

Syria: Freedom of religion or belief

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Introduction

The Syrian civil war has negatively impacted every religious and ethnic community. In areas controlled by Islamist militias, Christians and other religious minorities have suffered particularly poor treatment. They have been forced to flee these areas due to the hostile living conditions created by these militias, leaving these areas 'religiously cleansed'.

Abduction of Christian clergy

The murders and disappearances of notable Christian clergy provided the first clear indications of a campaign targeting Syria's ancient Christian community.

In January 2012 the Reverend Basilious Nasser, a Christian priest from the Greek Orthodox Church, was killed by a sniper in the city of Hama while he was helping a wounded man.

The abduction and murder of Father Fadi Haddad in October 2012 was followed by the abduction of Archbishop Boulos (Paul) Yazigi of the Greek Orthodox Church, Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim of the Syriac Orthodox Church, and Father Paolo Dall'Ogglio, the Italian Jesuit priest, in 2013. Their whereabouts remain unknown. In April 2014 the elderly and respected Dutch priest Frans van der Lugt was murdered. Father Ibrahim Farah, an Orthodox priest in Idlib, was kidnapped by the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda: Al-Noussra Front in 2015. His release was negotiated with the terrorist group and he had to flee to Turkey where he now lives.

Displacement and massacres

As well as these and other abductions, the campaign against the Christian community has included extortion through kidnapping, rape, seizure and destruction of property, forced conversion under threat of death, and murder. It has caused an estimated 650,000 Christians to flee the country, with many others displaced internally. Cities such as Homs and Aleppo, which had been home to large Christian communities, are now left with a fraction of the previous Christian population.

By July 2014 Islamic State (IS, Daesh) was reported to be in control of around 35% of Syria's territory, with other hard-line militants controlling large swathes elsewhere. Shari'a courts had been set up in areas occupied by IS, to enforce conformity with their extreme interpretation of Islam. For example, the Christian community in Raqqa was ordered to pay jizya or dhimmi tax, adopt the Islamic dress code, and worship behind closed doors. In addition, Christians were subjected to harsh living conditions in an effort to compel their conversion.

Raqqa was home to nearly 13,000 Christians before 2014; fewer than 80 remain.

In February 2015 IS abducted at least 253 Assyrian Christians in north-eastern Syria. Twenty-three members of the group were released the following month, after a sum of money was paid on their behalf to a shari'a court. The rest were released over the course of a few months, following negotiations with Christian community leaders. Reports indicate that 52 children, 84 females and 95 males were among the captives in 2015, and that IS had initially demanded USD23 million (USD100,000 for each person) for their release. They were all released after payments were negotiated and made.

In June 2015 fighters from Al-Noussra Front massacred 20 Druze civilians in the countryside of Idlib. On 25 July 2018 IS terrorists conducted a number of suicide attacks on markets and in residential areas in As-Suwayda Governorate, and stormed villages in the region, killing more than 300 people, injuring 298 and abducting 37. The victims included women and children, and in some instances, entire families were wiped out.¹

Syria is still a war zone, even though IS has now lost the territory it once held. There is an urgent need for a credible ceasefire that contributes towards the protection of civilians and towards combating enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions. Components of truth, reconciliation and transitional justice should also be included in any negotiated ceasefire, and this ceasefire must generate measurable improvements in humanitarian access to civilians. This will also assist in re-activating the economy in Syria, which has been severely damaged by years of fighting. Improving local economies would create jobs and encourage the re-integration of fighters into society. This too is a vital part of the process to achieve a sustainable political solution.

¹ CSW, 'Syria: Islamic State targets Druze religious minority', 26 July 2018 www.csw.org.uk/2018/07/26/press/4053/article.htm

Recommendations

- Urge the Syrian government to agree to a nationwide ceasefire that prioritises the protection of civilians, and precludes enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions.
- Encourage the international community to develop robust mechanisms to monitor respect for human rights and humanitarian law in and around ceasefire areas. Components of truth, reconciliation and transitional justice should also be included in the ceasefire process.
- Urge all parties to the conflict, including the Syrian government, to ensure that freedom of religion or belief and the protection of religious and ethnic minorities are prioritised during peace negotiations.
- Urge all parties to the conflict to ensure that any proposed new constitution reflects Syria's heritage of religious and ethnic pluralism, and empowers civil society to promote the concept of a national identity.

As Christians, we stand with everyone facing injustice because of their religion or belief.