However, there was widespread resistance to these autonomy plans, which ultimately envisaged a separate entity modelled on the 'Autonomous Region of Kurdistan' in Northern Iraq. This came from both the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition (Syrian National Council<sup>55</sup>) as well as from Turkey and the USA: "Yet Rojava<sup>56</sup>, as the territory along the border with Turkey is called, has been precisely that for years now."<sup>57</sup>

Important role of the Iraqi Kurdish leader, Masoud Barzani, and the Kurdish National Council in the early stages of Kurdish efforts to achieve autonomy in Northern Syria.

Withdrawal of Kurdish National Council followed by establishment of a PYD-dominated interim administration.

### 3.1 Burdens on the population

#### 3.1.1 Law on the confiscation of “emigrants” property

In September 2015 the legislative council of Jazira<sup>58</sup> passed a “Law on the Administration and Protection of the Property of Refugees and Absent Persons”. This would have permitted the authorities to confiscate all the assets of people who had left the region. The Christian representatives in the legislative council refused to vote on the bill because they regarded its provisions as being targeted at Christians.<sup>59</sup> While the law contains no explicit reference to any ethnic or ethnic-religious group, the number of Christians who have fled the region is far greater than that of other groups in the region. Consequently the confiscation of assets would have hit Christians harder than other groups. Ultimately the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration gave way – possibly to pacify the Christian community, but probably also to avoid problems with foreign financial donors – and accepted the proposal whereby confiscated assets should be transferred to the churches.<sup>60</sup>

It is worth noting that the Syrian regime passed a similar law in late 2018. This requires refugees to prove ownership of the properties they have abandoned in the reconstruction zones. It is not completely clear whether this is designed to put pressure on the refugees to return to Syria or whether the law is simply intended to provide a framework for expropriating enemies of the regime who have fled.<sup>61</sup>

In addition there have been repeated allegations of human rights violations in the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. The Kurdish forces have been accused of the forced resettlement of Arabs<sup>62</sup> and the Syrian Democratic Forces – including the YPG – of forced recruitment, including of children. Moreover there have been isolated reports of torture and (in 2017) of a case of extra-legal killing.<sup>63</sup>

In a report entitled *Assyrians Under Kurdish Rule, The Situation in Northeastern Syria* published early in 2017 by the *Assyrian Confederation of Europe*,<sup>64</sup> the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria was accused of a whole series of negative developments by which – and this was insinuated in the title of the report – only Christians in the region, or predominantly Christians, were said to have been affected.

#### 3.1.2 Double military service

During the period when the public administration of the Syrian state and the Autonomous Administration of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria existed de facto side by side in Northern Syria, people living in the region – including Christians – were faced with the prospect of double military service. On the one hand the Syrian army conscripted recruits while, on the other, the YPG insisted on the performance of military service<sup>65</sup>. The Syrian public authorities and the YPG both refused to recognise the performance of military service by the other side.<sup>66</sup>

#### 3.1.3 Duties, fees and taxes

The temporary parallel existence of the public administration of the Syrian state and of the Autonomous Administration of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, which lasted until at least 2012, also affected the inhabitants of the region – and not

just the Christians – in terms of duties, fees and taxes. Whereas, in practice, taxes were collected only by the Syrian public administration, fees and duties for services had to be paid to both the Syrian public administration and the Autonomous Administration of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.<sup>67</sup> It is not clear, however, whether fees and duties for services – depending on who was in control of the individual areas – had to be paid *either* to the Syrian public administration *or* to the Autonomous Administration of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria *or in equal measure* to both.

#### **3.1.4 Compulsory contributions for the reconstruction of towns and villages in Turkey**

From August 2016 towns and villages on both sides of the Syrian-Turkish border, including the Turkish border town of Nusaybin<sup>68</sup> where – in the eyes of the Turkish armed forces – the PKK had established a presence, suffered attacks and destruction by the Turkish armed forces. The PYD subsequently demanded sums of 100,000 to three million Syrian pounds<sup>69</sup> from businessmen in the Al-Hasakah region by way of support for the “‘countrymen’ of the PYD” in Nusaybin – “in other words the PKK”. This led to protests because Syrian citizens – and not just Christians – were being called on to pay for the reconstruction of a town in a neighbouring country with which they had no connection.<sup>70</sup>

#### **3.1.5 Introduction of new curricula by the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration**

Church education authorities in the Al-Hasakah Governorate were among those affected by the introduction of new curricula by the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration in 2016. The disputes that arose as a result between the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration and the Christians are discussed in detail below (The introduction of new curricula by the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration, p.33).

#### **3.1.6 Violence against persons**

In Syria under the Assad regime violence against persons by state authorities was always to be expected when individuals allegedly or actually opposed the state in any way.

Acts of violence against persons by Islamist groups (Al-Qaida or IS or their associates) have been a regular occurrence in Syria since 2011. Anyone who, in the eyes of the Islamist groups, failed to behave in accordance with their crude interpretation of Islam had to reckon with violent attacks and a risk to life and limb. Members of religious minorities – Christians in other words – were particularly hard hit.

Violence against persons by the Syrian regime and by Islamist groups has been well documented. This report therefore concentrates on a few exemplary cases of violence against persons, of which the PYD and its associates, who dominate the Autonomous Administration in Northern Syria, have been accused. They make it clear that the PYD and its associates, ignoring their regularly asserted claim to be ‘democratic’, respond with brutal violence to criticism and non-subjection. The list of such occurrences could easily be extended beyond the following examples.

On 22 April 2015 two Assyrian leaders from the Khabur region were attacked by five YPG fighters. The two victims were commanders of the Assyrian Zerevani forces in the Khabur region. David Antar Cindo died in the attack, Elias Nasser was seriously injured. It was not clear at first whether the attack was politically motivated or whether it was a criminal offence. At all events, the YPG fighters are said to have stolen 750,000 Syrian pounds, 35 AK47 sub-machine guns and a number of PKC machine guns from Elias Nasser's house. The fact that Elias Nasser survived made it possible to identify the assailants.

Around 11 p. m. David Antar Cindo and Elias Nasser were visited by YPG fighters who told them that YPG leaders wished to talk to them at a different location about looting. Since they initially had no reason to be distrustful, the two Assyrians accompanied the YPG fighters. They were blindfolded on the grounds that the place where they were to meet the YPG leaders was to remain a secret. They were tied up during their journey to the meeting place. Both men were accused of collaborating with the IS and the Assad regime. David Antar Gindo was tortured. From the point of view of the Assyrian Federation in Germany and Sweden the accusations raised were a pretext on the part of the YPG to put the Khabour Assyrian Council of Guardians under the control of the YPG.

David Antar Gindo was shot and killed when the group arrived at the off-road destination. Elias Nasser, having been shot and seriously injured, was left for dead. He was later able to make his way to the nearest road from where he was taken to a hospital in Qamishli.<sup>71</sup>

The YPG launched an investigation into the matter, which led a few days later to the arrest of four suspects. While Elias Nasser insisted that the five offenders were members of the YPG, the organisation noted on its website<sup>72</sup> that the four persons arrested were not members of the YPG at all.<sup>73</sup> This is likely to be some way from the truth. Otherwise the Khabour Guardians would hardly have issued an official statement saying that as a result of the incident they would not be taking part in any more fighting as of 8 June 2015 and no longer wished to be part of the Syrian Democratic Forces dominated by the YPG.<sup>74</sup>

On 22 September 2018 the 'Aramean' [Syriac Orthodox] teacher, Isa Rashid, – Director of the Nsibin Institute responsible for the Aramean [Syriac Orthodox] schools – was critically injured outside his house in Qamishli when two men attacked him with baseball bats. Their attack was quite clearly an act of revenge for Rashid's refusal to ensure that the curricula developed by the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration would be introduced in Syriac Orthodox schools. A few days earlier there had been a heated argument between Rashid and the Chair of the Olaf Taw Institute<sup>75</sup> of the Autonomous Administration, Elisabeth Gouriye, who is also Vice-President of the Autonomous Administration, after Rashid had refused to accept the introduction of the curricula.<sup>76</sup>

This case is particularly important because it shows that the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration does not shrink from the use of force if its instructions are not followed. It also illustrates that in such cases Christian supporters of the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration who are associated with the Syriac Union Party become agents of the administration, even if that leads to violent conflict within their own ethnic group.



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## 4. The US military in Northern Syria and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

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The USA's interest in Northern Syria was in fighting the IS. The first US troops, including a small contingent of special forces, arrived in Syria in late 2015. They hoped to be able to forge an alliance with local militias in the fight against the IS. The Kurdish and Arab allies, now known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), launched ground attacks which led to the capture of the IS strongholds Manbij<sup>77</sup> and Ar-Raqqah<sup>78</sup>. The number of US troops in Northern Syria increased steadily, albeit slowly. In the summer some 500 US soldiers were stationed in South-East Syria and in December 2018 around 2,000. The US armed forces were able to use the Al-Tanf airbase in Northern Syria from the middle of 2016 and an airbase south of Kobanê<sup>79</sup> as of June 2017.<sup>80</sup>

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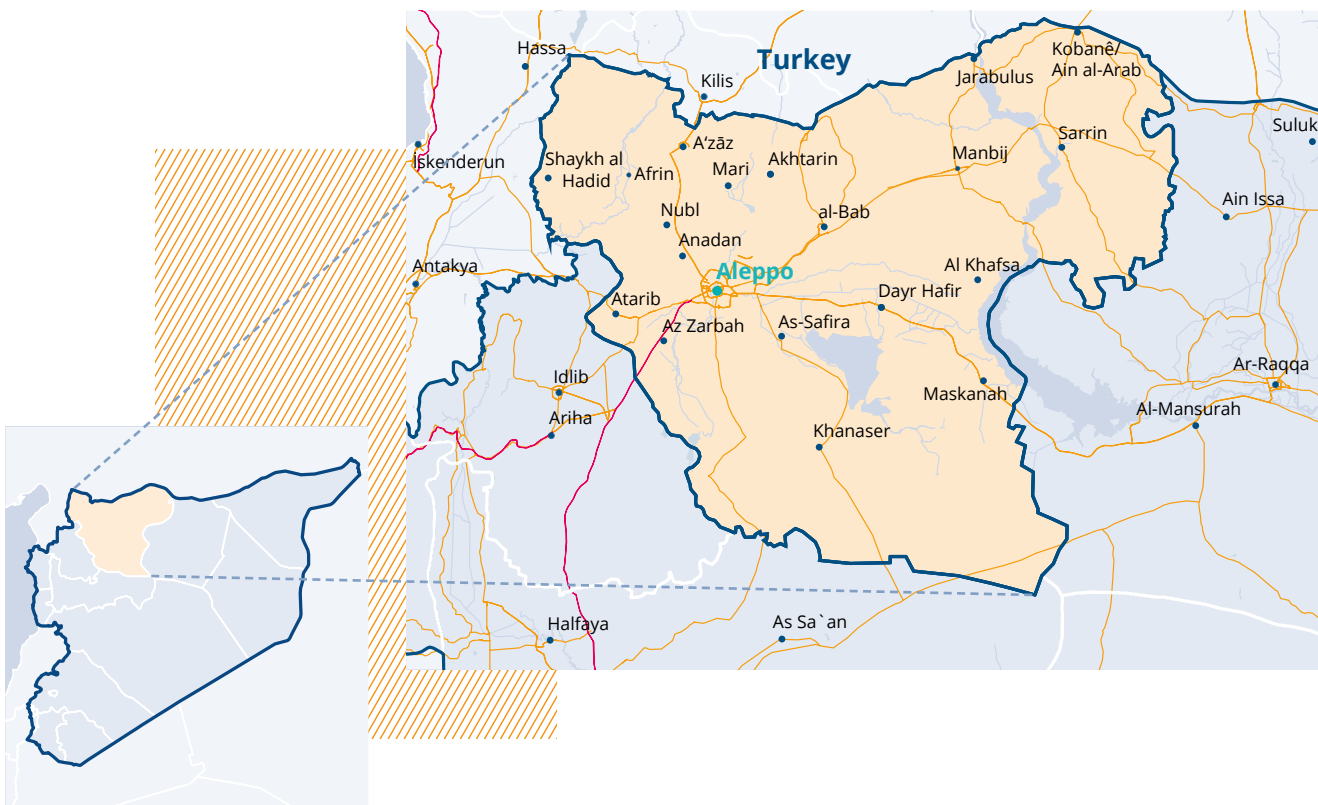
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## 5. Developments in the individual regions of Northern Syria

### 5.1 Aleppo Governorate

The Aleppo Governorate consists of the districts of Afrin, Ain al-Arab, Atarib, Azāz, al-Bab, Dayr Hafir, Jabal Sem'ān (main city: Aleppo), Jarabulus, Manbij and As-Safira, which are divided up into sub-districts (nahiya).



The city of Aleppo (Jabal Sem'ān district) and the districts of Atarib, Azāz, al-Bab, Dayr Hafir, Jarabulus, Manbij und As-Safira are not included in this report even though they are situated in the north of Syria. This is because Aleppo and the districts mentioned are under the control of the Syrian regime. The report only deals with those areas of Northern Syria which were under Kurdish control after 2011 (Afrin, Aleppo Governorate) or still are (Ain al-Arab (Kobanê) in Aleppo Governorate and in Ar-Raqqa, Al-Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor Governorates).

### 5.1.1 Afrin

Afrin district in Aleppo Governorate borders in the west on the Turkish province of Hatay and in the north-west on the Turkish province of Kilis. Prior to the Turkish military offensive, Operation Olive Branch, in early 2018 Sunni Kurds were the majority population in the Afrin region (approx 95 per cent in 2011)<sup>81</sup>. Before the Turkish invasion the western part was mostly occupied by Kurds and regarded as uniformly Kurdish.<sup>82</sup> The centre and eastern parts of the region, on the other hand, were home to a mixed ethnic population<sup>83</sup>, including Arabs and Arabised Kurds as well as Circasians and Chechens in the town of Manbij and, in the north of the region, Syrian and Arabised Turkmens.<sup>84</sup> Arabs made up one to five per cent of the region's population in 1998.<sup>85</sup> Before the Turkish invasion some 20,000 to 30,000 Yazidis<sup>86</sup> lived there – other sources put the figure at around 15,000<sup>87</sup> – together with some 5,000 Alawite Kurds.<sup>88</sup>

The town of Afrin<sup>89</sup> some 55 kilometres north-east of Aleppo is the seat of the district of the same name. In the years since the start of the conflict in Syria the Arab share of the town's population has grown to around 15 per cent as a result of the influx of Arab Sunni internally displaced persons.<sup>90</sup>

The Assad regime withdrew from Afrin in 2012. Control over the town and parts of the region was taken over by the YPG, the most important militia in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) supported by the USA.<sup>91</sup>

#### **Turkish military offensive against Afrin<sup>92</sup>**

The Turkish military offensive against Afrin is led jointly by the Turkish Armed Forces<sup>93</sup> and the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA),<sup>94</sup> which came into being as the military arm of the opposition alliance, National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces<sup>95</sup>, but which now includes Islamist and radical Islamist jihadist groups<sup>96</sup>. Directed against the Kurdish-controlled rural district of Afrin in the north-west of Syria on the Syrian-Turkish border, the offensive began on 20 January 2018.<sup>97</sup>

Turkey justified its offensive, which had been announced well in advance, by saying it was intended to expel groups such as the

- PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê = Kurdistan Workers' Party),<sup>98</sup>
- KCK (Koma Civakên Kurdistan = Kurdistan Communities Union),<sup>99</sup>
- PYD (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat = Democratic Union Party)<sup>100</sup> and its military arm, the
- YPG (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel = People's Protection Units)<sup>101</sup>

as well as the

- Islamic State,

from the region and to guarantee border security and the safety of the population in the region.<sup>102</sup> Turkey's real purpose was undoubtedly to take action against groups associated with the PKK. This is indicated not least by its announcement that later on in the operation it would also attack the Northern Syrian town of Manbij, which was likewise under Kurdish control. The claim that it wished to combat the Islamic State in all likelihood served as a pretext to secure acceptance of its operations by the West, for the IS plays only a negligible role in and around Afrin.<sup>103</sup>

Before the start of the Turkish military offensive the rural district of Afrin, as part of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, was effectively controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces, but a military alliance comprising

- the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG),
- the Women's Protection Units (YPJ),<sup>104</sup>
- the Jabhat Al-Akrād (Dawn of Freedom Brigades),<sup>105</sup>
- the Kurdish-Turkmen Katā'ib Šams aš-Šamāl (Northern Sun Battalion),<sup>106</sup>
- the Sunni-Arab Jaysh al-Thuwar (Army of Revolutionaries),<sup>107</sup>
- the Sunni-Arab Shammar tribal militia Quwat as-Samnadid (Al-Sanadid Forces),<sup>108</sup> and
- the Sunni Liwa Thuwar Ar-Raqqa (Ar-Raqqa Revolutionaries Brigade),<sup>109</sup>
- the Al-Jazira Brigades<sup>110</sup>
- the Liwai99 Muṣat<sup>111</sup> and
- the Syriac Military Council (Suryoye Military Council)<sup>112</sup>,

which was controlled by the Kurdish forces directly associated with the PYD, was to all intents and purposes in command.

Even before the Turkish military offensive against Afrin was launched, the Kurds had warned of the pending expulsion of hundreds of thousands of people from Afrin. In fact, by the time the Turkish armed forces and the associated FSA militias stormed Afrin over 200,000 civilians had already left the town. The United Nations reported that just under 100,000 people had been registered in neighbouring areas as internally displaced persons.<sup>113</sup>

Meanwhile a government spokesman in Ankara announced that the Kurdish town was being returned to its "real owners".<sup>114</sup> In the course of the military offensive against the YPG the Turkish President Erdoğan announced several times that he wished to "restore Afrin to its rightful owners" and "oust terrorist rule and re-establish order".<sup>115</sup> The Federal Chairman of the Kurdish Community in Germany, Ali Ertan Toprak, accused Turkey in this context of planning ethnic "cleansing" in Afrin.<sup>116</sup> And Ruth Bossart, SRF (Swiss Radio and Television) correspondent in Turkey, thought that "a resettlement [of the Kurdish refugees] to the area inhabited by Kurds would be tantamount to ethnic cleansing."<sup>117</sup>

At the same time there were reports from Afrin of looting by pro-Turkish jihadists<sup>118</sup> and of gunfights between FSA militias arguing over their gains.<sup>119</sup>

### **Christian presence in Afrin**

In February 2015 there were two Armenians (father and son) living in Afrin, which was the only place where they could still move freely.<sup>120</sup> The number of Christians in Afrin had greatly increased from 2015 up to the time of the Turkish invasion in 2018. According to the *Evangelical Christian Union Church*<sup>121</sup>, there were around 250 Christian families (comprising some 1,200 persons) living in Afrin before the Turkish invasion began.<sup>122</sup> The Good Shepherd community alone had been frequented up to that time by 230 Christians.<sup>123</sup> All the Christians who had lived in Afrin prior to the Turkish invasion were converts who had switched their allegiance from Islam to Christianity.<sup>124</sup> They were said to have done so in view of the atrocities committed by the IS and other Islamist militias.<sup>125</sup> Whereas their former Muslim neighbours had accepted their

Ethnic "cleansing" as a consequence of the Turkish military offensive against Afrin.

conversion, the situation changed dramatically after the Turkish invasion. Kamal Sido of the Society for Threatened Peoples (Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker) in Germany said that from the point of view of President Erdoğan the tolerant Muslims were not Muslim enough and that he intended to introduce Sharia law in the region. However, according to Sido, it was not only Christians, but also Yazidis and other Alawite Kurds who were in grave danger, because the radical Islamists regarded them as apostates who had to be eliminated.<sup>126</sup>

Converts in Afrin see their salvation in flight.

Numerous Christians were reported to have fled from Afrin and the surrounding villages before the Turkish invasion, while others held out. However, concern grew among the Kurdish population in the region – and not just among the Christian converts – that the Turkish invasion would lead to ethnic-religious “cleansing”. A video by Syrian rebels targeted at the converts also triggered fears among Christians. A militiaman directly addressed the Christians saying: “By Allah, if you have a change of heart and return to Allah, we will know that you are our brothers” and then: “But if you refuse, it will be clear that your heads are ripe and that the time has come for us to pick them.”<sup>127</sup> That the Christians’ fears of being attacked were not ungrounded was apparent from the reports from Afrin, according to which jihadists had been promised that they would go straight to paradise if they killed Christians.<sup>128</sup>

Islamist militiamen in Afrin are also said to have sprayed the outer walls of the Church of the Good Shepherd with jihadist slogans and then set the church on fire.<sup>129</sup> The jihadist group Ahrar Al-Sharqiya<sup>130</sup> boasted of its activities in Afrin on its website saying it had opened an office in the town to recruit fighters who would kill the “atheist pigs” and had taken over a mosque in order to teach “the true values of Islam”.<sup>131</sup>

Reports saying the pastor of the Church of the Good Shepherd, Valentin Hanan, had claimed 200 families once frequented the church but that none of the 3,000 Christians were left in Afrin cannot be considered convincing.<sup>132</sup> If those figures were correct, there would have been fifteen members of each family. The figures cited at the beginning – 250 families, 1,200 persons – appear more realistic and comprehensible.<sup>133</sup> What is true, admittedly, is that all the Christians from Afrin and the surrounding area as well as the members of all the other minorities and large sections of the Kurdish population – a total of over 250,000 people – left Afrin and its environs, fleeing in haste in the face of the Turkish invasion.<sup>134</sup> The majority of Christians are reported to have fled to Aleppo while some joined the new church community in Kobanê.<sup>135</sup>

### 5.1.2 Kobanê (Ain al-Arab)

The town of Kobanê<sup>136</sup>, in Arabic Ain al-Arab<sup>137</sup>, in Aleppo Governorate is located right next to the Turkish border. The 2004 census put the number of inhabitants there at around 45,000, the majority of whom were Kurds; the rest were Arabs, Turkmens and members of a small Armenian minority.<sup>138</sup> The population is said to have grown to an estimated 54,681 inhabitants by 2007.<sup>139</sup> According to an estimate from 2013 some 90 per cent of the inhabitants were Kurds with Arabs and Turkmens each making up about five percent and Armenians roughly one per cent.<sup>140</sup>

In the wake of the civil war in Syria and the withdrawal of the Assad regime from the region the YPG took control of Kobanê in 2012. In 2014 the town became the administrative centre of Kobanê Canton, which is de facto the Democratic Federation of

Northern Syria. From September 2014 to January 2015 the town was besieged by the IS and almost completely destroyed during the fighting. Most of the inhabitants fled to Turkey but later returned to Kobanê after the siege was over.<sup>141</sup>

### **Opening of a church in Kobanê**

On 13 September 2018 the Kenîseya Biratiyê li Kobanê, the Brethren Church in Kobanê, was opened,<sup>142</sup> the first church to be officially registered by the authorities for over one hundred years.<sup>143</sup>

Christians can look back on a long history in Kobanê. Many Armenian refugees fleeing the genocide settled in Kobanê around 1915. However, there too they were forced to convert to Islam. Given the social pressure and administrative restrictions, the few remaining Christians rapidly stopped practising their faith. The last service took place 55 years ago and the last church in Kobanê was destroyed 30 years ago. There are now some 300 Christians living in the town, some of whom fled from Afrin to Kobanê in 2018. In recent years the Christians in Kobanê have met in private house churches.<sup>144</sup> They are Kurds and, up until a few years ago, they were Muslims. The activities of the IS are said to have been the reason for their apostasy from Islam and conversion to Christianity.<sup>145</sup>

It is interesting that the new church was built as the result of a request made by the mayor of Kobanê.<sup>146</sup> What is also remarkable is the way in which the local authorities have used the consecration of the church for their own propaganda purposes. It has been reported that the “Co-Chairman of the Executive Council of the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) in Kobanê, [Ahmed Sheikho in his opening speech] said that ... the peoples of Rojava were promoting coexistence on an equal footing and in a spirit of fellowship under the roof of the democratic Autonomous Administration. The consecration of the Brethren Church was an achievement brought about by the willingness to make sacrifices of all those who fell during the struggle for an egalitarian society based on equal representation.”<sup>147</sup> The representative of the church administration, Umer Fîras, responded by saying: “The consecration today of the Brethren Church is the result of the resistance put up in Kobanê. Hundreds of daughters and sons of the Kurdish people and of the other peoples in the region have laid down their lives for Kobanê. This town is the key to the freedom of the Middle East. Good neighbourliness between the peoples and a community life have now begun in Kobanê.”<sup>148</sup>

Regardless of any possible upheavals in Northern Syria, it will be interesting to see how cooperation between the authorities, the church administration and church members in Kobanê, as described above, will develop in the future. After all, the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), the coalition which rules the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, is dominated in practice by the PYD – a Stalinist-style, Marxist-Leninist party which nonetheless claims to be secular.

Leaving political considerations aside, there is also the question of the background to the establishment of a new church community in Kobanê. Several missionary movements have been active in the Middle East since the mid-1980s. There is no guarantee, however, nor is it likely in view of the town's recent history that they played any direct part in the emergence of a new Christian community in the town.

Conversion to Christianity as a reaction to the activities of the IS.

Who contributed to the formation of a new Christian community in Kobanê?



The name of the new church – the Brethren Church – could be a pointer to the formation of a new Christian community, however. Several Evangelical/Free churches spring to mind in this context.

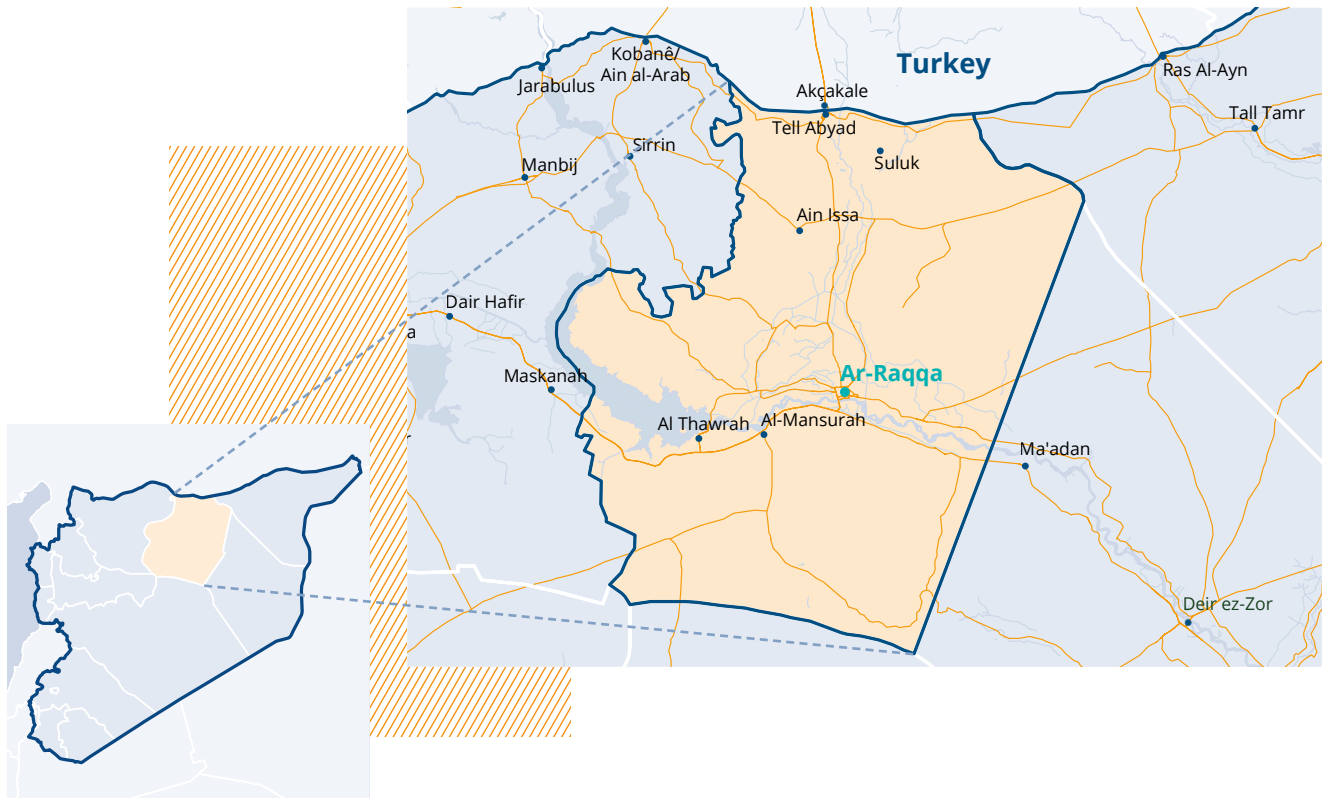
The Church of the Brethren<sup>149</sup> is a large Protestant church in the USA, which has its roots in the Schwarzenau Brethren in the 18th century.<sup>150</sup> Then there is the Evangelische Vereinigte Brüderkirche<sup>151</sup> (Evangelical United Brethren Church<sup>152</sup>), a Methodist church which arose from the union of two Methodist sister churches in 1946, along with the Mennonite Brethren Church<sup>153</sup> and other Peace churches.<sup>154</sup>

Finally there are the members of the Evangelical denominational family of the Baptists<sup>155</sup>, although the word “Brethren” is not included in their name. Many Baptist churches engage in missionary work in the Middle East.

However, research has not indicated that the name of the new church is directly connected with any of the churches mentioned.<sup>156</sup> The missionaries active in Kobanê are said to be Kurds from south-east Turkey who became Christians in recent decades.

### 5.2 Ar-Raqqa Governorate

Ar-Raqqa Governorate comprises the three districts of Tell Abyad, Al-Thawrah (Tabqa) and Ar-Raqqa, which are divided up in turn into sub-districts (nahiya).



### 5.2.1 Tell Abyad (Girê Spî)

Tell Abyad, in Kurdish Girê Spî, is the capital of the district of the same name in Ar-Raqqa Governorate in Syria and is situated right next to the Turkish border.

#### **Christian presence in Tell Abyad (Girê Spî)**

Before Tell Abyad<sup>157</sup>, in Kurdish Girê Spî, was captured by the IS it had a church.<sup>158</sup> This was the Armenian Al-Sahib Church built in 1924.<sup>159</sup> Rabia Jihad, a news site known for its reliable reporting on the IS, said the IS had destroyed the cross on the roof of the church and taken over the church building after the faithful had refused to accept the dhimma contract.<sup>160</sup> The IS used the church for a time as a prison and bomb workshop.<sup>161</sup> On 29 October 2013 IS fighters set fire to the Armenian church in Tell Abyad.<sup>162</sup> After liberation the church was given back to the Armenians. However, it was so badly destroyed that it took three years – up to October 2018 – before the Armenians from Tell Abyad had rebuilt it and could use it again.<sup>163</sup>

Six thousand Armenians are said to have lived in Tell Abyad before it was taken by the IS.<sup>164</sup> Since the end of 2015 there have been no Christians in Tell Abyad at all.<sup>165</sup>

### 5.2.2 Al-Thawrah (Tabqa)

The town of Al-Thawrah (Tabqa)<sup>166</sup> only came into being in 1973 when the Euphrates Dam<sup>167</sup> was built. Al-Thawrah (Tabqa) was home to Arabs, Kurds, Sunnis, Shiites and Ismailis as well as Assyrian, Armenian and Syriac Orthodox Christians.

With the start of the Syrian crisis in 2011 the town came under the successive control of various Islamic/Islamist groups. The IS captured Al-Thawrah (Tabqa) at the end of 2013.<sup>168</sup>

In the course of the *Battle of Tabqa* (2016–2017)<sup>169</sup> to safeguard the Euphrates Dam and recover the town of Al-Thawrah (Tabqa) along with its military airbase, which had been captured by the IS in August 2014,<sup>170 171</sup> the town and the Euphrates Dam fell into the hands of the Syrian Democratic Forces on 10 May 2017.<sup>172</sup>

#### **Christian presence in Al-Thawrah (Tabqa)**

“The gangs of mercenaries, who had occupied the town in early 2013 before the IS took it, were no better than the IS, since they not only expelled Kurds and Shiites but also 400<sup>173</sup> Christian families.”<sup>174</sup>

The IS used the town's three churches for its own purposes. The church on Dewar al-Kanissa (Church Square) in the town centre – probably a Greek Catholic church<sup>175</sup> – was built in 1975. The IS used it as a garage and workshop for its military vehicles. The second church, the Greek Orthodox Sergius and Bacchus Church on the banks of the Euphrates Dam in the district of Masaken al-Habbary, was used by the IS to produce explosive devices and booby trap vehicles. The IS raised sheep in the little Assyrian church in the al-Kassara district in the east of the town. In all three churches the IS had previously destroyed the crosses and icons.<sup>176</sup> Today five Syriac Orthodox families are said to be living in Al-Thawrah (Tabqa) again.<sup>177</sup> But it was not only Christian churches which fell victim to the havoc wreaked by the IS. The Shiite Omar Bin al-Khatib mosque was completely destroyed and the place where the Ismailis wor-

shipped was turned into a training centre for children.<sup>178</sup> The Shiites and Ismailis<sup>179</sup> were driven out of the town just as the Christians were.<sup>180</sup>

Conditions under the new rulers of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria would appear to be at odds with their own propaganda. Christians who fled from Al-Thawrah (Tabqa) have accused the (town) council of seizing their houses and they claim that the YPG/SDF has not kept its promise to guarantee the “protection of minorities and community life”<sup>181</sup>.

### 5.2.3 Ar-Raqqa

Ar-Raqqa, the capital of the governorate of the same name, was liberated by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in mid-October 2017. Following its complete takeover by the IS in January 2014 it was regarded as the organisation’s capital. The IS had previously exercised control there after expelling the Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Qaeda) militia in mid-2013. The Syrian regime had lost control of Ar-Raqqa in March 2013.

#### **Christian presence in Ar-Raqqa**

While Ar-Raqqa was not a Christian centre it did have a sizeable Christian population.<sup>182</sup> Before the outbreak of the Syrian civil war Christians made up around ten per cent of the 220,000 inhabitants in 2011.<sup>183</sup> Before the IS took control, over 1,500 Christian families lived in Ar-Raqqa. One half of the Christians were Greek Orthodox, the other half being made up of all the other denominations.<sup>184</sup> Most of the Christians left Ar-Raqqa while the IS was establishing its headquarters there. Several thousand Christians initially remained in Ar-Raqqa.<sup>185</sup> In November 2015 there were just 25 families still living there, their poverty making it impossible for them to leave the town.<sup>186</sup>

In the province of Ar-Raqqa there were four churches, two of which were in Ar-Raqqa itself<sup>187</sup>: the Saida Shara Church and the Martyrs Church as well as the Sergius and Bacchus Church in the town of Al-Thawrah (Tabqa) and a church in the town of Tell Abyad.<sup>188</sup> The churches in Ar-Raqqa were closed by the IS or used for its own purposes.<sup>189</sup>

The Syrian regime’s loss of control in March 2013 was a moment of joy for all the local activists, including the Christians. In the months that followed, however, the IS became increasingly brazen. Its flag was hoisted on the roof of the Armenian church and the Catholic church was set on fire. Before that the IS had desecrated both churches, taken down crosses and sculptures and burned them.<sup>190</sup>

In early 2014 the IS gave the Christians of Ar-Raqqa a written ultimatum. This cited the Islamic concept of the dhimma<sup>191</sup> and demanded that in return for a guarantee of their security the Christians in Ar-Raqqa should pay a per capita tax (jizya<sup>192</sup>) to the value of half an ounce (14 g) of pure gold. The Christians were forbidden to renovate their churches, display crosses or other religious symbols outside their churches, ring church bells or pray in public. In addition they were forbidden to carry weapons and had other regulations imposed on them which greatly influenced their everyday lives. The IS claimed that the regulations were the result of negotiations with 20 Christian representatives who had been offered three options: convert to Islam, accept the conditions imposed by the IS or reject IS control and thus run the risk of being killed.<sup>193</sup>

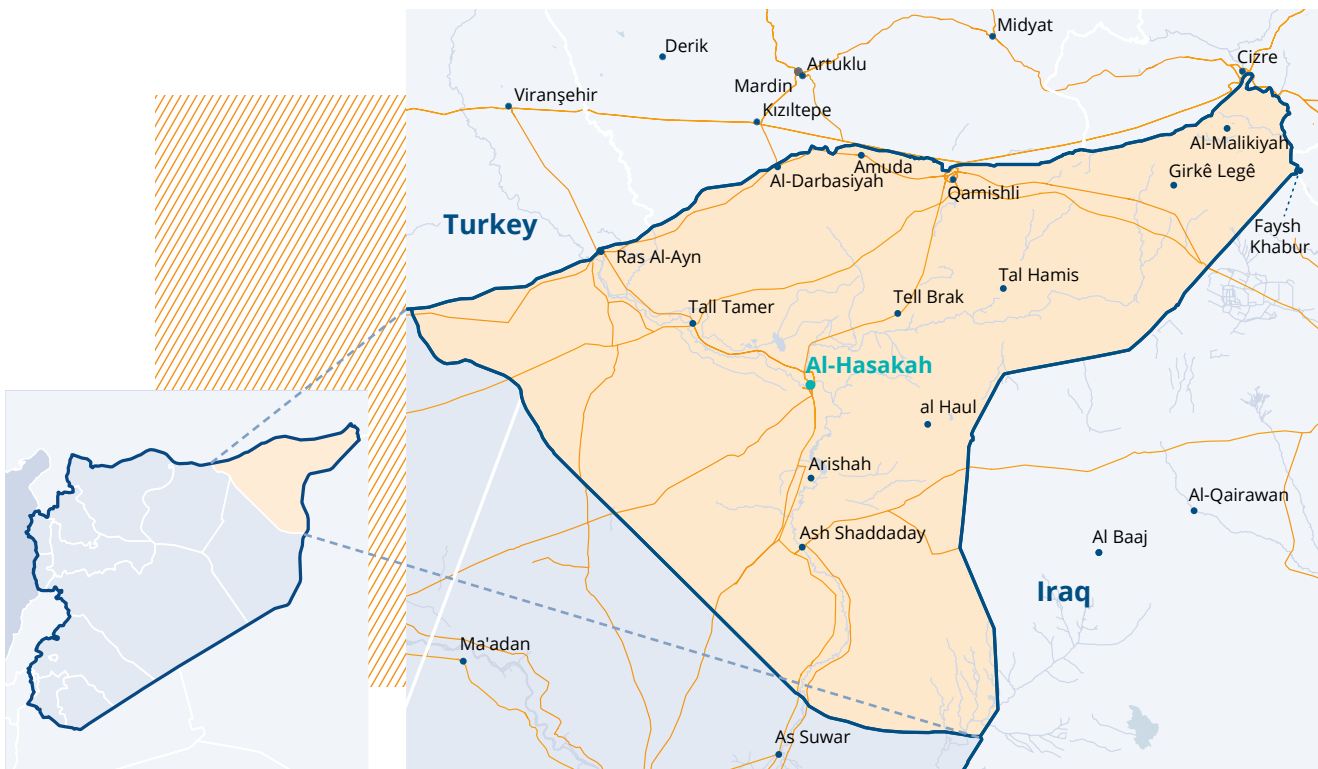
In March 2016, finally, the IS forbade the few Christians still living in Ar-Raqqā to leave the town. However, almost all the remaining Christians managed to escape during the fighting to liberate Ar-Raqqā.<sup>194</sup>

Return of Christians to Ar-Raqqā is unlikely.

It is safe to assume that the Christians who lived in Ar-Raqqā before it was taken by the Islamic State will not be returning, given that the Sunni population there made common cause with the Islamic State. Therefore, even after a peaceful resolution of the conflict, the Christians will rule out living side by side with the Sunni population of Ar-Raqqā again and will in all probability never return.<sup>195</sup>

### 5.3 Al-Hasakah Governorate

Al Hasakah Governorate comprises the four districts of Ras al-Ayn, Al-Hasakah, Qamishli und Al-Malikiyah, which are divided in turn into sub-districts (nahiya).



#### 5.3.1 Ras Al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê

Ras Al-Ayn lies on the Turkish border south of the Khabur headwaters, to which the Kurdish name refers. The town is of great significance for Christians. For the Syrian [Syriac Orthodox and Syrian Catholic] Christians the town is important as an early centre of scholarship. Ras Al-Ayn is the Arab name for the Aramaic term Riš 'Aino. Riš 'Aino is a very old Aramean town which produced outstanding scholars in the fifth and sixth centuries such as Sargis of Riš 'Aino (died 536)<sup>196</sup>, who translated many texts from Greek into Syrian-Aramaic.

For the Armenians – and not only for them – the importance of Ras Al-Ayn derives from the fact that the town was one of the main assembly points for Christians deported in accordance with the Ottoman Deportation Act<sup>197</sup> (Tehcir Kanunu)<sup>198</sup> of 27 May 1915.<sup>199</sup>

From 8 November 2012 there was fierce fighting around Ras Al-Ayn, which has come to be known as the Battle of Ras Al-Ayn<sup>200</sup>. Consisting of three phases<sup>201</sup> – interrupted by two armistices – it lasted until 17 July 2013.<sup>202</sup> One of the participants in the negotiations on the second armistice was the well-known Syrian dissident and Christian, Michel Kilo.<sup>203</sup>

8 November 2012;  
Battle of Ras Al-Ayn

At the beginning there was fighting between the Syrian army and FSA fighters,<sup>204</sup> who were supported by numerous allied Islamist militias<sup>205</sup> and allegedly by Turkish helicopters.<sup>206</sup> Later the Kurdish YPG and its allies joined in the fighting.

As the fighting progressed, parts of Ras Al-Ayn came first under the control of the FSA and then of the YPG, which finally gained complete control over the town on 17 July 2013. The fighting was accompanied by repeated Syrian air force bombing.<sup>207</sup> More than 70,000 people – Kurds, Arabs and Christians – are thought to have fled during the fighting in and around Ras Al-Ayn.<sup>208</sup> Many of them initially went to the nearby Turkish border town of Ceylanpinar.

### Christian presence in Ras Al-Ayn

It is not clear how many of those who fled were Christians – there are no reliable figures for the Christian population of Ras Al-Ayn. However, the *New York Times* reported that several hundred Christian refugees “have arrived in Turkey in recent weeks”. “And tens of thousands want [ed] to leave the country, should the Kurdish-controlled region fall into the hands of Arab (= Islamist) militias.”<sup>209</sup>

75-year-old Constantine Junan from Ras Al-Ayn stayed in his house for a total of ten weeks during the fighting, although thousands had fled the town before it began. On 27 January 2013 he was finally forced to leave the town with his son by Islamist rebels who had come from Idlib and elsewhere. He was afraid that they would kill both him and his son straightaway. In fact they allowed him to stay until dawn. After a brief visit to the Church of St. Thomas, which had been ransacked by rebels of the Suqoor Al-Sunna<sup>210</sup> group (the Eagles of Al-Sunna<sup>211</sup>),<sup>212</sup> he left Ras Al-Ayn – probably never to return.

The Syriac Orthodox Church of St. Thomas, the Syrian Catholic Church of St. Maria Magdalena and the Armenian [Orthodox] Church of St. James – all three in “Churches Street” – were looted and ransacked by Islamic rebels. The Syriac Orthodox Church of St. Thomas also suffered serious damage at the hands of the Islamist rebels of Suqoor al Sunna.<sup>213</sup> A bomb placed in front of the church and the time at which it was found indicate that the rebels planned to ignite it as soon as the approaching Kurdish militiamen entered the church. However, the bomb was defused. Had it gone off, it would have destroyed the church, the old schoolhouse, the parish hall and the rectory.

Apart from a statue of St. Anthony that was destroyed, no further damage was done in the two other churches, which would indicate that a different militia was active there and not Suqoor Al-Sunna. Whatever the case, there can be no doubt about the reason for the ransacking of the churches in “Churches Street”: the Christians were to be so petrified that they would never wish to return to their home town.

Suqoor Al-Sunna smeared the door and outer walls of the Church of St. Thomas with slogans, one of which read: "Allah is great for those who pray to the cross". This was taken to be a call to fight Christians in the name of Allah.<sup>214</sup>

While not all the victims in Ras Al-Ayn were Christians, it was only the Christians who were immediately driven out of their homes and forced to flee.<sup>215</sup>

It is not clear how many of the victims were Christians. In the second phase of the fighting, Kurdish militiamen succeeded in late January 2013 in liberating the Syriac Orthodox Church of St. Thomas, which had previously been taken by the FSA and damaged<sup>216, 217</sup> The Kurdish militias which now assumed control in the town replaced the hostile slogans with words which, according to reports, were intended to demonstrate their sympathy for the Christians and all peace-loving people in the town.<sup>218</sup>

It is impossible to verify whether this is true and the YPG was merely towing the official line of the PYD or whether a remark of this kind on the part of the reporter should be read as a gesture of submission to the new Kurdish rulers in Ras Al-Ayn.

Be that as it may, the report cited here states: "From the beginning of the conflict the Kurdish armed forces have expressed their good intentions towards the Christians. After recapturing 'Churches Street' they wrote important messages of solidarity with their Christian neighbours" [on the walls of houses]. The report continues: "Every day the Kurdish armed forces ring the bells [of all three churches] to send a message to the rebels that the Kurdish people wish to have close ties with the Christians."<sup>219</sup>

The threat to Ras Al-Ayn from Islamist militias associated with the FSA was initially over after mid-July 2013 – but not for good.



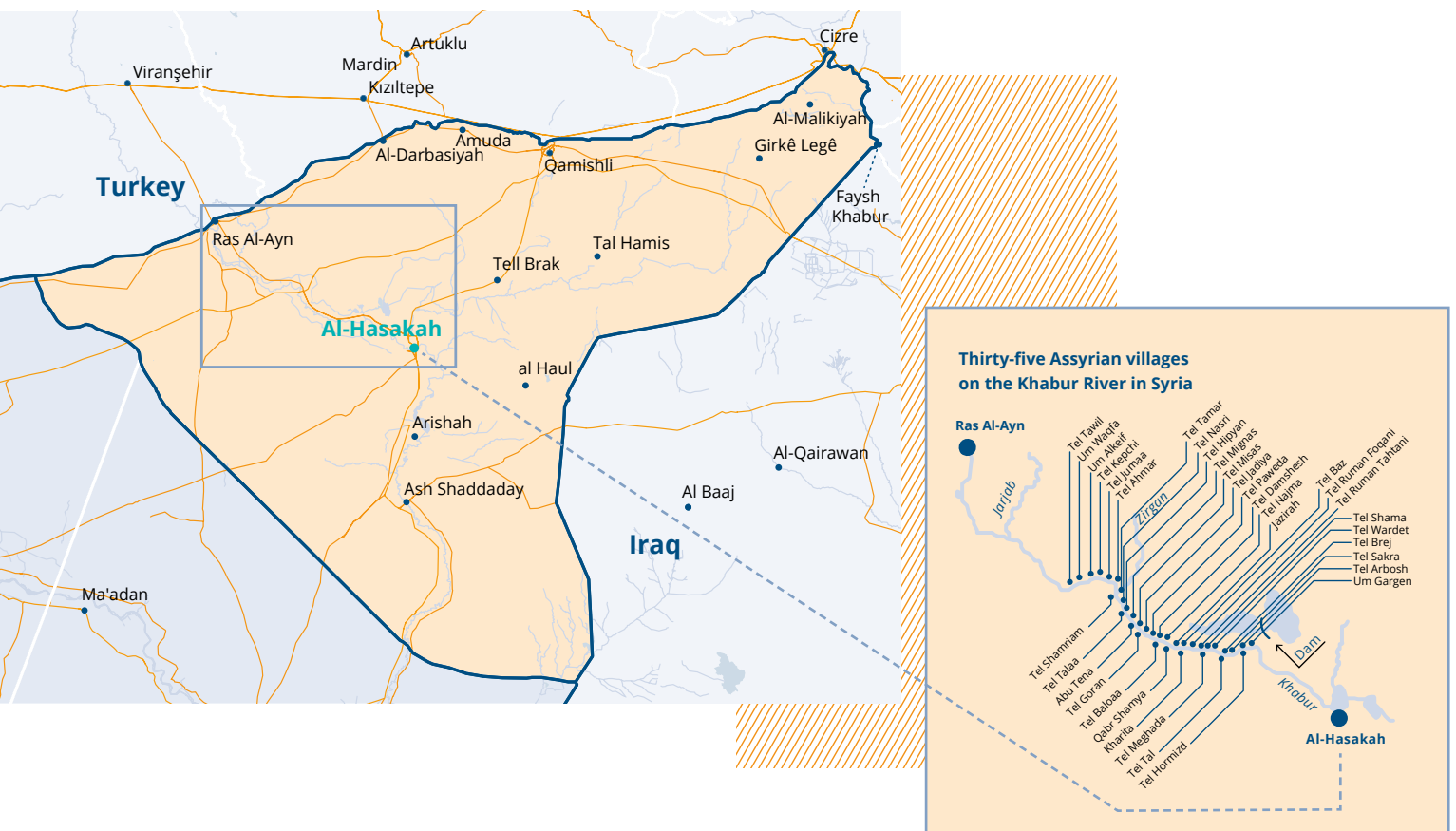
*Street in Ras Al-Ayn (before the conflict)*

According to Yusuf Türker, the administrator of the Mor Hobil-Mor Abrohom monastery in Midyat which took in refugees from Ras Al-Ayn and the surrounding region, Syriac Orthodox Christians in Turkey feared a wave of Christian refugees from Northern Syria. "If Ras Al-Ayn falls and the militias overrun the region – which pray God they will not – 40,000 or 50,000 Christians will come rushing over the border", he said. "Not a single Christian will stay there."<sup>220</sup>

On 26 March 2016 a suicide attacker detonated a bomb outside the Syriac Orthodox Church of St. George in Ras Al-Ayn (controlled by the YPG) killing several pedestrians and injuring others.<sup>221</sup>

### 5.3.2 Christian villages on the Khabur River

On 23 February 2015 the IS began an assault on Christian (Assyrian)<sup>222</sup> villages in a 40-kilometre section of the front line along the south bank of the Khabur River.<sup>223</sup>



Source: Own diagram after Christian Aid Program CAPNI, *Thirty-five Assyrian villages on the Khabur River in Syria*

Many residents managed to flee and make it to safety in the town of Al-Hasakah, but several hundred Assyrian (and Chaldean) Christians were trapped in their villages and taken prisoner by the IS. Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which had previously controlled the region, attempted to regain control of the villages.<sup>224</sup>

**Extent of the destruction in individual Assyrian villages in the Khabur region<sup>225</sup>**

	Village	Church		Houses
01	Tel Nasri	Mother of God	blown up	all destroyed
02	Tel Hipyan	Mar Shalyta	blown up	no information
03	Tel Jazirah	Mar Yonan	blown up	all set on fire, destroyed
04	Tel Baz	Mar Gerges	blown up	all destroyed
05	Tel Sakra	Mar Hanannya	destroyed	all destroyed
06	Tel Hormizd	Rabban Bethyun	blown up	all set on fire, destroyed
07	Tel Tal	Mar Odisho	blown up	no information
08	Tel Balooa	Mar Shimun	set on fire	no information
09	Qabber Shamyia	Mar Gerges	set on fire	no information
10	Abu Tena	Mar Shimun	blown up	all set on fire
11	Tel Talaa	Holy Cross	blown up	all set on fire
12	Tel Schamriam	Mar Bishoy	blown up	all destroyed

The villages were founded by Assyrians who had fled from the vicinity of the town of Simmele west of Dohuk in Iraq in August 1933 and had settled in Syria in the hope of being able to return to their homes one day.<sup>226</sup> Around 220 families and 60 individuals, including Christian militiamen, were captured by the IS in these villages between 24 and 26 February 2015<sup>227</sup> and taken to IS-controlled areas, for instance the Arab Sunni village of Um Al-Masamier. Men, women and children were separated in the process.<sup>228</sup> During the attacks there were casualties among the civilian population as well as the assailants and defenders – YPG fighters and Assyrian militiamen. About 1,200 families managed to escape to Al-Hasakah and Qamishli<sup>229</sup>; some of them attempted to flee into Turkey, but the border was closed to them.<sup>230</sup> On 27 February 2015 there were no longer any Assyrian Christian inhabitants in the 35 Assyrian villages on the Khabur River<sup>231, 232</sup>.

As was the case in Iraq in the summer of 2014, large sections of the Arab Sunni population in the region made common cause with the IS;<sup>233</sup> in some cases Sunnis helped Christians, however. People living in the Arab Sunni village of Qaber Shamiat, for example, guided some 15 Assyrians to safety in Al-Hasakah.<sup>234</sup>

Aerial attacks by the anti-IS coalition from early March onwards enabled the YPG and Assyrian militiamen to recapture the north bank of the Khabur River.<sup>235</sup> However, this in no way meant the situation was now stable and the Christians could return. On 5 April 2015, for instance, the IS blew up the Church of St. Mary in Tel Nasri when YPG fighters and Christian militiamen attempted to retake the village.<sup>236</sup>



This was not the only reason to doubt that the Assyrian (and Chaldean) Christians who had escaped would ever return to their villages along the Khabur River. They come without exception from families which have suffered expulsion and migration over generations. So it can come as no surprise that the first refugees from these villages arrived in Istanbul und Beirut<sup>237</sup> just a few days after the IS attacks. Many more followed in their footsteps.

### 5.3.3 Battle of Al-Hasakah

In 2014 the IS gained control of a large part of Al-Hasakah Governorate. The YPG and the Syrian army, supported by their respective allies, launched offensives on 21 and 27 February 2015 respectively against the IS<sup>238</sup>, in the course of which the IS was driven out of large areas and many villages it had previously captured.

During the so-called eastern Al-Hasakah offensive,<sup>239</sup> which lasted from 21 February to 17 March 2015, the YPG and the Syrian army made territorial gains to the east of Al-Hasakah and the IS to the west of Al-Hasakah.

Previously the IS, having been conclusively defeated, had been forced to withdraw from the town of Kobanê further to the west. In early March it launched a major offensive against the town of Ras Al-Ayn, which – like large parts of the region – had been under the control of the YPG since 2013.<sup>240</sup> A great deal has been written about the reasons for this offensive. For instance, that the IS was merely changing tack after its defeat in Kobanê. However, it is also conceivable that the IS attack on Ras Al-Ayn was simply designed to provide the IS with direct access to the Turkish border again after this had been lost in Kobanê.<sup>241</sup> The IS captured 35 Christian villages between Ras Al-Ayn and the town of Al-Hasakah on the Khabur River (see below).

During a counter-offensive, the so-called western Al-Hasakah offensive – termed Operation Robert Qamishlo<sup>242</sup> by the Christian militias involved – which lasted from 6 to 31 May 2015 and extended into the region of Tell Abyad after 31 May, the YPG and its allies,<sup>243</sup> including the Syriac Military Council,<sup>244</sup> with the support of intensive aerial attacks by the anti-IS coalition<sup>245</sup> were able to re-capture the area around Tell Tamer<sup>246</sup> and Ras Al-Ayn<sup>247</sup> including 230 settlements (towns, villages, farmlands)<sup>248</sup> and the Abd Al-Aziz<sup>249</sup> range of hills.<sup>250</sup>

Whereas in early summer 2015 the IS had attempted to extend its territory from Kobanê and Ras Al-Ayn further eastwards and there had been armed clashes to the west and east of Al-Hasakah, the IS now tried to capture the town of Al-Hasakah. In the so-called Battle of Al-Hasakah,<sup>251</sup> which lasted from 23 June to 1 August 2015, the Syrian army and the YPG/YPJ and their allies scored a decisive victory over the IS. The IS had initially succeeded in capturing four districts of Al-Hasakah and parts of three others<sup>252</sup> as well as numerous villages to the south-west of the town.<sup>253</sup> Later on in the battle, however, the Syrian Arab Army and the YPG/YPJ together with their allies succeeded in regaining control of the town and freeing it entirely of IS fighters by 1 August.<sup>254</sup> The YPG now controlled three-quarters of the town and the Syrian army the rest.<sup>255</sup> The Syrian army had been joined in the fighting by the Christian Gozarto Protection Forces<sup>256</sup> (Sootoro militia)<sup>257</sup> among others, while the YPG had had the support of the Syriac Military Council and the Sutoro militia.

### 5.3.4 Situation in Qamishli

In August 2016 there were armed clashes in Qamishli between the Syrian state and Kurdish armed forces – the Asayish police force and the People’s Protection Units (YPG). The conflict culminated in attacks by the Syrian air force on targets of the PYD’s associates in the centre of Qamishli, which resulted in power failures and shortages of supplies. There are fears that such clashes, in which the Christians are not directly involved but are bystanders and victims, could lead to an accelerated exodus on their part.<sup>258</sup> The concerns of the Christians are undoubtedly justified, although not only they were affected but the civilian population as a whole.



*On 11 July 2019 there was a car bomb attack outside the Church of St. Mary in Qamishli*

How volatile the situation in Northern Syria is in general and in Qamishli in particular is illustrated by the car bomb attack in the early evening of 11 July 2019 outside the Church of St. Mary in Qamishli. Although the Christian part of the town in which the Church of St. Mary lies is well guarded and access for vehicles is difficult, the assailant(s) managed to drive a small truck loaded with explosives to the church and detonate it there. No one was killed apart from the driver of the truck, although eleven people were injured. Several buildings in the vicinity of the attack were badly damaged.

Nothing is known about the background to the assault. According to Christian circles in Qamishli, an attack by the IS or by other groups cannot be excluded. Reports said the aim was to instil fear in the Christians and speed up their exodus.<sup>259</sup>

### 5.3.5 Burdens on the population

#### Arbitrary occupation of buildings/public institutions/villages

In early 2016 YPG training camps were set up in three Assyrian villages in the Khabur region, including in Tel Nasri.<sup>260</sup> In addition the Christian<sup>261</sup> Amal primary school and several other buildings in the centre of the town of Al-Hasakah were occupied by the YPG militia. There was initially no response to complaints by the school management that this occupation would hinder the return of the 900 pupils at the start of the new school year.<sup>262</sup> The school had already been occupied in May and June 2015 during fighting with the IS – on that occasion by the Syrian army. After the fighting was over, however, the army had left the premises when requested to do so.<sup>263</sup>

#### Introduction of new curricula by the PYD-dominated

##### Autonomous Administration

Since the Syrian state continues to constitute a single entity under international law, the legislation passed by the Assad regime still applies in principle all over the country. The same naturally applies to the curricula in public schools, irrespective of whether they are state-run or in private – e. g. church – hands.

After the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration of Northern Syria took control it tried to introduce new legislation for schools on the basis of its “social contract”, as the provisional constitution was called. This was passed in 2016 on the basis of a postulated ethnic and religious pluralism. It provides for native-language lessons in public schools for the individual ethnic and religious groups.<sup>264</sup> When the Assad regime was in control of the administration of schools, Arabic was always the language used for teaching in all schools. That applied both to the state-run schools and those in private hands, e. g. of churches. The languages of the ethnic and religious minorities living in Syria were not only not taught, but lessons in these languages were generally forbidden in schools and were illegal even in private.<sup>265</sup> For that reason it is understandable that the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration in Northern Syria should have heralded the introduction of lessons in the respective native language of the local majority population (limited to Arabic, Kurdish and Syrian-Aramaic, which are also official languages<sup>266</sup>) as a major achievement at the start of the 2015/2016 school year.<sup>267</sup>

In order to live up to its overall aspirations the education authority in the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration in Northern Syria was keen that the church school boards should also ensure the use of the respective native language – Syrian-Aramaic or Armenian – in their schools in accordance with the provisions of the new curricula. Thus the Assyrian Cultural Association and the Olf Taf Foundation<sup>268</sup> – both of which are associated with the Syriac Union Party<sup>269</sup> – were charged by the education authority of the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration with developing a Syrian-Aramaic curriculum. In other words, the church schools affected were not involved.

This opened a new chapter in the dispute between the Christians in Al-Hasakah Governorate – for it is only here that there are Christian, i. e. private church schools – and the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in Northern Syria.

#### Public schools

In September 2015 the school authorities in the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration in the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria introduced new curricula in

Curricula introduced by the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration provide for native-language lessons.

public schools. These provided for lessons in either Kurdish or Arabic for the first three years in primary schools – in accordance with the linguistic background of the local majority population. From the fourth year there were also bilingual lessons in Kurdish and Arabic and from the fifth year English was introduced as an additional foreign language.

**The new curricula provided for the following subjects:**

- › **Years 1–3:** Language (Kurdish or Arabic), Mathematics, Music, Painting, Sport;
- › **Years 4–5:** Language (Kurdish or Arabic), Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Social Studies, Music, Painting, Sport;
- › **Year 6 f.:** Language (Kurdish or Arabic), Mathematics, Natural Sciences (Physics, Chemistry), Democratic Nation, Geography, Music, Painting, Sport. (At these schools English or French are taught as a [third or] fourth language.)

Even though the introduction of the new curricula fulfilled a long-standing wish of many Kurds for lessons in public schools to be given in Kurdish, the new curricula were not universally welcomed.

It is easy to understand that sections of the population which had previously been banned from receiving lessons in their mother tongue by the provisions of the state school system under the Assad regime now urged that the opportunity to introduce native-language lessons under the new conditions should be seized without delay. However, it is doubtful whether consideration was given to the long-term consequences. The future of Syria remains unclear and no one can predict what it will hold in store for the north of the country. So the possibility cannot be excluded that in the foreseeable future the new curricula will have to be renounced in favour of the old curricula which are determined by the education authority of the Assad regime and are valid in the rest of the country.

It is doubtful whether the new curricula will survive in the long term.

But, leaving such considerations aside, there was a controversial response both in the political sphere and amongst the population at large. In 2015 the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria was not governed by the PYD alone but by a coalition in which the second most important group was the Kurdish National Council (KNR). The KNR was led by Masoud Barzani of the Democratic Party of Kurdistan-Syria (DPK-S), an offshoot of the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (DPK) which dominated the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan. The DPK-S flatly rejected the one-sided emphasis on the “Öcalan philosophy”, i. e. the ideology of democratic confederalism developed by the PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan. But there was also criticism from within the majority Kurdish population that the new curricula – like the curricula of the Syrian state education system in the past – only allowed for a single view. In a nutshell, the ideology of the Ba’ath Party was to be replaced by that of Abdullah Öcalan.

Kurdish supporters of the new curricula see them as a success in the struggle against the Assad regime’s discrimination of the Kurdish language.

Kurdish supporters, on the other hand, described the new curricula as the culmination of the long struggle for recognition of the Kurdish language in public institutions after years of limitations and discrimination by the Syrian regime.

Opponents of the new curricula criticised in particular their ideological content. Jian Zakaria, Secretary of the West Kurdistan Teachers’ Union, for example, described the curricula as an attempt to integrate a “totalitarian ideology” into school lessons in the

form of a “sanctification of the leader [Abdullah Öcalan]” and the “militarisation of schools”. This, he said, was “an educational disaster and a crime against future generations”. Other critics complained that the PYD was engaging in “ideological recruitment” with the help of the new curricula.<sup>270</sup>

Others criticised the fact that Arabic was replaced by Kurdish in the first three primary school classes from the beginning of the 2015/2016 school year. “We want to learn our Kurdish language and we want to learn Arabic and English too” said a protest call issued by demonstrators in Amuda. They were concerned that English and Arabic lessons would disappear as part of the new programme and demanded a more inclusive educational programme than that offered by the PYD. This call reflected the concern that the new curricula might be just the first step on the path to a Kurdish-language education system. Finally, criticism was directed against the segregation of Kurdish and Arab school children following the introduction of the new curricula.<sup>271</sup>

Responding in September 2015 to the introduction of the new curricula, the state education authority of the Syrian regime in Qamishli threatened to withdraw all teaching staff from primary schools which used the new curricula or to cease paying the salaries of teachers giving lessons at these schools. The Kurdish education authority responded in turn by announcing that it would pay the teachers’ salaries in full.

It is self-evident that the dispute over the introduction of the new curricula shrinks in importance when set against the military developments in the region over recent years. There has been a series of offensives by groups associated with al-Qaida and then by the IS as well as counter-offensives launched by the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces and by the Syrian army. Groups associated with al-Qaida and later the IS spread fear and horror and brought death and destruction wherever they went on the offensive and gained the upper hand. This applied across the board but in particular to the members of non-Muslim minorities, i. e. the Christians, who were expressly targeted and threatened.

### Christian private schools

From the autumn of 2015 there was regular media coverage of the threatened and/or forced closure of Christian private schools in North-East Syria by the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. There were regular reports, too, on the protests of church dignitaries against the measures. The Syrian Catholic Archbishop of Al-Hasakah-Nisibi, Behnam Hindo,<sup>272</sup> and the Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan of Jazira<sup>273</sup>, Mor Maurice Amsih, made their views known on many occasions. Hindo talked of an attempted Kurdification,<sup>274</sup> demographic “manipulation” in Northern Syria<sup>275</sup> and a plan to expel Christians from the region<sup>276</sup>. Mor Maurice Amsih condemned the abuse of power by the “self-appointed PYD rulers” in respect of the Christians, saying that his accusation had to do with more than just the dispute over the introduction of the new curricula. At the same time he expressed the hope that the region would soon come under the control of the Syrian regime again.<sup>277</sup> Coverage in the media might well create the impression that there was an exclusive conflict between the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration and those responsible for running the Christian private schools as a whole. In actual fact the introduction of the new curricula by the education authority in the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria triggered a wide-

Rejection of the new curricula because of their emphasis on the ideology of democratic confederalism developed by the PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan.

If the new curricula are introduced, the regime threatens to withdraw teachers or stop paying them.

Church representatives protest against the planned introduction of the new curricula.

spread, controversial reaction amongst the population in the region and not just among Christians. Nonetheless, it is correct that the Christian private schools, in particular, were affected by the threatened or actual forced closures because, as stated above, there is a very large number of Christian private schools in the region.

To put the aforementioned reports in the right perspective it is helpful to take a brief look at the facts. This poses a number of problems, however.

Dispute over the introduction of new curricula is not an exclusive conflict between the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration and the Christians.

- First and foremost, the underlying facts are so complex that it is extremely time-consuming and difficult to obtain a clear picture of the real situation.
- Secondly, there are often disconnected reports about individual occurrences, institutions and places which frequently makes it difficult, if not well-nigh impossible, to compare information from different sources.
- Thirdly, coverage of this issue is clearly driven by particular interests even if it is based on information from within church circles or if the sources stem from associates of the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.
- Fourthly and finally, the Christian school boards are frequently described as “Assyrian” or “Syriac”, although these attributions do not permit any conclusions to be drawn about the church which is actually responsible for running the school concerned. The same applies to the languages spoken by Christians in the region or used for liturgical purposes.

The following example illustrates the difficulties involved in assessing the situation. A law passed in 2016 by the Legislative Council of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria in accordance with the aforementioned social contract<sup>278</sup> covers regulations for private schools. These state that unauthorised private schools must be closed within two months. Concerning the curricula to be used by the private schools, the law states that “The curricula of the Democratic Autonomous Administration are not prescribed for any private school. Private schools are not obliged to use either the curriculum of the Democratic Autonomous Administration or that of the Baath regime. All private schools are to draw up their own curricula on which lessons should be based. There are no provisions for the use of the regime’s curricula.” Mohammed Salih Ebdo, Co-Chairman of the Educational Council of Cizîrê Canton in the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration in Northern Syria, justified this directive by saying that the curricula of the Syrian regime fostered a hostile mindset and attempted to set peoples against each other. The curricula in private schools ought be democratic, however, although they were not obliged to conform with the official curricula of the Democratic Autonomous Administration.<sup>279</sup> He said democratic curricula were certainly desirable.

Whether curricula of the kind envisaged by the school authorities in the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration of Northern Syria meet this aspiration is highly questionable.

Christian private schools have been active in the region since the middle of the 1930s.<sup>280</sup> The first Assyrian<sup>281</sup> private school in Qamishli, however, was the Al Hurria private school founded in 1928.<sup>282</sup> The Christian schools teach in accordance with a curriculum which was developed jointly with the Syrian Ministry of Education and, depending on the Christian church which ran the school concerned, was geared to either the Arme-

nian<sup>283</sup> or the Syrian-Aramaic<sup>284</sup> language and the corresponding religious instruction.<sup>285</sup> All the Christian schools take in pupils from other ethnic and religious groups. For decades many Arab, Yazidi and Kurdish families have sent their children to these schools because they value the quality of the education provided.<sup>286</sup>

Christian private schools, for instance in Amuda, responded to the call from the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration to apply the curricula prescribed by the Autonomous Administration by sending all their pupils home and requesting parents not to send their children to the school any more. At the start of the 2015/2016 school year many Kurdish families had deliberately sent their children (around 500 in number) to [Christian] private schools precisely because they wished to avoid the curricula of the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration.<sup>287</sup>

However, two more (school) years were to pass before the conflict between the education authority of the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration in the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria and the Christian private schools finally came to a head.

A decree issued by the education authority of the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration on 7 August 2018 sparked outrage in the Christian communities. It stated that private church schools in the province of Al-Hasakah were to be re-registered within 24 hours because they had no operating licence from the education authority of the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration and, moreover, were using the curricula of the education authority of the Assad regime. Should they not re-register, they ran the risk of being shut down immediately.<sup>288</sup> This decree would have affected some 7,000 pupils attending church schools.<sup>289</sup>

Figures differ on the number of schools that were actually closed. Mohammed Salih Ebdo said that, following a court ruling, 14 (in actual fact 13) private schools, six in Qamishli, four in Al-Hasakah and one each in Ras Al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, Al-Darbasiyah/Dirbêsiyê<sup>290</sup> and Al-Malikiyah/Dêrik<sup>291</sup> had been closed. He pointed out that, while the schools had been founded by Christians, they were not church schools but commercial schools, and fee-based education was banned in the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.<sup>292</sup> The non-governmental organisation Syrians for Truth & Justice, on the other hand, spoke of 17 church schools being closed.<sup>293</sup>

#### **A – Closed Syrian<sup>294</sup> church schools in North-East Syria<sup>295</sup>**

- › Al-Hurriyah Primary School, Al-Gharbi District, town of Qamishli
- › Al-Amal Primary School, Al-Wusta District, town of Qamishli
- › Al-Amal Primary School, Al-Quwateli Street, town of Qamishli
- › Al-Amal Secondary School, Al-Quwateli Street, town of Qamishli
- › Al-Amal Primary School, Al-Arbawiya District, town of Qamishli
- › Al-Amal Primary School, town of Al-Darbasiyah
- › Al-Amal Primary School, town of Al-Qahtaniyya/Tirbespî
- › Dijlah School, town of Al-Malikiyah/Dêrik
- › Al-Amal Primary School, town of Al-Hasakah
- › Al-Amal Secondary School, town of Al-Hasakah
- › Al-Amal Primary School, Al-Nasrah District, town of Al-Hasakah
- › Al-Muwahadah Primary School, town of Al-Hasakah
- › Al-Muwahadah Secondary School, town of Al-Hasakah

The conflict over the introduction of new curricula comes to a head in August 2018.

PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration threatens to close church schools – individual schools are shut down.

**B – Closed Armenian schools in North-East Syria<sup>296</sup>**

- › Al-Itihad Primary School, town of Qamishli
- › Al-Furat Primary School, town of Qamishli
- › Another unnamed Armenian primary school, town of Al-Hasakah
- › An unnamed Armenian primary school, town of Al-Malikiyah/Dêrik
- › Al-Salam Primary School, town of Qamishli
- › Al-Salam Secondary School, town of Qamishli

**C – Closed Protestant schools in North-East Syria<sup>297</sup>**

- › Maysaloon Primary School, town of Qamishli
- › Maysaloon Secondary School, town of Qamishli
- › Fares Al-Khoury Primary School, town of Qamishli (Assyrian school<sup>298</sup>)

A particularly noteworthy aspect of the closure order issued by the education authority of the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration was that the shutdown of the Christian schools concerned was enforced by members of the nominally Christian Sutoro militia.<sup>299</sup> The Sutoro militia is the police force of the Syriac Union Party<sup>300</sup> which forms part of the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), set up largely by the PYD, which is responsible for the Autonomous Administration in Northern Syria.

On 7 August 2018 the public prosecutor in Al-Malikiyah/Dêrik<sup>301</sup> ordered the closure of a Christian school in Al-Darbasiyah<sup>302</sup> after those responsible for running the school had refused to introduce the curriculum laid down by the Kurds.<sup>303</sup> The source does not allow any unequivocal statement to be made about whether the school in Al-Darbasiyah was the only one to be closed immediately after the threat to shut schools down if the new curricula were not introduced.

In Qamishli, four Syriac Orthodox schools are said to have been occupied on 28 August 2018 – in other words not until three weeks later – by PYD militiamen and the Syriac Union Party, teachers and other staff expelled and the school then closed with the help of several locks.<sup>304</sup> It is also unclear whether these four schools are included in the above list.

Talks were held with schools “with Assyrian and Armenian names” in which the Syriac Union Party associated with the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration was involved, but they did not produce an outcome amenable to the education authority of the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration.<sup>305</sup>

Immediately after 7 August 2018 there was evidently a series of talks between the schools affected and the churches, on the one hand, and the education authority of the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration, on the other, which were intended to resolve the conflict. The schools affected and the churches once again pointed out that the running of the schools was legitimised by permits issued by the Syrian state education authorities and that the schools in question, therefore, could not introduce and comply with the new curricula introduced by the education authority of the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration. At the same time they stressed that they continued to welcome the presence of Kurdish pupils in the Christian schools, but this was rejected out of hand by the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration.<sup>306</sup>

The Assyrian Democratic Organisation<sup>307</sup> urged the Autonomous Administration on 29 August 2018<sup>308</sup> to revoke its decision of 7 August to close schools and warned against

Talks between the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration and the school boards failed to resolve the conflict at first.



linking the schools issue with other matters because it might well give rise to internal conflicts and promote national and religious antagonism.<sup>309</sup> Hana Sawmi, a member of the Syriac Culture Association<sup>310</sup> of the Syriac Union Party, which operates under the umbrella of the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration, noted that the schools run by the Syriac Orthodox Church which had been closed had taught Assyrian [sic]<sup>311</sup> as a second language and would continue to do so.<sup>312</sup>

The education authority of the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration reported on 29 August 2018 that the church leaders and priests had accused the Autonomous Administration at a meeting between the two sides of abusing the rights of Christians by forcing the Autonomous Administration's new curriculum on them and demanding that the schools be licensed. The church leaders and priests had pointed out in the talks that they were associated with the Syrian regime. A statement issued by the education authority accused the church leaders and priests in turn of running the schools for financial reasons and of spreading the totalitarian and undemocratic ideology of the Baath Party in the process.<sup>313</sup>

In addition to this political clash there was also a dispute over the nature and quality of language training. While the church leaders and priests wished to teach Syrian-Aramaic and Armenian for liturgical purposes only in the schools – as had been the case in the past – the Autonomous Administration insisted that these languages be used for all lessons.<sup>314</sup>

The action taken by the Syriac Cultural Association and the Olf Taf Foundation exemplifies the way in which the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration used Syrian Christian supporters for its own ends. They both reported on 28 August 2018 that they had sent representatives to schools run by the Syriac Orthodox Church to discuss the methods employed in the Syrian-Aramaic curriculum. The closure of the relevant schools had not been discussed.<sup>315</sup>

Fully in line with the instructions of the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration, the Aramaic Union opened the Qin Al-Shin Institute for Aramaic Languages in June 2018. Not long after, another institute for Aramaic languages, the Olf Taf Institute, was opened.<sup>316</sup> It is not clear whether the two institutes were established by agreement with the Christian churches responsible for running the Christian private schools.

At all events, the decision of 7 August 2018 to close schools triggered protests from large parts of the population, sections of civil society and regional opposition parties as well as the churches. The closure decision was supported only by the part of the population which backed the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration or the Syriac Union Party. On 28 August 2018, representatives of all the ethnic groups and religions took part in a demonstration in Qamishli against the closing of the schools. Despite threats and intimidation by the militias, the demonstrators ultimately managed to liberate the four Syriac Orthodox schools that had been occupied. However, it was not clear at first whether the education authority of the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration and its allies from the Christian Sutoro militia would bow to the will of the demonstrators and revoke its controversial plans for the Christian schools.<sup>317</sup> The same applied to whether the Autonomous Administration would be impressed by a joint appeal issued by the German Society for Threatened Peoples (GfbV) and the Central Organisation of Assyrian Associations in Germany (ZAVD), in

School closures only approved by supporters of the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration.

Re-opening of all Christian schools on 12 September 2018. Whether the dispute over the introduction of new curricula has now been resolved remains unclear.

which they urged that no new curricula should be imposed on the Christian schools. The appeal stated that the new regulations should be withdrawn immediately because otherwise Christians might get the impression they were no longer welcome in the region.<sup>318</sup> As it turned out, the Christian schools in the province of Al-Hasakah were re-opened on 12 September 2018.<sup>319</sup>

Whether the conflict between the church school boards and the education authority of the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration has thus been finally resolved is doubtful for a number of reasons. The church school boards were evidently not prepared to give up using the Syrian regime's curricula. In addition they were not prepared to introduce the two main languages of the Christian population groups – Armenian and Syrian-Aramaic – as general teaching languages. They refused to do so even though representatives of the Syriac Union Party and the Syriac Culture Association visited some of the [Syrian-Aramaic language] schools affected on 30 August 2018 and in talks with those responsible demanded that, in future, lessons at these schools should be given in the Syrian-Aramaic language.<sup>320</sup> The Assyrian Democratic Party<sup>321</sup> accused the YPG in a statement<sup>322</sup> of trying to intimidate the Assyrian communities in the region. The YPG was harming education by seeking to use the curricula as a vehicle for its ideology. The schools in Al-Malikiyah/Dêrik and Al-Darbasiyah should be re-opened without delay.<sup>323</sup>

It is undeniably the case that the argument over the introduction of new curricula by the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria from the start of the 2015/2016 school year and again at the start of the 2017/2018 school year dominated coverage of the situation facing Christians in Northern Syria for quite some time.

In the process it became clear that the Christians – and not only the Christians, but also parts of the Kurdish population in the region – refused to accept that the curricula of the Syrian state school system should be replaced by new curricula drawn up by the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration. The Autonomous Administration tried to make the introduction of the new curricula palatable to this target group by pointing out that all ethnic and ethnic-religious groups in their schools would now be able to use the language spoken by their respective group as a language of instruction, albeit with minor restrictions (lessons in Arabic or Kurdish). While the supporters of the Dawronoye ideology – the Syriac Union Party and the civil society organisations associated with it – approved the measure, the overwhelming majority of Christians – along with a large share of the remaining population – rejected the new curricula. They had plausible arguments for doing so:

- Whereas the certificates of the Syrian state school system qualify students to attend university, there is no guarantee that this will apply in the foreseeable future to the certificates awarded in the school system run by the Autonomous Administration of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. In practice, changes would only take place if – in strictly hypothetical terms – the territory under the control of the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration were no longer to form part of what is currently the state of Syria.
- However, a role continues to be played in these considerations by the hope of a majority of Christians that, once the present civil war is over, the state structure of

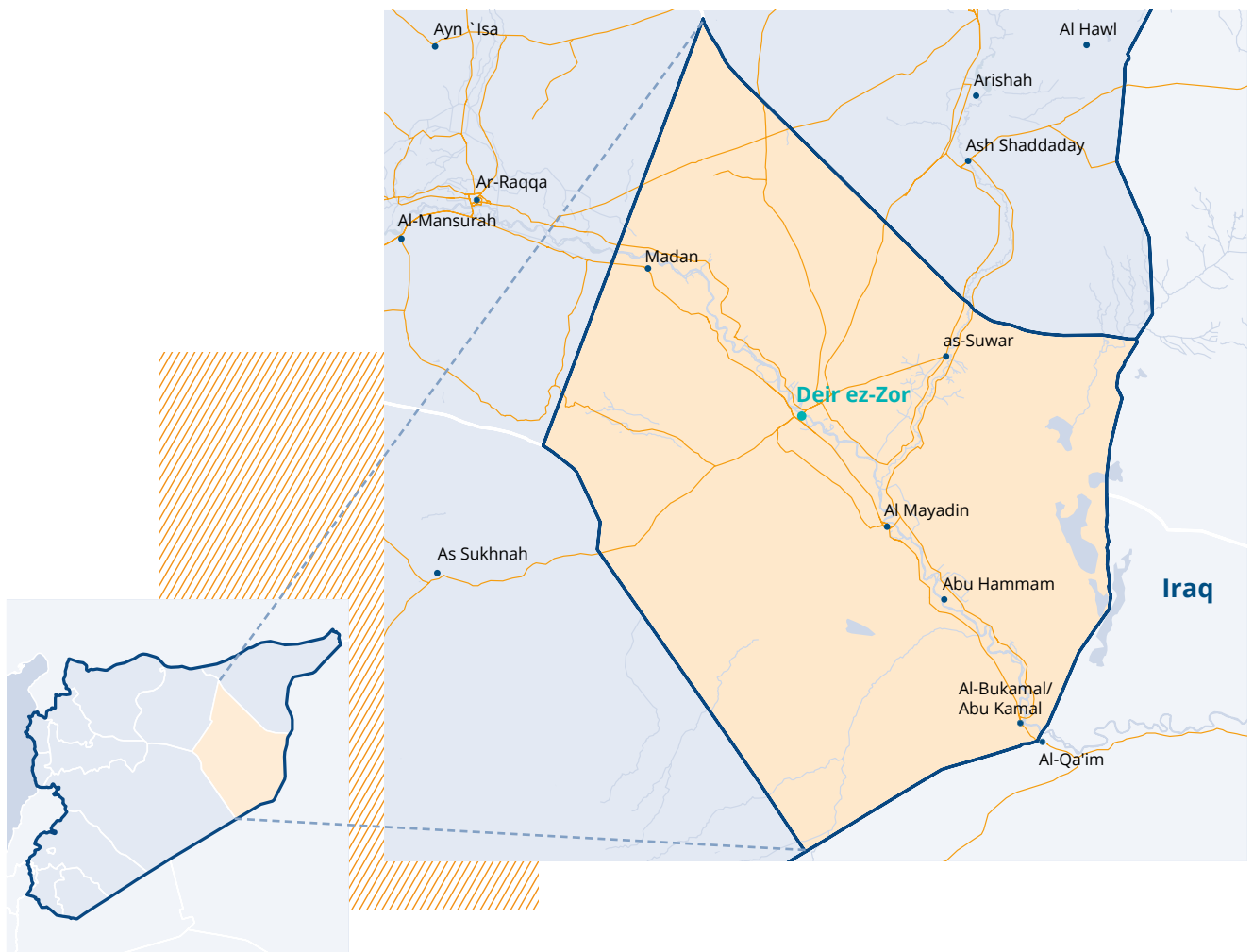
Syria will correspond to that which existed before 2011. Loyalty has always been honoured by the Assad regime and disloyalty ruthlessly punished. With that in mind, most Christians quite understandably do not wish to make a mistake which might later be construed as demonstrating disloyalty.

- Only a minor role is played, on the other hand, by the fact that the new curricula represent the introduction of a new ideology – the concept of democratic confederalism developed by the PKK Chairman, Abdullah Öcalan – to replace the ideology of the Baath Party which was taught previously.

In the end the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration backed down and stopped the introduction of the new curricula it had initially insisted on – probably also to save face. The new curricula now constitute merely an option for the Christian school boards.

#### 5.4 Deir ez-Zor Governorate

Deir ez-Zor Governorate in the North-East of Syria borders on Iraq and is divided up into three districts, Deir ez-Zor, Al-Bukamal and Al-Mayadin, with capitals of the same name.



### 5.4.1 Christian presence in Deir ez-Zor

Deir ez-Zor is of special significance in particular for Armenian Christians – but not only for them – because numerous Armenian Christians who were expelled southwards along the Euphrates in accordance with the Ottoman Deportation Act<sup>324</sup> (Tehcir Kanunu)<sup>325</sup> of 27 May 1915 were herded together in camps outside Deir ez-Zor<sup>326</sup>. In Deir ez-Zor itself a memorial church for the martyrs of the Armenian genocide<sup>327</sup>, which was destroyed by the IS on 21 September 2014,<sup>328</sup> recalls the events of that time.

Before the civil war in Syria began, the majority Sunni town of Deir ez-Zor<sup>329</sup> was home to about 150 Christian families<sup>330</sup> or around 3,000<sup>331</sup> – according to other sources 5,000 to 10,000 – members of four Christian churches. The largest community was the Syriac Orthodox community, to which about 50 per cent of the Christians<sup>332</sup> belonged. Before 2011, 10,000 Armenians (religious affiliation not specified) are said to have lived in Qamishli. By the end of 2015 there were only around 5,000.<sup>333</sup>

The community centre of the Syriac Orthodox Church was the Al-Sayyida Maryam Al-'Adhra' (Church of the Virgin Mary) in Al-Rashidiyya District which, according to the Syriac Orthodox Archbishop at the time, Matta Roham, was built between 1994 and 2004. In 2012 fighting took place between the Syrian regime, on the one hand, and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Jabhat al Nusra, on the other. The church was situated near a military facility and was therefore in the front line when fighting broke out; it suffered minor damage in June 2012. After the area was taken by the FSA, the church was again damaged after coming under fire from the Syrian army. The church also suffered serious damage in late December 2012 following an allegedly unintentional bomb attack by Jabhat al Nusra on a nearby restaurant.

The second largest community was made up by the Roman Catholic Christians with the Al-Malik lil-'Aba' Al-Kabushin Church (Christ the King Church of the Capuchins). Located close to the military police headquarters, the church was used by the regime as an operational basis – snipers posted on its roof fired on innocent passers-by in the nearby “liberated areas”.

In late 2012 the opposition forces and a contingent of Jabhat al Nusra reached the area around the military police headquarters. Fierce fighting broke out near the Church of the Capuchins and lasted for four months with neither side being able to gain the upper hand. Jabhat al Nusra therefore dug a tunnel under the road which passed beneath the church and filled it with explosives. The Nusra front justified the extensive damage done to the church by saying the opposition forces had prevented them from reaching the military headquarters. Moreover, passers-by had been shot at from the roof of the church. The Nusra front insisted at the same time that it was not among the groups which attacked churches – for instance, it had not destroyed the Armenian church in an area it controlled.

The Syrian Catholic community was the third-largest Christian community in Deir ez-Zor, all the members of the community belonging to two families. The community church was destroyed during the bombing of Al-Rashidiyya District after the arrival of the armed opposition.



*Destruction in  
Deir ez-Zor*

The Armenian Orthodox community was the smallest Christian community in Deir ez-Zor. The Shuda' Al-Arman (Armenian Martyrs) Church stood in the west of Al-Rashidiyya District near the town centre and from 2012 came under constant fire and aerial attacks by the regime. In September 2014 the church was destroyed by the IS, which had taken large parts of the town on the 14th of that month and had immediately begun campaigning against any form of church service considered to be un-Islamic. In Deir ez-Zor there was also an Armenian Catholic community with a church of its own. When the first protests against the Assad regime began in spring, fewer than ten per cent of the Christians took part because – according to Amer, one of the participants, – “... minorities the world over demand security first and foremost” and from the point of view of the Christians “the regime in Syria still protected their rights and those of the minorities in the early stages of the revolution ....”<sup>#334</sup>. The protests in 2012 led to a violent conflict. The Christians had previously attempted to join the moderate opposition but had been rejected – perhaps because of their well-known affinity with the regime. Since the Christians found themselves caught between ruthless bombing by the regime and a lack of protection from the armed opposition they decided to flee.

By March 2013 virtually all the Christians had fled from Deir ez Zor. A year later, in April 2014, the town was attacked by the IS, which captured it in July of that year and subsequently executed all the remaining fighters of the FSA and Jabhat Al Nusra. It was not until November 2017 that the Syrian government troops (Syrian Arab Army) succeeded in recapturing the town.

In February 2018, after a long-standing Christian absence, a service attended by Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Ephrem was held in the badly damaged church in which less than two dozen believers took part. All the participants in the service had come from other villages, the appeal to the Christians of Deir ez-Zor to return to the town issued by the Syrian Orthodox Bishop, Maurice Amsih, having gone unheeded. The participants in the service were thus probably the last Christians in Deir ez-Zor – possibly forever.

At Christmas 2018 a Christmas tree was put up in Deir ez-Zor and candles lit – not by Christians but by the Syrian regime.

### **Al-Bukamal/Abu Kamal**

Up to the end of 2012 Al-Bukamal/Abu Kamal was home to three wealthy Christian families whose ancestors were among the town's founders. The church in the town was protected by the rebels and Islamic battalions which conquered the town in the second half of 2012. In early September 2012, however, it was bombed and destroyed by government troops. The heavy fighting forced large numbers of inhabitants, including the Christians, to leave the town of Al-Bukamal/Abu Kamal. Towards the end of 2012 the government troops withdrew, whereupon many inhabitants – but not the Christians – returned to the town. Some Christians from Al-Bukamal/Abu Kamal are said to have already left Syria while others have gone to other parts of the country.

When Jabhat al Nusra gained control of Al-Bukamal/Abu Kamal at the end of 2013, its Islamic Legal Council issued an order to completely destroy the church, whereupon it was demolished with the help of bulldozers. When the IS took Al-Bukamal/Abu Kamal in July 2014 and incorporated the town into its Euphrates state together with the Iraqi border town of Al-Qaem, all the properties of Christians who had left the town were confiscated and the words "IS property" written on the walls.

Activists of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights have listed the following properties confiscated by the IS:

#### **Family 1**

- › approx. 30 acres (= 121,410 sq. m.) of land in the centre of the town of Al-Bukamal

#### **Family 2**

- › 300 sq. m. in the centre of the town of Al-Bukamal
- › Old house with 500 sq. m. of land, 1 Baghdad Street, town of Stadt Al-Bukamal

#### **Family 3**

- › approx. 10 acres (= 40,470 sq. m.) of land on a public road in Al-Bukamal
- › approx. 5 acres (= 20,235 sq. m.) of land behind the courtroom, Al-Bukamal
- › 15 shops, 10 apartments

The IS is said to have also confiscated a number of residential buildings belonging to these families.

### **Al-Mayadin**

Three Christian brothers, two of them doctors, recently lived with their families in Al-Mayadin. Until Al-Mayadin was taken by the IS in the summer of 2014 they had resided together in a house in Al-Takeyyi Street near the Al-Mayadin market. The IS set them a deadline of September 2014, by which time they had to decide whether they wished to stay and pay the jizyah or leave the area controlled by the Islamic State. The family opted to leave Al-Mayadin and go to Homs Governorate. The IS then confiscated their house, which was estimated to be worth ten million Syrian pounds.

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## 6. Impact of a possible withdrawal of US troops from Northern Syria

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With that in mind it is easy to understand why the message conveyed by US President Donald Trump via Twitter on 19 December 2018 that the USA would withdraw its troops from Northern Syria spread fear and terror among the Christians. It was anticipated that Turkey would respond to the announced withdrawal of US troops by going ahead with its intention of occupying Northern Syria so as to root out the YPG. The experience of the Turkish military offensive against Afrin struck fear into the hearts of Christians, particularly since it could be assumed that Turkey would deploy Arab allies associated with the FSA, as it had done in Afrin. Established as the military arm of the opposition alliance, National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, the FSA now includes Islamist and radical Islamist jihadist groups.<sup>335</sup>

### 6.1 Decision on the withdrawal of US troops from Northern Syria of 19 December 2018

In a video message distributed via his Twitter account Donald Trump said: “After historic victories against ISIS, it’s time to bring our great young people home! ...”<sup>336</sup>. The order to withdraw 2,000 US soldiers from Syria, with which he aimed to redeem an election promise he had made in 2016, was not agreed with either his security advisor, John Bolton, or the military responsible for the mission. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis<sup>337</sup>, who commanded United States Central Command<sup>338</sup>, General Joseph Votel<sup>339</sup>, and the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, Brett H. McGurk<sup>340</sup>, sharply criticised Trump’s decision.

Mattis deplored the fact that, as a result of the troop withdrawal, Western influence in Syria would pass to Russia and Iran. This would counteract the Trump administration’s security doctrine of challenging Russia and Iran, the most important financial and military benefactors of the Assad regime.<sup>341</sup>

Votel and McGurk both stressed that the IS would never have been defeated without the Kurdish fighters. Votel also expressed his concern that a withdrawal of American troops would expose the Kurds to the threat of a Turkish attack and ensure the survival of Bashar Al-Assad. McGurk said the mission in Syria had been designed to bring about the “lasting defeat” of the IS. Hence there was a need to consolidate the victory that had been won.<sup>342</sup> Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis submitted his resignation the day after Trump’s decision,<sup>343</sup> the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, Brett McGurk, a day later.<sup>344 345</sup>

Trump's decision was criticised not only by the military, but also by politicians – both Democrats and Republicans, such as Senator Lindsey Graham. Graham and five other senators from both parties urged Trump to reconsider his decision and warned that a withdrawal would only encourage the remnants of the IS as well as the Assad regime, Iran and Russia.<sup>346</sup> The House Democratic Leader, Nancy Pelosi, said she thought Trump had probably acted more for personal or political reasons than with a view to national security interests.<sup>347</sup>

There was a constant back and forth in the policy on Syria and in media coverage of it in the weeks after the decision made by President Trump on the troop withdrawal from Northern Syria. With an eye on its own interests in Northern Syria, Turkey in particular tried to make capital out of Trump's announcement.

### **6.2 Decision on the continued stationing of US troops in Northern Syria of 21 February 2019**

While many people in Eastern Syria were unsettled by President Donald Trump's surprising decision to withdraw all US troops from Syria, they were relieved by the announcement that a small troop contingent would remain in Syria after all.<sup>348</sup> On 21 February 2019 the White House announced – to the surprise of the Pentagon among others – that 200 US soldiers were to remain temporarily in Syria. In the meantime there is talk of 400 soldiers, thereby contradicting President Trump's original plan to bring home all 2,000 soldiers from Syria. Crucial for people on the ground was that even a modest US presence would ensure the continuation of the "de facto no-fly zone".

The Pentagon's decision was designed to ensure there would be no resurgence of the IS and that Iran would not be able to exploit the vacuum which would have arisen following a complete troop withdrawal. Moreover, the decision was also interpreted as a concession to France and Great Britain, which were to be encouraged to guarantee security in a planned security zone along the Syrian border. The decision followed a telephone call between Trump and President Erdoğan of Turkey, during which they again discussed the setting up of a security zone in Northern Syria.<sup>349</sup>

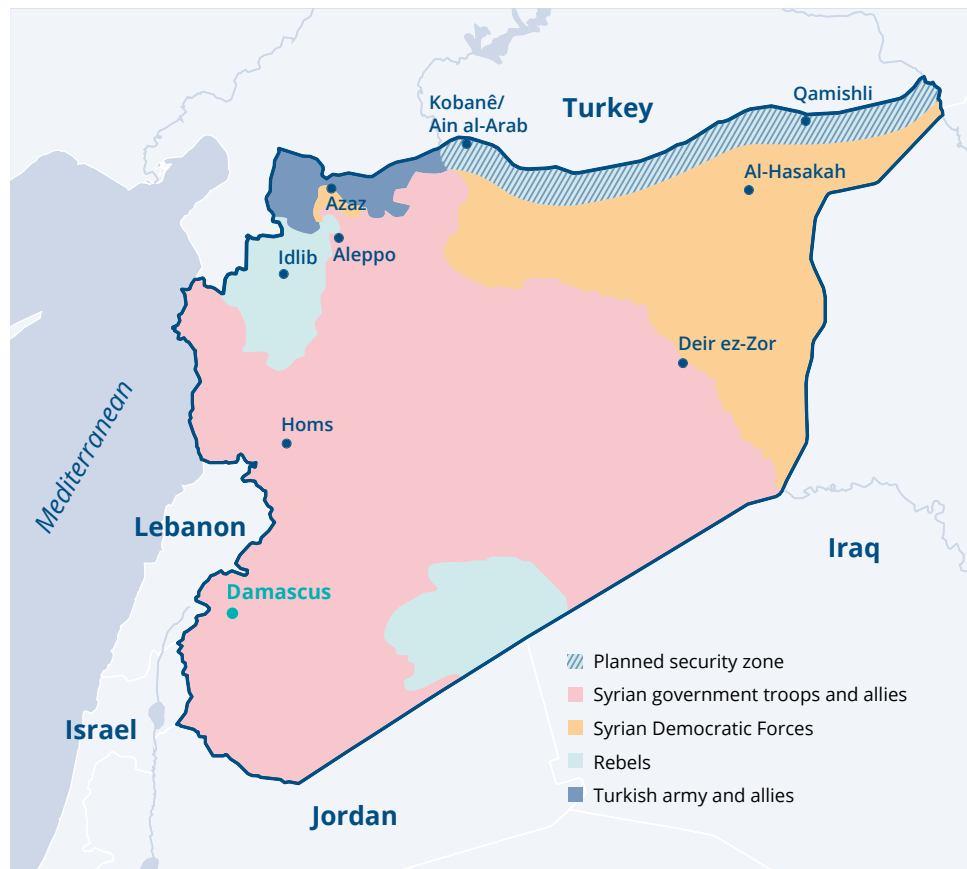
President Erdoğan was probably displeased by President Trump's decision to keep some US troops stationed in Northern Syria after all. He was thus obliged to abandon his hopes that Turkey would be given responsibility for security in a safe zone in Northern Syria. As it happened, any such plans had already been scotched by Iranian president Hassan Ruhani and Russian president Vladimir Putin during the three-party talks held in Sochi on 14 February 2019. Ruhani and Putin both expressed the view that the only correct solution would be for the Syrian government to resume control of the area the USA was about to leave. Erdoğan reiterated Turkey's aim of setting up a security zone south of the Turkish-Syrian border in order to "cleanse" the area of a Syrian Kurdish militia – by which he meant the YPG. At all events, if Turkey does not have the backing of Russia and Iran, both of whom are present in Syria, it can hardly achieve its objective.<sup>350</sup>

### 6.3 Security zone in Northern Syria?

For some time now there have been regular reports in the media about the possible setting up of a security zone in Northern Syria. The Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan argued in favour of such a zone in 2013 and suggested that the Turkish armed forces could take control of it. More recently he has focused on the discussions about the setting up of security zones (de-escalation zones)<sup>351</sup> which were held in May 2017 in Astana between Russia, Iran and Turkey and led in June 2017 to the establishment of four such zones in the western part of Syria.<sup>352</sup>

Discussions on the setting up of a security zone in Northern Syria have intensified since early 2019. President Erdoğan reported on a telephone conversation he had had with US President Donald Trump, saying Turkey would be introducing a security zone in Northern Syria.<sup>353</sup> Responding to that announcement, the Syrian Democratic Forces said just one day later that they would be prepared to support the establishment of a security zone in Northern Syria. They added, however, that there would need to be a corresponding guarantee that foreign intervention would be halted. By that the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) clearly meant Turkey.<sup>354</sup> In mid-January Trump had considered the setting up of a 32-kilometre deep security zone in Northern Syria in order to stop Turkey's unacceptable<sup>355</sup> military operations against the US-backed YPG.<sup>356</sup>

Turkey claims it will set up a security zone in Northern Syria.



The slant in the Turkish media was very different, however. The Turkish tabloid STAR, for instance, wrote: "For the Turkmens, Arabs and Kurds in the areas occupied by the terrorist organisation YPG/PKK the plan for a security zone has become a source of hope. The refugee families who fled for their lives [and are now living in Turkey] hope the plan will soon be implemented so that they can return home earlier than expected."<sup>357</sup> STAR added that the Arabs and Kurds who had fled to Turkey would not have done so if conditions in the areas controlled by the YPG/PKK had been good. In fact, it said, "pious [Muslims] have been mistreated, their religion [Islam] presented in a distorted manner and devotional exercises forbidden. This is not compatible with Islam."<sup>358</sup>

From the point of view of the Christians in Northern Syria the situation looks very different. The Deputy Chairman of the Syriac Union Party, Sanharib Barsoum, said: "We regard these [Turkish] threats as being directed not just against Kurds. They are a threat to this democratic project and for all people living east of the Euphrates, including the Christians." The threats had sparked fears amongst Christians in the region.<sup>359</sup> The border area in which Turkey wished to establish a safe zone was home mostly to Christians. If Turkey attacked, Kurds and Arabs might possibly survive but Christians most certainly would not.<sup>360</sup>

Similar views to those of Sanharib Barsoum have been expressed by Elizabeth Gawyria, a Syrian Christian, who is now one of the vice-presidents of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria: "We see the Turkish threat as an existential threat. ... We have therefore joined the Autonomous Administration and are working to ensure that we can implement our rights in the new Syria."<sup>361</sup>

Some readers may conceivably object at this point that Sanharib Barsoum's critical remarks about Turkey are not really surprising, given that they come from an official of the Syriac Union Party. After all, the Syriac Union Party is closely associated with the PYD and is part of the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), founded by the PYD, which administers the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. Hence it is not unexpected that Barsoum should say the "Turkish threats" pose "a threat to the democratic project", by which he means the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.<sup>362</sup>

However, Barsoum can hardly be contradicted when he recalls that the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration permitted "the opening of three churches in Afrin", whose members were without exception converts, and that "Turkey and the FSA (Free Syrian Army) destroyed these churches and forced people to flee".

Of significance here is undoubtedly his reference to the fact that the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration recognises and ensures equal treatment of "all the important religions in the region ..., including Islam, the Yazidi faith and Christianity". Hence, as had previously been the case in Kobanê, Muslim Kurds who had converted to Christianity had been able to freely practise their religion under the Autonomous Administration, including in Afrin.<sup>363</sup>

It is important to point out here once again that, these facts notwithstanding, relations between most of the Christian population in Northern Syria and the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria and its police and military units are highly ambivalent.

To date only a minority of Christians have expressed sympathy for the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria and its police and military units. They include, for example, those who are organised in the Syriac Union Party and the civilian units and militias associated with it and their supporters. These people can be described as pragmatists attempting to promote the interests of Christians. But they can also be seen quite simply as opportunists – a view taken by the church leaders and a majority of the Christians in Northern Syria – who are pursuing their particular interests under the pretext of working for the interests of the Christians as a whole.

What is certainly correct is that, when it comes to the setting up of a so-called security zone in Northern Syria, they do give a voice to the interests of Christians. This is something which should be properly acknowledged in the West. It will not be difficult for those who are politically interested to understand that they simultaneously advocate the interests and positions of the Autonomous Administration of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.

Setting up of a Turkish-controlled security zone would be a disaster from the Christians' point of view.

One thing on which all Christians in Northern Syria are agreed is that the setting up of a Turkish-controlled security zone in Northern Syria would be a disaster for the people living in the region – and not just for the Christians – and would certainly further accelerate the exodus of Christians from the area. Thus Samir Yaghouna Youghano from the village of Tell Nasri in the Khabur Region, from which a large section of the Assyrian population was expelled during the IS attack in 2015, thinks that “if Erdoğan attacks our area no Christian will remain. It is occupied not just by Kurds but also by Christians.”<sup>364</sup>

Amy Austin Holmes, a professor at the American University of Cairo, wrote recently after returning from a trip through Northern Syria: “Syrian Christians describe themselves as the ‘descendants of survivors’. Many of their ancestors were killed during the Seyfo massacre of 1915, during which an estimated 300,000 Christians were killed by the Ottomans. The event has not attracted much academic research, which has prompted the historian Joseph Yacoub to describe it as a ‘hidden genocide’.

This community – including Syriac Orthodox, Syrian Catholic, Assyrian, Chaldean and Armenian Christians – has not forgotten the persecution it suffered at the hands of the Ottomans a century ago.<sup>365</sup> This experience explains its current opposition to Ankara’s plan to deploy Turkish troops east of the Euphrates. The Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, is attempting to present the plan as a ‘buffer zone’ or ‘safe zone’. For Syrians [in this context Syrian Christians] this is yet another intervention by a foreign power. Instead of generating a feeling of security, the prospect of Turkish troops being sent into their homeland revives memories of the trauma their community once suffered.”<sup>366</sup>

Holmes goes on to say that, in view of the Trump administration’s concern over the serious difficulties facing religious minorities in the Middle East and the ill-treatment suffered at the hands of the Turkish-backed militias in Afrin, which were documented in a recently published State Department report,<sup>367</sup> it was worrying that US officials were seriously considering the Turkish proposal at all. Contrary to discussions in Washington and other Western capitals it was not just the Kurds who did not wish

to see Turkish troops stationed in Syria again – “irrespective of what euphemism was used to describe the zone”. The conclusion she drew from her journey through Northern Syria was that practically all sections of Syrian society, including Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens, Chercassians and Christians, were fiercely opposed to the Turkish plan, although the stiffest resistance to the deployment of Turkish troops certainly came from the Christians.<sup>368</sup>

It is still not clear how the security zone issue will develop.<sup>369</sup> The expected US decision on the question of Turkish participation will evidently not have to do primarily with Syria but will revolve around planned arms deals with Turkey.

Following a cabinet meeting on 18 April 2019 Ibrahim Kalin, the spokesman for President Erdoğan, said: “Turkey expects the US withdrawal from Syria to continue and a safe zone to be set up under Turkish control.” Shortly beforehand President Erdoğan, Finance Minister Berat Albayrak, Defence Minister Hulusi Akar and Kalin had returned from Washington, where they had conducted talks on Ankara’s planned purchase of the Russian air defence system S-400<sup>370</sup> and probably also the planned purchase of F-35 multi-role combat aircraft.<sup>371</sup>

Turkey intends to establish a security zone under Turkish control after the withdrawal of the USA.

The spokesman for the US Department of Defense, Charles Summers, made it clear on 18 April 2019 that the USA remained committed to protecting its local partners in Syria: “Our Turkish allies and our SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) partners have legitimate issues that they’re discussing, and those discussions are ongoing.”<sup>372</sup>

In response to Kalin’s statement on Turkey’s intentions to control a safe zone in Northern Syria Summers said that “engagements to date” with Turkey on the issue had been “productive” – whatever that might mean in the overall context.<sup>373</sup>

“We are confident that together with the Coalition, we will ensure a lasting defeat for ISIS in Syria”, Summers continued as he also listed three other objectives the Trump administration is pursuing as it draws down forces in Syria: “preventing a security vacuum that destabilises the area; addressing Turkey’s legitimate security concerns; and, thirdly: protecting our partners in the fight against ISIS.”<sup>374</sup>

It thus appears unlikely at the moment that the USA will agree to Turkey’s demand that it control the “safe zone” in Syria.<sup>375</sup> However, a decision has still not been made, although the new U. S. Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, Ambassador James Jeffrey,<sup>376</sup> the successor to Brett McGurk who resigned in late 2018, has been involved for months in shuttle diplomacy between Ankara and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in order to find a border security solution acceptable to both sides. For all those involved it is crucial that the USA clarify its position.<sup>377</sup> Indeed, Amy Austin Holmes thinks that, instead of continuing to yield to Erdoğan’s neo-Ottoman plans to go on annexing parts of Northern Syria, US officials could simply tell Ankara that there will be no further deployment of Turkish troops in Syria.<sup>378</sup>

SPIEGEL ONLINE reported on 30 May 2019 that the German government had indicated its willingness to the USA to play a military role in guaranteeing a safe zone in Northern Syria, which would ensure protection for the Kurds who had fought alongside the USA

**In the eyes of the USA the security zone should provide protection against an attack by Turkey and the Assad regime.**

**Unresolved issue of protecting the planned security zone in the air and on the ground.**

against the terrorist organisation Islamic State (IS) against both an attack by Turkey and the clutches of the Assad regime.<sup>379</sup> If such a solution were to come about, it would certainly be in the interests not only of the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration in Northern Syria, but also of everybody living there. At the moment, however, it is not clear whether things will move in that direction. Media coverage of the outcome of the visit of the US Secretary of State to Berlin on 30 May 2019 was not exactly illuminating in this respect.<sup>380</sup> Nothing has changed in the meantime, although SPIEGEL ONLINE did report on 26 June 2019 that, prior to a NATO meeting in Brussels, the USA expected a swift decision on this issue and that the "US Administration had suggested that, in addition to the Tornado mission, Germany might become involved in a mission to stabilise the crisis region in Syria and Iraq and deploy ground troops".<sup>381</sup>

Concrete plans for a security zone in Northern Syria will certainly have been worked out in detail. For the moment, however, information on these plans is not available to the general public. Yet details of concrete plans for a security zone in Northern Syria are crucial for an assessment of what such a zone might mean for the people living there. The only thing which is certain so far is that a 32-kilometre deep security zone along the Turkish-Syrian border is under discussion.

While Turkey insists that it should control this security zone, it can be concluded from the aforementioned remarks by the US Secretary of State that neither Turkey nor the Assad regime are to be given control over the zone. This is certainly in the interests of all the population groups in Northern Syria.

However, it is still not clear who is to guarantee security in the zone that is planned. SPIEGEL ONLINE (see above) reported that the German government had expressed its willingness to the USA to participate militarily in guaranteeing a protection zone in Northern Syria – specifically in the form of air surveillance. However, it remains unclear who is to guarantee safety on the ground. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who already have a presence there, plus the few remaining US soldiers? These forces plus contingents of troops from France and Great Britain? Or just the few remaining US soldiers and additional contingents of troops from France and Great Britain but excluding the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)? It is difficult to imagine that the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) will readily accept their banishment from the 32-kilometre deep security zone and quietly withdraw to the south.<sup>382</sup>

Even if the details of concrete plans for a security zone in Northern Syria have still not been made public, Germany's role in this connection has finally been clarified. The U. S. Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, James Jeffrey, had requested the German government to provide support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) led by Kurds in the north-east of the country in the form of instructors, logistics specialists and technical assistants from the Federal Armed Forces.<sup>383</sup> "We want ground troops from Germany to help replace our soldiers", Jeffrey said, adding that he expected an answer from the Federal Government by the end of July.<sup>384</sup>

As it turned out, there was a prompt response to his request: Germany will not meet the United States' request for German Army soldiers to form part of a combat mission on Syrian soil.<sup>385</sup>



Government spokesman Steffen Seibert said the government merely wished to continue its previous military contributions to the anti-IS coalition in the form of Tornado reconnaissance jets, a tanker aircraft and instructors in Iraq. "When I say that the Federal Government is contemplating continuing its previous activities as part of the anti-IS coalition this does not involve any ground troops, as is well known."<sup>386</sup>

Regardless of the stance taken by Germany, there are still many unanswered questions concerning the establishment of a security zone in Northern Syria. This is made clear by a brief excerpt from a report in the German daily *Die Welt*:

"The north-eastern part of Syria is controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an alliance comprising the Kurdish YPG and Sunni-Arab and Christian militias. Turkey has repeatedly threatened to march into this area to fight the YPG, which is allied with the banned Kurdish Workers Party PKK in Turkey. Jeffrey said he was aware of the concerns in Europe that European troops were to be deployed for security purposes between the area controlled by the SDF and the Turkish border: 'That is expressly not our objective. We are now negotiating with Turkey about a security zone in this area which would be protected by our troops together with Kurdish units.'<sup>387</sup>

In the meantime the possibility cannot be ruled out that Turkey may have renounced its idea of controlling a security zone in Northern Syria (or have been forced to do so) and might opt instead for cross-border military operations of the kind it has carried out for some time now in Northern Iraq.<sup>388</sup> In contrast to the regular cross-border military operations in Northern Iraq, however, Turkey could justify its actions here by reference to an agreement in international law. In respect of the security zone in Northern Syria now under discussion it is anticipated that Turkey could refer to the so-called Adana Agreement of 1998 and two supplementary agreements between Ankara and Damascus signed in 2009<sup>389</sup> and 2010<sup>390</sup> and assert its right to pursue the PKK/KONGRA-GEL<sup>391</sup> and "its offshoots operating under various names"<sup>392</sup> across the Turkish-Syrian border into a five-kilometre deep strip in Syria along the Turkish-Syrian border.

This possibility arose after Turkey issued Syria an ultimatum in 1996 to hand over the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and close the PKK camps, but it "fell on deaf ears".<sup>393</sup> Then, in autumn 1998, Turkey issued Syria another ultimatum, this time threatening to go to war if Syria continued to ignore Turkish demands.<sup>394</sup> Syria subsequently expelled Abdullah Öcalan from the country and closed the PKK camps in Lebanon. Thanks to mediation by Egypt and Iran, negotiations were held on 19 and 20 October 1998 in Adana between Turkey and Syria which led to what is known as the Adana Agreement. This details Turkey's expectations of Syria concerning their joint efforts to combat terrorism. The agreement covered primarily the action Turkey expected Syria to take against the PKK.<sup>395</sup> Of particular interest here is Annex 4 of the Adana Agreement which states: "The Syrian side understands that its failure to take the necessary measures and security duties stated in this agreement gives Turkey the right to take all necessary security measures 5 kilometres deep into Syrian territory."<sup>396</sup>

The Adana Agreement was confirmed by two other Turkish-Syrian agreements:

- › the Agreement between the Interior Ministry of the Turkish Republic and the Interior Ministry of the Syrian Arab Republic on Security Cooperation of 23 December 2009<sup>397</sup>

Can Turkey continue to refer to the Adana Agreement and pursue the PKK and its 'offshoots' in a five-kilometre deep strip on the Syrian side of the border?

and

- › the Agreement between the Government of the Turkish Republic and the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic on Cooperation against Terrorism and Terrorist Organisations of 21 December 2010.<sup>398</sup>

This agreement is valid for three years and runs for a further three years unless one of the contracting parties notifies the other party of the termination of its commitment to the agreement in due time prior to the expiry of the three-year deadline. Since nothing is known to the contrary, it must be assumed that the latter agreement is still valid and thus also the aforementioned regulation in Annex 4 of the Adana Agreement.

The population as a whole and the Christians in particular would rightly be concerned if there were to be a Turkish presence in the security zone.

Should Turkey insist on the above right in the discussions on the establishment of a security zone in Northern Syria, the statement made by US Secretary of State Pompeo that Turkey is not to be given control of the zone will need to be qualified. For the inhabitants of areas near to the border within the five-kilometre deep strip in question it would mean that their concerns regarding a possible Turkish presence might be justified.

That applies not just to the majority Kurdish population, but also, for example, to the Christians in places in the immediate vicinity of the Turkish border such as Kobanê (Ain al-Arab), Ras Al-Ayn, Qamishli and Malikiyah/Dêrik.

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- Türkiye Cumhuriyeti İçişleri Bakanlığı ile Suriye Arap Cumhuriyeti İçişleri Bakanlığı Arasında Güvenlik İşbirliği Anlaşması [Agreement of the Interior Ministry of the Turkish Republic and of the Interior Ministry of the Syrian Arab Republic on Security Cooperation] source: [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye---suriye-ydsik-1\\_-toplantisi-ortak-bildirisi\\_-22-23-aralik\\_-sam.tr.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye---suriye-ydsik-1_-toplantisi-ortak-bildirisi_-22-23-aralik_-sam.tr.mfa)
- 390 TÜRKİYE CUMHURİYETİ HÜKÜMETİ İLE SURİYE ARAP CUMHURİYETİ HÜKÜMETİ ARASINDA TERÖR VE TERÖR ÖRGÜTLERİNE KARŞI ORTAK İSBİRLİĞİ ANLAŞMASI [Agreement between the Government of the Turkish Republic and the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic on Cooperation against Terrorism and Terrorist Organisations [of 21 December 2010] In: T. C. BASBAKANLIK Kanunlar ve Kararlar Genel Müdürlüğü: TÜRKİYE CUMHURİYETİ HÜKÜMETİ İLE SURİYE ARAP CUMHURİYETİ HÜKÜMETİ ARASINDA TERÖR VE TERÖR ÖRGÜTLERİNE KARŞI ORTAK İSBİRLİĞİ ANLAŞMASININ UYGUN BULUNDUGUNA DAIR KANUN TASARISI [Turkish Republic] Directorate-General for Laws and Decisions with the Office of the President: Draft Law on Approval of the Agreement between the Government of the Turkish Republic and the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic on Cooperation against Terrorism and Terrorist Organisations], 9 February 2011 – [www2.tbmm.gov.tr/d23/1/1-1009.pdf](http://www2.tbmm.gov.tr/d23/1/1-1009.pdf)
- 391 Kurdistan Workers Party – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurdistan\\_Workers%27\\_Party](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurdistan_Workers%27_Party)
- 392 In the above agreement of 21 December 2010 repeated mention is made (e. g. in Article 2) of “PKK/KONTRA-GEL terör örgütü ve çeşitli adlar altındaki uzantıları” [terrorist organisation PKK/KONTRA-GEL and offshoots under various names].
- 393 Statement Made By İsmail Cem, Foreign Minister, On The Special Security Meeting Held Between Turkey And Syria 20 October 1998 (Unofficial Translation) – [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/\\_p\\_statement-made-by-ismail-cem\\_-foreign-minister\\_-on-the-special-security-meeting-held-between-turkey-and-syria\\_br\\_october-20\\_-1998\\_br\\_unofficial-translation\\_\\_p\\_.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/_p_statement-made-by-ismail-cem_-foreign-minister_-on-the-special-security-meeting-held-between-turkey-and-syria_br_october-20_-1998_br_unofficial-translation__p_.en.mfa)
- 394 Dönemin Kara Kuvvetleri Komutanı Orgeneral Atilla Ateş, 16 Eylül 1998’de Hatay’da yaptığı konuşmada, “Suriye’ye karşı sabrımız kalmadı. Türkiye beklediği karşılığı alamazsa, her türlü tedbiri almaya hak kazanacaktır.” diyerek, Esed rejimine PKK elebaşısını himaye etmesinin savaş nedeni sayılacağı sinyali verdi. [The Commander-in-Chief of the Army, Atilla Ateş, said on 16 September 1998 in Hatay Province, “Our patience with Syria is at an end. Should Turkey not get what it wants from Syria, it has the right to take every conceivable measure.” He thus indicated that Turkey regarded the fact that Syria had granted protection to the PKK leader as grounds for war.] Source: Adana Mutabakatı nedir? (1998 Krizi) Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan’ın bahsettiği Adana Protokolü. [What is the Adana Agreement about? (Crisis 1998). The Adana Protocol mentioned by President Erdoğan], KARAR, 25 January 2019 – <https://www.karar.com/guncel-haberler/adana-mutabakati-nedir-1998-krizi-cumhurbaskani-erdoganin-bahsettiği-adana-protokolu-1099492>
- 395 Statement Made By İsmail Cem, Foreign Minister, On The Special Security Meeting Held Between Turkey And Syria 20 October 1998 (Unofficial Translation) – [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/\\_p\\_statement-made-by-ismail-cem\\_-foreign-minister\\_-on-the-special-security-meeting-held-between-turkey-and-syria\\_br\\_october-20\\_-1998\\_br\\_unofficial-translation\\_\\_p\\_.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/_p_statement-made-by-ismail-cem_-foreign-minister_-on-the-special-security-meeting-held-between-turkey-and-syria_br_october-20_-1998_br_unofficial-translation__p_.en.mfa)
- 396 “The Syrian side understands that its failure to take the necessary measures and security duties stated in this agreement gives Turkey the right to take all necessary security measures within 5 km deep into Syrian territory.” Source: @M\_Alneser [Mohamed Al Neser], Finally a copy of the security agreement between #Syria & #Turkey 1998 (#AdanaAgreement) Published by @BASSAMPDC the Syrian diplomat who worked for the SY embassy in Washington.
- 397 A reference to this agreement can be found in: Türkiye – Suriye YDSİK [Yüksek Düzeyli Stratejik İşbirliği Konseyi] 1. Toplantısı Ortak Bildirisi, 22–23 Aralık, Şam [Joint Declaration on the First Meeting of the High-Level Council of Turkey and Syria on Strategic Cooperation], see Section 6 of the agreements concluded: Türkiye Cumhuriyeti İçişleri Bakanlığı ile Suriye Arap Cumhuriyeti İçişleri Bakanlığı Arasında Güvenlik İşbirliği Anlaşması [Agreement of the Interior Ministry of the Turkish Republic and of the Interior Ministry of the Syrian Arab Republic on Security Cooperation]. Source: [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye---suriye-ydsik-1\\_-toplantisi-ortak-bildirisi\\_-22-23-aralik\\_-sam.tr.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye---suriye-ydsik-1_-toplantisi-ortak-bildirisi_-22-23-aralik_-sam.tr.mfa)
- 398 TÜRKİYE CUMHURİYETİ HÜKÜMETİ İLE SURİYE ARAP CUMHURİYETİ HÜKÜMETİ ARASINDA TERÖR VE TERÖR ÖRGÜTLERİNE KARŞI ORTAK İSBİRLİĞİ ANLAŞMASI [Agreement between the Government of the Turkish Republic and the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic on Cooperation against Terrorism and Terrorist Organisations [of 21 December 2010] In: T. C. BASBAKANLIK Kanunlar ve Kararlar Genel Müdürlüğü: TÜRKİYE CUMHURİYETİ HÜKÜMETİ İLE SURİYE ARAP CUMHURİYETİ HÜKÜMETİ ARASINDA TERÖR VE TERÖR ÖRGÜTLERİNE KARŞI ORTAK İSBİRLİĞİ ANLAŞMASININ UYGUN BULUNDUGUNA DAIR KANUN TASARISI [Turkish Republic] Directorate-General for Laws and Decisions with the Office of the President: Draft Law on Approval of the Agreement between the Government of the Turkish Republic and the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic on Cooperation against Terrorism and Terrorist Organisations], 9 February 2011 – [www2.tbmm.gov.tr/d23/1/1-1009.pdf](http://www2.tbmm.gov.tr/d23/1/1-1009.pdf)

## 7. Flow of Christian refugees from Northern Syria

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The conclusion that must be drawn from talks with representatives of various Christian exile organisations<sup>399</sup> is that the Christians in Northern Syria have their bags packed and that even the slightest change in the conditions they face in Northern Syria might prompt them to leave the country.

It is also well known that there has been a steady outflow of Christians from the region. What is striking, however, is that the influx of Christian refugees from Syria – and not just from Northern Syria – into Turkey is still negligible.<sup>400</sup> But that does not mean that the exodus of Christians from Syria – and in particular from Northern Syria – has come to a halt.

However, there are practical reasons which prevent Christians from Northern Syria from leaving the country or encourage them to stay where they are until the overall conditions for migration improve.

- The Syrian-Turkish border has been closed for some time, as a result of which Christian refugees – in contrast to frequent reports in recent years – no longer have any way of entering Turkey from Syria via the existing crossing points.

Nevertheless, Syrian Christians – including those living in Northern Syria – continue to leave the country. Since they cannot enter Turkey, they have no choice but to leave Syria and head for other neighbouring countries.

- Christians from Northern Syria have the theoretical possibility of leaving the country via the crossing point at Semalka<sup>401</sup> near Faysh Khabur<sup>402</sup> and entering Iraq. However, even if they are allowed to enter Iraq, that will not essentially solve their problem because it is almost impossible in practical terms for them to migrate legally from Iraq to a third country, unless they have a visa entitling them to do so and can continue their journey there via the airport at Erbil.

In the past few years, therefore, many Christians from Syria – including from Northern Syria – have first migrated to Lebanon and proceeded from there either legally – for instance under UNHCR relocation programmes – or illegally, e. g. via Turkey, to Europe. As long as this possibility existed, they were prepared to accept the occasionally very high costs<sup>403</sup> and risks<sup>404</sup> involved in travelling into Lebanon. Moreover, Lebanon as the country of first destination had the advantage that they could find refuge for a while in the Christian communities there.

The Turkish-Syrian border is now also closed to Christians.

At the moment there are few options for Christians in Northern Syria to escape even if the conditions they face worsen.

However, the temporary suspension of relocation programmes – including for Christian refugees – by the Trump administration and the EU's refugee policy have made many Christians realise that fleeing to Lebanon with the option of staying there legally or travelling on from there illegally does not seem very promising for the moment at least.

But should the conditions in Northern Syria change at short notice, as they have done so often in recent years, everything that currently prevents Christians in Northern Syria from leaving their homes in large numbers would no longer apply.

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399 In preparing this publication I regularly had conversations with representatives of such groups and organisations.

400 Telephone conversation with Msgr. François Yakan, Chaldean Patriarchal Vicar in Turkey, 21 February 2019

401 Semalka Border Crossing – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semalka\\_Border\\_Crossing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semalka_Border_Crossing)

402 Faysh Khabur – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faysh\\_Khabur](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faysh_Khabur)

403 On the way from Al-Hasakah, for instance, to Lebanon migrants inevitably often had to move from an area under the control of the Syrian regime or a rebel group to an area controlled by a different group. Every time “duties” would have to be paid.

404 Such risks inevitably occur if you are moving around in a country where there is civil war. If you then also frequently move from an area under the control of the Syrian regime or a rebel group into an area controlled by a different group, the risk potential naturally increases.

## 8. Appendix

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### 8.1 Christian militias in Northern Syria<sup>405</sup>

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

#### **A – Christian militias which are part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)**

Sutoro – known originally as the Syriac Security Office<sup>406</sup> – is a police force set up in 2012 by the Syriac Union Party (Suryoye Unity Party)<sup>407</sup>, 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-Qahaniyah (Qabre Khworeh) and Al-Malikiyah (Dayrik)<sup>408</sup> and later on Qamishli<sup>409</sup>. It is active in Jazira Canton in the Federation of Northern Syria – Rojava, above all in Al-Hasakah Governorate, where it draws recruits from among Assyrian and Syrian Christians and works closely with the local general police force (Asayish). The Syriac Union Party is a member of the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change, an alliance of left-wing and Kurdish parties – including the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) –, which opposes the Assad regime. The Sutoro militiamen are trained by the People's Protection Units (YPG) of the Democratic Union Party (PYD). Sutoro is alleged to have over 400 militiamen<sup>410</sup> or, according to other sources, more than 1,000<sup>411</sup>.

The Syriac Military Council (Suryoye Military Council) 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).<sup>412</sup> It pursues the same goals and has the same geographical frame of reference as Sutoro. On 8 January 2014 it formally joined the offensive launched by the People's Protection Units (YPG) against the Islamic State.<sup>413</sup> Kino Gabriel of the Syriac Military Council is currently the spokesman of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).<sup>414</sup>

Bethnahrain Women's Protection Forces (HSNB)<sup>415</sup> – together with the Syriac Military Council (Suryoye Military Council) the Bethnahrain Women's Protection Forces (HSNB) founded in 2015 make up the military arm of the Syriac Union Party (Suryoye Union Party). They are part of the military alliance named Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and are allied with the Sutoro militia, the police force of the Syriac Union Party (Suryoye Union Party). No reliable information is available on the size of the HSNB.<sup>416</sup>

The Khabour Guards (Mawṭḃā d-Nāṭorē d-Ḥābor)<sup>417</sup> – also known as the Khabour Assyrian Council of Guardians<sup>418</sup> – is an Assyrian militia founded in late 2012/early 2013 after the Syrian regime lost control of the majority of Assyrian villages on the River Khabur. The militia's members come from the Assyrian villages along the river; it maintained checkpoints in several of these villages.<sup>419</sup> In 2013 its membership was put at "several hundred"<sup>420</sup>, although in 2017 the numbers were estimated to be no more than 75 to



150<sup>421</sup>. Up to 2015 the militia was associated with the Syriac Union Party. During an incident on 22 April 2015, for which the YPG was blamed, a commander of the Khabour Guards, David Antar Cindo, was murdered and Elias Nasser, another commander, was seriously injured. The Khabour Guards subsequently decided to end their cooperation with the YPG.<sup>422</sup> In an official statement the Khabour Guards announced that as of 8 June 2015 they would no longer be fighting alongside the YPG, would no longer form part of the YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces and no longer wished to be part of a Kurdish plan for the division of Syria.<sup>423</sup> In early 2016 the Khabour Guards – although they were officially neutral and non-partisan – allied themselves with the Assyrian Democratic Party, which is associated with the Assad regime as well as the Assyrian People's Guard – Nattoreh<sup>424</sup>. On 25 February 2017 the Assyrian Democratic Party joined the Syrian Democratic Council<sup>425</sup>. At the same time the YPG handed over responsibility for security along the River Khabur to the Khabour Guardians and Nattoreh, both of which joined the military alliance, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).<sup>426</sup> The Khabour Guards were therefore back where they started.

On 24 September 2018 the Assyrian Democratic Party announced the creation of a united military leadership for the Khabour Guards and the Assyrian People's Guard – Nattoreh, the united force to be known as the Ashur Forces<sup>427, 428</sup>.

The Assyrian People's Guard – Nattoreh<sup>429</sup> (Naṭore d'Tel Tamer Ashoraye) is an Assyrian militia which has its headquarters in Tell Tamer in the Khabur valley and is associated with the Assyrian Democratic Party.<sup>430</sup> Probably founded in 2012, it is said to have had 100 to 200 members in 2017.<sup>431</sup> On 25 February 2017 the Assyrian Democratic Party joined the Syrian Democratic Council.<sup>432</sup> At the same time the YPG handed over responsibility for security along the Khabur River to the Khabour Guards and Nattoreh, both of which joined the military alliance, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The YPG retained a base in Tell Tamer, however.<sup>433</sup> On 24 September 2018 the Assyrian Democratic Party announced the creation of a united military leadership for the Khabour Guards and the Assyrian People's Guard – Nattoreh, the united force to be known as the Ashur<sup>434</sup> Forces.<sup>435</sup>

Ashur forces: see: Khabour guards and Assyrian People's Guard – Nattoreh

### **B – Christian militias allied with the Syrian army**

Sootoro or the Gozarto Protection Force<sup>436</sup> arose out of the Sotoro unit in Qamishli, which in late 2013 broke away from the Sutoro militia founded in 2011. 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<sup>437</sup> and is allied with Bashar Assad's Ba'ath regime.<sup>438</sup> Following an Islamic State attack on the town of Sadad in the Homs Governorate<sup>439</sup>, where Syriac Orthodox Christians live, Gozarto/Sootoro militiamen were transported by the Russian air force from Qamishli to Sadad to provide reinforcements.<sup>440</sup>

Khabour Guards see: A – Christian militias which are part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

Assyrian People's Guard – Nattoreh see: A – Christian militias which are part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

## 8.2 Christian schools in North-East Syria

Unfortunately there is no reliable overview of all the church-run schools in Northern Syria. In the sources different – and therefore often misleading – information is given for the name of one and the same the school, its location (district, street) and the church responsible for running it. The following list, which Mr. Amil Gorgis<sup>441</sup> has kindly compiled, is a great help in this respect.

### Church-run schools in Northern Syria<sup>442</sup>

Town	Name of school	Type of school	Pupils	Church responsible
Al-Hasakah	Al-Amal	PS+SS	500	Syriac Orthodox Church
Al-Hasakah	Al-Muhada	PS+SS	133	Syrian Catholic Church
Al-Hasakah	Al-Luaa	PS	150	Armenian Apostolic Church
Al-Hasakah	Al-Nahdah Al-Arabieh	PS+SS (up to 9 <sup>th</sup> form)	250	Evangelical <sup>443</sup>
Al-Qahtaniah	Al-Amal			Syriac Orthodox Church
Al-Malikiyah/ Dêrik	Al-Dushleh (Tigris)	S		Syriac Orthodox Church
Al-Malikiyah/ Dêrik	Al-Hurria (Freedom)			Armenian Apostolic Church
Qamishli	Al-Amal	KG+PS+SS		Syriac Orthodox Church
Qamishli	Mor Gabriel <sup>444</sup>	S	1,500	Syriac Orthodox Church
Qamishli	Al-Furat	PS	200	Armenian Apostolic Church
Qamishli	Al-Etihad	SS	800	Armenian Apostolic Church
Qamishli	Maysaloon	PS+SS	800	Evangelical <sup>445</sup>
Qamishli	Fares Al-Khoury	PS+SS	800	Apostolic Church of the East
Qamishli	Al-Salam	PS+SS	500	Armenian Catholic Church

KG = Kindergarten, PS = Primary school, SS = Secondary School, S = School

The Syrian non-governmental organisation Syrians for Truth & Justice has issued a report entitled *Autonomous Administration Closes Schools Run by Christians*<sup>446</sup> in which it provides an overview of Christian schools in Northern Syria which were closed at short notice or temporarily as a result of the dispute between the PYD-dominated school authority and the Christian churches over the introduction of new curricula in the region. Wherever possible this overview has been supplemented by additional information from other sources.

**A – Syriac<sup>447</sup> church schools<sup>448</sup> closed**

	Town	Part of the town	Name of school	Type of school	Pupils	Church responsible
1	Qamishli	Al-Gharbi District	Al-Hurria	PS		Syriac Orthodox Church <sup>449</sup>
2	Qamishli	Al-Wusta District	Al-Amal	PS		
3	Qamishli	Al-Quwately Street	Al-Amal	PS+SS		
4	Qamishli	Al-Arbawiya District	Al-Amal	PS		
5	Al-Darbasiyah		Al-Amal	PS		
6	Al-Qahtaniyah		Al-Amal	PS		Syriac Orthodox Church <sup>450</sup>
7	Al-Malikiyah		Dijlah	S		Syriac Orthodox Church <sup>451</sup>
8	Al-Hasakah		Al-Amal	PS+SS	500 <sup>452</sup>	Syriac Orthodox Church <sup>453</sup>
9	Al-Hasakah	Al-Nasrah District	Al-Amal	PS		
10	Al-Hasakah		Al-Muwahadah <sup>454</sup>	PS+SS	133 <sup>455</sup>	Syriac Orthodox Church <sup>456</sup>

PS = Primary school, SS = Secondary School, S = School

**B – Armenian schools closed**

	Town	Name of school	Type of school	Pupils	Church responsible
1	Qamishli	Al-Itihad	PS		
2	Qamishli	Al-Furat	PS	200 <sup>457</sup>	Armenian Apostolic Church <sup>458</sup>
3	Qamishli	Al-Salam	PS+SS		
4	Al-Hasakah	Al-Luaa	PS	150 <sup>459</sup>	
5	Al-Malikiyah/Dêrik	Al-Hurria	S		Armenian Apostolic Church <sup>460</sup>

PS = Primary school, SS = Secondary School, S = School

**C – Protestant schools closed**

	Town	Name of school	Type of school	Pupils	Church responsible
1	Qamishli	Maysaloon	PS+SS	800	Protestant <sup>461</sup>
2	Qamishli	Fares Al-Khoury	PS+SS <sup>462</sup>	800	Apostolic Church of the East <sup>463</sup>

PS = Primary school, SS = Secondary School

It was mentioned earlier that different – and occasionally misleading – information is given in the available sources on church-run schools in Northern Syria. That naturally also applies to the question of whether and which schools were closed at short notice or temporarily in connection with the dispute between the PYD-dominated education authority and the Christian churches over the introduction of new curricula in the region. The report by Syrians for Truth & Justice cited above would appear to clarify matters for the moment. However, it is evident from the media coverage of the school closures that the reports on them were “used” by both parties involved – the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration and the churches as the organisations running the schools – for their own “propaganda” purposes.

Further enquiries in Syria have produced results which do not necessarily help to resolve once and for all the question of whether the present information available on the closure of church-run schools by the PYD-dominated Autonomous Administration really reflects what happened in every instance. To all intents and purposes this information is like a snapshot illustrating the situation after the start of the last school year (September 2018).

#### Church-run schools in Northern Syria – closed/open<sup>464</sup>

Town	Church responsible	Church schools	PS	SS	Curriculum taught	
Qamishli	Syriac Orthodox Church	5	3	2	R	Two primary schools were closed by the Autonomous Administration and immediately re-opened by the Syriac Cultural Association. The secondary schools were never closed.
Qamishli	Protestant	1			R	Two primary schools were closed by the Autonomous Administration and immediately re-opened by the Syriac Cultural Association. The secondary schools were never closed.
Al-Malikiyah/Dêrik	Syriac Orthodox Church	1			R	Never closed.
Al-Hasakah	Syriac Orthodox Church	4	2	2	PS: N SS: R	All schools permanently open.
Al-Hasakah	Syrian Catholic Church	1		1	PR	The school is open.
Al-Hasakah	Apostolic Church of the East	1			PR	The school is not attended by a single Syrian Christian; it is open.
Al-Darbasiyah		1				Closed before the curriculum dispute since there were no longer any Christians in Al-Darbasiyah.

PS = Primary school, SS = Secondary school, R = Regime curriculum,  
N = Autonomous Administration curriculum, PR = No information, presumably regime curriculum

### 8.3 Demography

The gathering and provision of exact and reliable demographic data on individual ethnic and religious groups in the Middle East in general and in Syria in particular has always been and continues to be a challenge.

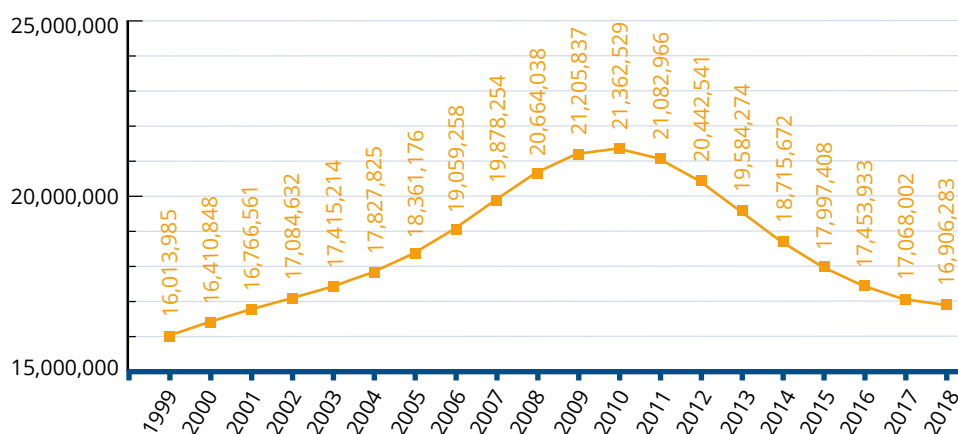
The only reasonably reliable demographic data are those from the 2004 census. As a result of general developments in Syria – the crisis and civil war – there has not only been massive internal displacement, but also a massive exodus into neighbouring states and beyond especially since 2011. That applies to the population as a whole but to the Christians in particular.<sup>465</sup> The results of the 2004 census are therefore of no more than historical significance.

The most reliable way of gathering demographic data in the Middle East in general and in Syria in particular is to ask as many people as possible with access to the relevant information. However, as a rule of thumb it is important to carry out a cross-check – or preferably several cross-checks – of the demographic information supplied, since the figures are frequently interest-driven. In the meantime no church leader will gladly admit to the occasionally massive drop in the numbers of believers, because this would ultimately call his own significance into question, e. g. if a bishop is responsible for no more than 500 or less believers. Complicating matters in the present situation is that, given the huge numbers of emigrants in some cases, it is extremely difficult to keep track and provide figures which are genuinely up to date.

In many instances this publication contains demographic information taken from the sources quoted. The possibility cannot be excluded that there will be discrepancies between these figures and those contained in the tables that follow.

Unless otherwise indicated, the figures in the following tables have been provided by sources known to me personally.

#### 8.3.1 Population development in Syria based on World Bank figures<sup>466</sup>



### 8.3.2 Members of Christian churches in North and North-East Syria (by denomination)

Unless indicated otherwise, the figures in the following tables have been supplied by sources known to me personally.

#### Apostolic Church of the East (Assyrian Church)

	Town <sup>467</sup>	Town (alternative spelling) <sup>468</sup>	Town (different name) <sup>469</sup>	Census 2004 <sup>470</sup>	Before <sup>471</sup>		Current	
					P <sup>472</sup>	F <sup>473</sup>	P <sup>474</sup>	F <sup>475</sup>
1	Tel Tuiel	Tel Tawil <sup>476</sup>	Bani Roumta	669	250	50	11	2
2	Um Waghfa	Um Waqfa			600	120	27	>5
3	Um El-Kef	Um Alkef <sup>477</sup>	Timar	1,072	150	30	21	>4
4	Tel Kefhi	Tel Kepchi <sup>478</sup>	Liwan		200	40	15	3
5	Tel Gumaa	Tel Jumaa <sup>479</sup>	Halmoun	1,260	3,000	600	50	10
6	Tel Ahmar	Tel Ahmar			40	8	0	0
7	Tel Temer	Tel Tamar <sup>480</sup>	Tal Tamr Tal Tamir	7,285	3,000	600	400	80
8	Tel Nessri	Tel Nasri <sup>481</sup>	Waltoo	650	1,000	200	5	1
9	Tel Hefian	Tel Hipyan <sup>482</sup>	Qodchanis	1,132	150	30	1	<1
10	Tel Maghas	Tel Mignas <sup>483</sup>	Gawar	194	150	30	10	2
11	Tel Masas	Tel Misas <sup>484</sup>	Barwar	231	150	30	5	1
12	Tel Jadaya	Tel Jadiya <sup>485</sup>	Gawar	301	75	15	4	1
13	Tel Faydda	Tel Paweda			350	70	14	3
14	Tel Damschiej	Tel Damshesh <sup>486</sup>	Qodchanis	153	50	10	0	0
-		Tel Najm <sup>487</sup>			No info		No info	
15	Tel Gazira	Jazira <sup>488</sup>	Eiel	190	200	40	0	0
16	Tel Baz	Tel Baz <sup>489</sup>	Baz	251	350	70	1	<1
17	Tel Ruman Fukani	Tel Ruman Foqani <sup>490</sup>	Mazra	354	200	49	13	<3
18	Tel Ruman Tahtani	Tel Ruman Tahtani		No info	20	20	0	0
19	Tel Schama	Tel Shama <sup>491</sup>	Gunduktha	162	75	15	1	<1
20	Tel Wardyat	Tel Wardet			20	4	5	1
21	Tel Sekra	Tel Sakra <sup>492</sup>	Kundaknaya	307	200	40	8	<2
22	Tel Breej	Tel Brej <sup>493</sup>	Chal	109	75	15	5	1
23	Tel Arbush	Tel Arbosh <sup>494</sup>	Arboush	229	250	50	0	0
24	Um Gharkan	Um Gargen <sup>495</sup>	Tkhouma	275	250	50	30	6

Town <sup>467</sup>	Town (alternative spelling) <sup>468</sup>	Town (different name) <sup>469</sup>	Census 2004 <sup>470</sup>	Before <sup>471</sup>		Current		
				P <sup>472</sup>	F <sup>473</sup>	P <sup>474</sup>	F <sup>475</sup>	
25	Tel Hermez	Tel Hormizd <sup>496</sup>	Tkhouma	575	700	140	0	0
26	Tel Taal	Tel Tal <sup>497</sup>	Talnaya	314	300	60	16	>3
27	Tel Mchadda	Tel Meghada <sup>498</sup>	Berjnaya	72	50	10	1	<1
28	Tel Kharyta	Kharita <sup>499</sup>	Gesaya	111	150	30	1	<1
29	Tel Baluaa	Tel Baloaa <sup>500</sup>	Dizen	443	200	40	2	<1
30	Qaber Schamyeh	Qabr Shamyā <sup>501</sup>	Dizen	734	150	30	0	0
31	Tel Kuran	Tel Goran <sup>502</sup>	Jilu	183	150	30	0	0
32	Abu Tineh	Abu Tena <sup>503</sup>	Jilu	301	250	50	0	0
33	Tel Telaa	Tel Talaa <sup>504</sup>	Sara	800	100	20	0	0
34	Tel Schmeran	Tel Shamriam <sup>505</sup>	Marbisho	811	350	70	2	<1
35	Tabqa				600	120	0	0
36	Al-Hasakah				5,000	1,000	300	60
37	Qamishli				700	140	40	8
<b>Total</b>					<b>19,505</b>	<b>3,926</b>	<b>988</b>	

*Before:* P = Persons before the start of the Syria crisis; F = Families before the Syria crisis

*Current:* P = Persons current; F = Families current

Town	Families <sup>506</sup>		Persons <sup>507</sup>	
	B	C	B	C

#### Armenian Apostolic Church

Ras Al-Ayn	20	9	100	45
Al-Darbasiyah	3	0	15	0
Qamishli	1,000	400	5,000	2,000
Al-Malikiyah/Dêrik	70	40	350	200
Al-Hasakah	150	110	750	550
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,243</b>	<b>559</b>	<b>6,215</b>	<b>2,795</b>

#### Armenian Catholic Church

Qamishli	250	100	1,250	500
Al-Hasakah	265	250	1,325	1,250
<b>Total</b>	<b>515</b>	<b>350</b>	<b>2,575</b>	<b>1,750</b>

Town	Families <sup>506</sup>		Persons <sup>507</sup>	
	B	C	B	C

#### Chaldean Church

Ras Al-Ayn	7	0	35	0
Qamishli	150	250	750	1,250
Al-Malikiyah/Dêrik	300	160	1,500	800
Chanik (village)	47	22	235	110
Al-Hannawieh	22	0	110	0
Al-Hasakah	250	90	1,250	450
<b>Total</b>	<b>776</b>	<b>522</b>	<b>3,880</b>	<b>2,610</b>

#### Protestant – Unionists

Al-Hasakah	30	12	150	60
Al-Malikiyah/Dêrik	60	30	300	150
Qamishli	25	15	125	75
<b>Total</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>575</b>	<b>285</b>

#### Protestant

Al-Hasakah	50	25	250	125
Al-Malikiyah/Dêrik	70	25	350	125
Qamishli	90	50	450	250
<b>Total</b>	<b>210</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1,050</b>	<b>500</b>

#### Greek Orthodox (Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East)

Rmelan <sup>508</sup>	75–150	12–25	375–750	60–125
Tabqa <sup>509</sup>	up to 300	0	up to 350	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>450</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>2,250</b>	<b>125</b>

#### Syrian Catholic

Al-Hasakah	200	120	1,000	600
Al-Darbasiyah	3	0	15	0
Qamishli	160	124	800	630
Ras Al-Ayn	30	11	150	55
<b>Total</b>	<b>393</b>	<b>255</b>	<b>1,965</b>	<b>1,275</b>



Town	Families <sup>506</sup>		Persons <sup>507</sup>	
	B	C	B	C
<b>Syriac Orthodox</b>				
Al-Thawrah (Tabqa) <sup>510</sup>		5		
Tell Abyad <sup>511</sup>	100	8	500	40
Ras Al-Ayn	144	35	720	175
Al-Darbasiyah	84	27	420	135
Amuda	3-10 <sup>512</sup>	1-6 <sup>513</sup>	15-50	5-30
Qamishli	3,900	2,100	19,500	10,500
Watwatieh (village)	26	5	130	25
Demchiah	15	3	75	15
Qbur-Albid	250	110	1,250	550
Mala Abas (village)	35	5	175	25
Kersheran (village)	15	1	75	5
Shalhumieh (village)	25	0	125	0
Gharduka (village)	40	0	200	0
Mharkan (village)	55	14	275	70
Routan (village)	18	8	90	40
Kerkeshamo (village)	60	0	300	0
Tel Gihan (village)	25	1	125	5
Choella sufla (village)	20	6	100	30
Dregik (village)	7	0	35	0
Qasrok (village) <sup>514</sup>	40	4	200	20
Sleman Sari (village)	25	0	125	0
Al-kalaaa (village)	20	0	100	0
Tasch (village)	35	0	175	0
Tel Tamer (village)	20	0	100	0
Zourafa (village)	5	0	25	0
Tel-Alo (village)	16	3	80	15
Al-Malikiyah/Dêrik	900	420	4,500	2,100
Al-Hasakah	3,500	1,600	17,500	8,000
Al Mayadin	3 <sup>515</sup> -10 <sup>516</sup>	0		
Al-Bukamal/Abu Kamal	3 <sup>517</sup> -10 <sup>518</sup>	0		
Deir ez-Zor <sup>519</sup>	?	0		
<b>Total</b>	<b>9,283</b>	<b>4,343</b>	<b>46,415</b>	<b>21,715</b>

B = Before the Syria crisis (2011), C = Current (2019)

## 8.4 Abbreviations

<b>FSA</b>	Free Syrian Army <sup>520</sup>
<b>HSNB</b>	Bethnahrain Women's Protection Units <sup>521</sup>
<b>IS</b>	Islamic State
<b>ISIS</b>	Islamic State in Iraq and in Syria
<b>PKK</b>	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê = Kurdistan Workers' Party <sup>522</sup>
<b>PYD</b>	Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat = Democratic Union Party <sup>523</sup>
<b>SDF</b>	Syrian Democratic Forces <sup>524</sup>
<b>TEV-DEM</b>	Movement for a Democratic Society <sup>525</sup>
<b>YPG</b>	Yekîneyên Parastina Gel = People's Protection Units <sup>526</sup>
<b>YPJ</b>	Women's Protection Forces <sup>527</sup>

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- 467 The figures are based on a survey recently drawn up by Bishop Aprim Athniel, Bishop of the Assyrian Church of the East (for Syria with its seat in Al-Hasakah). The survey was sent to me by Mr. Amill Gorgis, Berlin, email of 26 March 2019. In a table listing Assyrian settlements in Syria ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Assyrian\\_settlements](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Assyrian_settlements)) mention is made of the town of Tell Fuweidat Jazira ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tell\\_Fuweidat\\_Jazira](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tell_Fuweidat_Jazira)), which is not listed in Bishop Aprim Athniel's survey (column 2).
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- 469 Figures based on those contained in the relevant Wikipedia articles
- 470 Figures taken from the respective Wikipedia articles
- 471 Persons before the start of the Syria crisis
- 472 Persons current
- 473 Families current. This assumption here is that there are five persons per family.
- 474 Persons current
- 475 Families current. This assumption here is that there are five persons per family.
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- 502 Tell Goran – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tell\\_Goran](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tell_Goran)
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- 505 Tell Shamiram – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tell\\_Shamiram](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tell_Shamiram)
- 506 Number of families compiled by members of the Diocesan Council of the Syriac Orthodox Metropolitanate of Jazirah and Euphrates – seat: Al-Hasakah. Supplied by Amiiil Gorgis, email of 28 March 2019
- 507 A family comprises five persons on average.
- 508 Before the Syria crisis Rmelan was home to 150 Greek Orthodox and Syriac Orthodox families, which made up roughly half the population respectively. Twenty-five Greek Orthodox and Syriac Orthodox families still live in Rmelan, making up roughly half the population respectively. Email from Mesut Be Malke, 14 March 2019
- 509 Before the Syria crisis 300 Christian families – mostly Greek Orthodox Christians from Wadi Nasara or Homs plus Assyrian, Syrian Catholic and Syriac Orthodox families – lived in Al Thawra (Tabqa). At present there are only five Syriac Orthodox families still living in Al-Thawra (Tabqa). Email from Mesut Be Malke, 14 March 2019
- 510 Email from Mesut Be Malke, 14 March 2019
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- 512 *Ibid.*
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- 517 Further information on p. 44 under Al-Bukamal/Abu Kamal
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- 526 Yekîneyên Parastina Gel = People’s Protection Units – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People%27s\\_Protection\\_Units](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People%27s_Protection_Units)
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A resolution of the Syria conflict is not in sight, even though the Assad regime now controls over half the country. The IS is considered to be largely defeated. The population has dropped by around 21 percent since 2010 and the Christian share by up to 78 percent. Large parts of North and North-East-Syria are under the autocratic control of the Kurds and the regime is virtually non-existent there. Most Christians dream of a return to the situation before the war and are at odds with the Kurdish administration, which enjoys only minority Christian support. The Christians are currently concerned about the overall framework for the planned security zone in Northern Syria.