

# 'We left Homs because they were trying to kill us. They wanted to kill us because we are Christians'



Clockwise from main: Syrians at St Antoine's Dispensary in Roueissat, Lebanon; Christian and Muslim neighbours at Al Qaa; Archbishop John Darwish; an Iraqi mother and children; refugee 'Boutros' NATALIE NACCACHE

In the war in Syria, Christians have tried to stay neutral. But despite this, many are now facing persecution and death. By **Kim Sengupta** in Al-Qaa, Lebanon

The red Mitsubishi Lancer GT with "go faster" stripes was a source of great pride to Hamlig Bedrosian. It was the only one of its kind in the city, pointed out on the streets as he roared along, an object of admiration and envy among his friends in Aleppo.

The car may have been the reason why the 23-year-old student was ambushed and taken hostage, along with a female friend, as they were travelling to a shopping complex. The revolutionary fighters with Kalashnikovs who led them away subjected Mr Bedrosian – blindfolded and tied up – to savage beatings and threats of execution before the pair was finally freed in exchange for a ransom.

Or there may have been a different reason for the attack: they were targeted by the Sunni Muslim rebels because they were Christians. Mr Bedrosian did not wait long to find

out, leaving – along with his brother – for Lebanon. Others from the Syrian Armenian community followed, abandoning their homes.

The Haddad family had no doubts about why they had to escape from Homs. "We left because they were trying to kill us," said 18-year-old Noura Haddad. She is now staying with relations in the town of Zahle in the Bekaa Valley. "They wanted to kill us because we were Christians. They were calling us Kafirs, even little children saying these things. Those who were our neighbours turned against us."

"At the end, when we ran away, we went through balconies. We did not even dare go out on the street in front of our house. I've kept in touch with the few Christian friends left back home, but I cannot speak to my Muslim friends any more. I feel very sorry about that."

Mr Bedrosian and Ms Haddad are among thousands who have left Syria

as the 20 month-long civil war gets increasingly vicious and increasingly sectarian. The prospect of reconciliation between the Alawites, from which the ruling elite are drawn, and the overwhelmingly Sunni opposition, gets more remote by the day after each round of strife. But now it is the Christians, who have largely sought to remain neutral, who are on the receiving end of abuse and attacks. For many, the choice now is between leaving the country or risking an uncertain and hazardous future.

Some in the Church are adamant about who is to blame – not just those carrying out the persecution, but those who are encouraging it to happen. For Archbishop Issam John Darwish of Furrzol, Zahle and the Bekaa, the responsibility for the attacks lay with "an influx of jihadists in the rebels in the last six, seven months". There is for him, as in so many such situations in the Middle East, the spectre of a "hid-

den hand". "I think the situation is being manipulated by the USA and maybe Israel – they want this to happen," he insisted.

The Archbishop and others like him feel there is a lack of understanding in Europe about what Christians in the area are going through. Speaking at his diocese, he continued: "I have raised this with officials in the West, they must bring peace. The jihadists will not stop here, the war will spread to Europe. What will England be like in ten or 15 years?"

Fear continues to grow. The recent bombing in Beirut was probably the work of the Syrian regime aiming to kill Brigadier General Wissam al-Hassan, the head of Lebanon's domestic intelligence. A blast in Damascus the following day killing 13 people was targeted at a police station. But both took place in Christian areas of the respective cities and this has added to the trepidation in the community in both Syria and Lebanon, as has the recent inroads made into Christian parts of Aleppo by rebel fighters.

There are now busy campaigns to publicise the plight of the Christians, with a nun from the Homs area being one of its most prominent faces.

Mother Agnes-Mariam de la Croix's Greek-Melkite monastery of St James the Mutilated was blown up a few months ago. The culprits, she says, are Islamists, who tried to blame the regime for the destruction.

Mother Agnes-Mariam, who is of Palestinian and Lebanese descent, is on an international tour and is due to visit Britain. She believes that opposition fighters have driven out 80,000 Christians from the Homs region alone and that she escaped after being warned that she was the target of abduction. "Aggressive, armed gangs that wished to paralyse community life, abducting people, beheading, bringing terror even to schools," she said, maintaining that many of them are affiliated to "al-Qa'ida and with Muslim Brotherhood backgrounds".

Only one in 20 are Syrians, the rest come from a wide array of states, from Britain to Pakistan, Chechnya to North Africa, she says. Many are veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, and now "their cause is being recycled to kill Syrians".

Mother Agnes-Mariam has witnessed the plight of the Syrians first hand, but some of her assertions are open to dispute. In five trips into Syria with rebels, I did not once find large



Aleppo after we were captured [in the Anadan district]. I was being beaten with rifle butts, punched and kicked. None of the men holding us were foreigners, they were all Syrians and it was one of them who was really violent. They accused me of fighting for the regime, but I told them I was a Syrian Armenian – we didn't want to fight either side. I also told them that I had taken part in marches at university. But they said I would be killed unless money was paid for the girl and myself."

The kidnapers called Mr Bedrosian's parents and got through to his mother's mobile phone – which had as a ringtone a song in praise of Bashar al-Assad: the regime receives, in general, more support in the older generation. That got him another beating, but the ransom was delivered by his father, bargained down to \$12,000, and the couple were freed. The kidnapers kept the car. The first thing Mr Bedrosian did on returning home was to change his mother's ringtone.

Two months ago, Aleppo's 14th century covered market was burnt down. The regime and the rebels blamed each other while the Souk al-Medina, one of the finest examples of its kind in the Middle East, lay in ruins. Jirary Terzian, a jewellery trader, was one of dozens who lost their store that day. He is now in Beirut with his Syrian Armenian family; they locked-up

**'The West must bring peace. The jihadists will not stop here – the war will spread to Europe'**

home is in one of the Christian neighbourhoods overrun last week by revolutionary fighters. "The business was started by my grandfather 60 years ago and I hoped my children would take it over after me" he said.

"The history of my family is in Aleppo and we did not like leaving. I think both sides are at fault in what is happening. Our country is being destroyed. The fact is we can only go back if Assad wins. I don't like saying this, we don't want the regime to stay as it is, but we will be safer under them."

Another Christian refugee, who wants to be known as Boutros, says he knows what happens when the revolutionaries take over. At his home town, Qusayr, the rebels were, he acknowledges, local Sunnis, not foreigners. "But they told us we must fight with them against the government. When we refused they began to threaten and insult us. They started killing Christians. Mathew Kasouha was the first they killed. He was a good man."

Local Christians took up arms after a while, said Boutros, and in March there was a "showdown". More Christians were killed and he fled to Lebanon. Two months ago at Al-Bab, a satellite town of Aleppo, I was discussing what lay in store for Syria when the bloodletting ends with a group of young activists, all Muslims but committed to democracy with the Alawites and Christians playing their parts. But they were also aware of just how difficult that was going to be to achieve. One of them, Bari, who was later shot but survived in Aleppo, said: "It is not just the fighting and the destruction, but the division between different groups that is such a big problem. We're convinced it is the regime that's responsible for creating this, but the damage has been done. I don't know if people from different communities will ever trust each other again."



## Kurds to limit clashes with Syrian rebels

By **LOVEDAY MORRIS**  
in Beirut

The leader of a Kurdish faction embroiled in clashes with Syrian rebels has vowed to stem escalating aggression, as fighting between Arabs and Kurds raises the spectre of a new front in the conflict.

Kurdish representatives yesterday remained locked in negotiations with elements of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) after clashes in northern Syria which killed dozens and sparked mass kidnappings. Around 50 Kurdish hostages are still said to be being held by a rebel brigade.

"We will defend ourselves, we will defend our people" said Saleh Muslim Mohammed, the head of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) which is fighting a separatist guerrilla war in Turkey.

"There are parts of the Free Syrian Army who seem to be working for Turkey and have a strategy to hurt the Kurds." Meanwhile, US Secretary

of State Hillary Clinton yesterday confirmed Washington's plans to restructure Syria's opposition. She expressed the need to move beyond the existing make-up of the Syrian National Council, to bring those "fighting and dying today to obtain their freedom" into the fold.

The clashes between the opposition and Kurds heighten concern that the fight will increasingly become a proxy war along ethnic and sectarian lines. Turkey has expressed concern that the PYD has seized control over Syria's Kurdish areas, raising the risk of Ankara stepping up involvement if Kurds – who so far have largely stood back from the conflict – become increasingly embroiled.

The fighting first erupted a week ago when FSA members entered Aleppo's Kurdish area of Ashrafiya. The following day thousands of residents took to the streets calling for them to leave. Mr Mohammed claims 10 civilians were killed by FSA gunmen. "There was no other way, so our forces attacked them and killed 19 of them," he said.

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