

# SYRIA

CHURCH ON ITS KNEES

DIE OR LEAVE



**Open Doors**

Serving persecuted Christians worldwide

ADVOCACY REPORT

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*Report written in May 2013 by Stephen Rand, Advocacy Director, Open Doors UK & I: based on detailed work done by the Open Doors International Research Department (particularly in the June 2013 report 'The Vulnerability of Christians in Syria') and in conjunction with the Middle East field team.*

Open Doors is an international NGO serving persecuted Christians and churches worldwide by supplying Bibles, leadership training, literacy programmes, livelihood support and advocacy services. In 2010 it collected 428,000 signatures from over 70 countries for a *Right to Believe* petition in support of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

# SYRIA: THE CHURCH ON ITS KNEES

The crisis began with hope. Hope that the aspirations of the Arab Spring would impact Syria and see peaceful protest yield positive results for the whole of Syrian society. Hope that the President would respond constructively. Hope that there would be greater freedom and dignity.

Two years later there is a devastating crisis. An increasingly bloody civil war is becoming a sectarian battleground. There are more weapons, and an escalating level of weaponry – shelling, aerial bombardment, missiles, and accusations of chemical warfare.

*“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.”*

2 Corinthians 4:8-9

The whole country is paying a heavy price. The damage is estimated at £50 billion.<sup>1</sup> The human cost is staggering: over 93,000 dead, 6.8 million people in need, 4.3 million people internally displaced and an additional 1.6 million seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. Over half of these are children, the majority under 11.<sup>2</sup> And the stability of Syrian society is shattered.

There is little sign of an early end to violence. With international support for both sides but no sign of willingness for decisive intervention, it is hard to see an immediate political or a military solution. And when the fighting eventually stops, there will be a long and hard road to recovery.

This report focuses on the Christian community in Syria. We recognise that the whole nation is experiencing this crisis, and our concern is that the whole of Syria should know peace, freedom and dignity.

But Open Doors is an organisation committed to strengthening the church in the face of persecution. We are faced with significant evidence that Syrian Christians are suffering disproportionately and in many cases being targeted because they are Christians.

Samir Nassar, the Maronite Catholic Archbishop of Damascus, has stated that the country's Christians will have to 'choose between two bitter chalices: die or leave.'<sup>3</sup>

**Thus we believe it is right to present this evidence and call on all those with the power to influence the situation to act now to protect the lives, livelihoods and freedoms of *all* the people of Syria – and give particular attention to the Christian community, as a minority facing specific vulnerabilities.**

Whether the situation changes rapidly or slowly, with greater clarity or deeper complexity, there is no doubt that this vulnerability and the reality of suffering will remain long into the future.

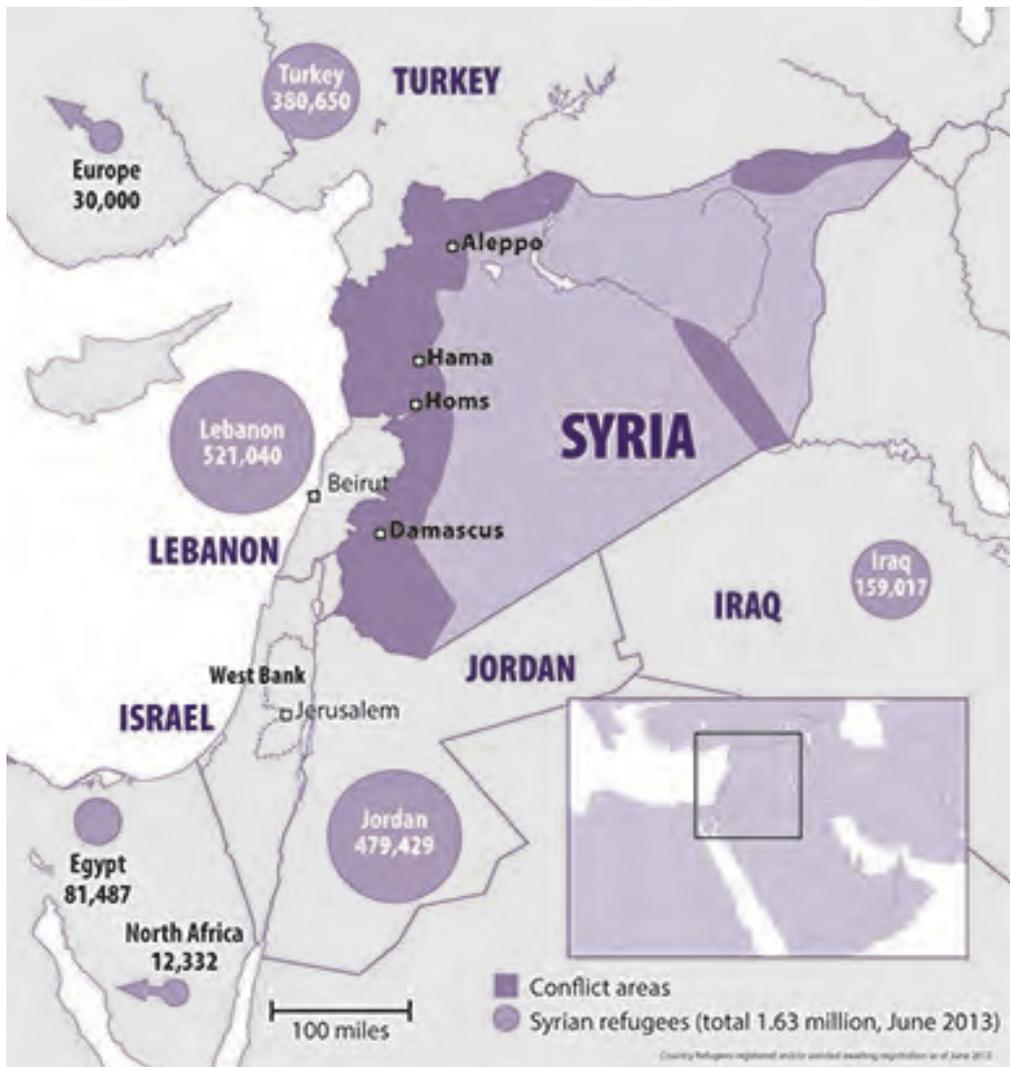
But we believe that in the darkest hours there is still hope. The church in Syria may face the possibility of almost complete destruction, but Syrian Christians do not see themselves as victims. Many are doing more than simply holding on; they are working for the well-being of the community in the face of overwhelming odds.

They can echo, loudly, the words of Paul: “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.”<sup>4</sup>

They deserve our support: in Christian terms, our fellowship. They are showing us what it means to be on our knees in prayer, on our feet in action.

# SYRIA: JUNE 2013

# JUNE 2013



# SYRIA: FROM CRISIS TO CATASTROPHE

March 2011: it started with protest. As the heady aroma of the positive possibilities of people power swirled around the Arab World, it was not surprising that when a group of young people were arrested for painting anti-government graffiti on the walls, people took to the streets.

But Assad was not ready to give way. His army was ordered to open fire on the demonstrators and as the deaths mounted peaceful protest became armed opposition. Tanks rolled in to key towns, opposition groups were besieged and whole neighbourhoods reduced to rubble.

Opposition forces, made up of defected soldiers, civilian volunteers, a range of militias and some extremist groups (from inside and outside Syria), gradually became more organised and more cohesive, encouraged by increasing support and recognition from outside Syria as evidence and rumours of Assad's brutality grew.

The formation of the opposition Free Syrian Army, now numbering at least 40,000, was announced in June 2011. Its stated aim was the removal of Assad as President, and it insists that the conflict is not sectarian. It supports the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, created in November 2012. Yet many still believe that the FSA is no more than a very loose and incoherent coalition of armed groups.<sup>5</sup>

By mid-July 2012, fighting had spread across the country. Acknowledging this, the International Committee of the Red Cross declared the conflict a civil war. There was increasing evidence of massacres, accusations of the use of chemical weapons. It was not uncommon for each side to claim the other had manufactured the outrages to discredit the other.

The fighting continues as the international community struggles to find any agreed basis for ending the conflict. There are hopes that the Geneva 2 conference,

proposed by Russia and the USA initially to be held in June 2013, might offer the beginnings of a framework for peace. But the European Union's lifting of its arms embargo and the determination of Assad to hold on to power are seen as major barriers to real progress.

## A potentially international catastrophe

Other countries have been increasingly drawn into the conflict, and tension is inevitably running high in the region. The shooting down of a Turkish fighter plane in June 2012 and the massive car bomb attack in southern Turkey in May 2013 have reinforced tensions between Turkey and Syria.

Israel's bombing raid on Syria in May 2013 provoked further fears of regional escalation, despite Israel emphasising that the aim was to prevent weapons reaching Hezbollah in Lebanon rather than further destabilise the Syrian government.

The conflict is clearly already leaking into Lebanon in a way that makes many fear for the future stability of the country. The sectarian wounds from a 15-year civil war that ended in 1990 are far from healed. Syria maintained a 29-year military presence in Lebanon until it was forced to withdraw its troops under international pressure in 2005. Syrian rebels have stated that they would 'move the battle into Lebanon' if Hezbollah's backing for the government offensive continues.<sup>6</sup>

One writer recently concluded, "Whether the current events are a preamble to the war dragging full scale into Lebanon, or instead represent inevitable turbulence caused by the nearby fighting, there is little question that the border region has become a more dangerous place than at any time in recent memory."<sup>7</sup>

**What began as a political protest is developing more and more into a major sectarian conflict, which has already had devastating consequences and risks becoming a regional and international conflagration.**

“Any Western  
intervention in Syria  
would likely supply  
the death warrant  
for the ancient  
Christianity of the  
Middle East.”

Philip Jenkins, Emeritus Professor  
of Humanities, Pennsylvania  
State University<sup>8</sup>



Photo: Yazan Homsi

# TAKING SIDES

There is a deep chasm that has frustrated all efforts to reach an international consensus on how best to respond to this human and political catastrophe.

The fault lines are shaped by the Sunni/Shia, Saudi Arabia/Iran rivalry. Syria was the sole long-term Middle Eastern ally of Iran; the governments of China, Iran and Russia have continued to support the Syrian government diplomatically and with financial and military support, largely to protect their own strategic interests.

At the same time, armed opposition groups in Syria have received financial and military support from Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. They have been bolstered by non-Syrian jihadis, Islamic extremists, seeing an opportunity to exploit the instability and establish a Sunni Islamic state. France, the United Kingdom

and the US have currently pledged non-lethal aid to moderate opposition groups. France and the UK helped ensure that the European Union agreed to end its arms embargo in August 2013.

In 2011, the Arab League suspended Syria's membership; in March 2013, they granted the representation of Syria to the opposition Syrian National Coalition and acknowledged the right of the member countries to provide it with all means of self-defence.

Saudi Arabia and Turkey are willing to arm the opposition to ensure the defeat of Assad; Hezbollah, based in Lebanon, backed by Iran, is increasingly offering support to Assad by attacking opposition militias in Syria.

## SYRIA: A REFUGE

As refugees pour out of Syria in their thousands, it is worth noting that for a hundred years the country has been a reliable refuge for the Christians of the Middle East. Syrians have welcomed Armenians escaping the Young Turk genocide of 1915; Palestinians, both Christian and Muslim, driven out in 1948; Orthodox Christians and Maronites fleeing sectarian violence in Lebanon during the 1970s and 80s.

And, most recently, it has been a refuge for Iraqis: an estimated 2 million entered Syria between 2006 and 2009; the most recent Syrian government figure is that 480,000 still remain. They are caught between a rock and a hard place: violence in Syria has led to 70,000 Iraqis returning to Iraq in recent months, while violence in Iraq prompted 41,000 to travel in the opposite direction in the same period.<sup>9</sup>



# THE CHURCH IN SYRIA: A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE AND SURVIVAL

The church in Syria is rooted in the very origins of Christianity. Jesus came here from Galilee, teaching and healing, so that 'News about him spread all over Syria.'<sup>10</sup> It was in Antioch – then capital of the Roman province of Syria – that followers of Jesus were first called Christians.<sup>11</sup> The Apostle Paul was converted on the road to Damascus, as he travelled intent on rooting out all trace of Christianity.<sup>12</sup>

From that point Ancient Syria was a heartland of Christianity for 700 years, home to great saints, martyrs, controversy and conflict.

By the 8th century virtually the whole population were Christians, though under the Islamic Caliphate. In 855, an increase in taxation prompted a revolt by Christians in Homs: its suppression was brutal, its leaders crucified at the city gates and churches burned down. The Crusades brought further Christian-Muslim conflict to Syria. By 1350 there were just 100,000 Christians, 10 per cent of the population.

Then Syria became part of the Ottoman Empire and outbreaks of violence continued – with the European powers backing opposing sides for their own purposes. Massacres were not unknown under this regime – for example, in 1915, slaughter in Turkey caused thousands of Armenians to flee into Syria.

In 1918 Arab forces, backed by the British, ended 400 years of Ottoman rule. This led to France taking control until 1946. There followed a brief period of civilian rule, ended by the Syrian Army, with Hafez al-Assad eventually confirmed as President in 1971; he was succeeded by his son, Bashar al-Assad, in 2000.

So for fifty years, until the current crisis, the stability of Syria depended on the dictatorship of a highly structured one-party system closely tied to the armed forces and the intelligence services. The Ba'ath Party, an Arab ultra-nationalist movement originally co-founded by a Syrian Christian, is committed to secular government – in 1973, when Assad dropped the constitutional requirement that the president must be a Muslim, the army had to suppress the rioting that followed – and has relied on religious minorities to maintain its power in a country that is about 74 per cent Sunni Muslim.

Those same minorities, therefore, have had a powerful vested interest in supporting the Ba'ath Party and President Assad. The Assads are Alawites (a branch of Shia Islam) and in the 1990s five of the President's seven closest advisers were Christians. The Muslim Brotherhood has been the main political expression of the Sunni Muslims: their revolt in Hama in 1982 was brutally suppressed by the government, killing as many as 25,000 people.

**The current crisis, tragically, is the expression of political realities and sectarian tensions rooted in a turbulent and violent history.**

“My people are hurting. I can cry like Nehemiah because the walls of our cities are burnt and the people in great trouble and disgrace. I can weep like Jeremiah because of the intensity and the spread of evil. I can mourn like David because of the indiscriminate brutal killing of innocent people, children, women, elderly, youth subject to shelling or under the rubble of their homes.”

A Syrian pastor  
September 2012



# THE CHURCH IN SYRIA: BEFORE THE CRISIS

Most of Syria's Christian population belong to a number of historic Catholic or Orthodox churches. The country's largest Christian denomination is the Greek Orthodox Church with approximately 500,000 members, followed by the Armenian Orthodox Church with 110,000-160,000 members, and the Syriac Orthodox Church with approximately 90,000 members. There are many more denominations; a small percentage of the Christian community belong to evangelical Christian churches.

With the exception of the Armenians and Assyrian/Syriacs, most Syrian Christians are Arameans, but their language is Arabic and they are part of the 'Arab World'. They largely live in the towns, particularly Aleppo, Homs and Damascus.

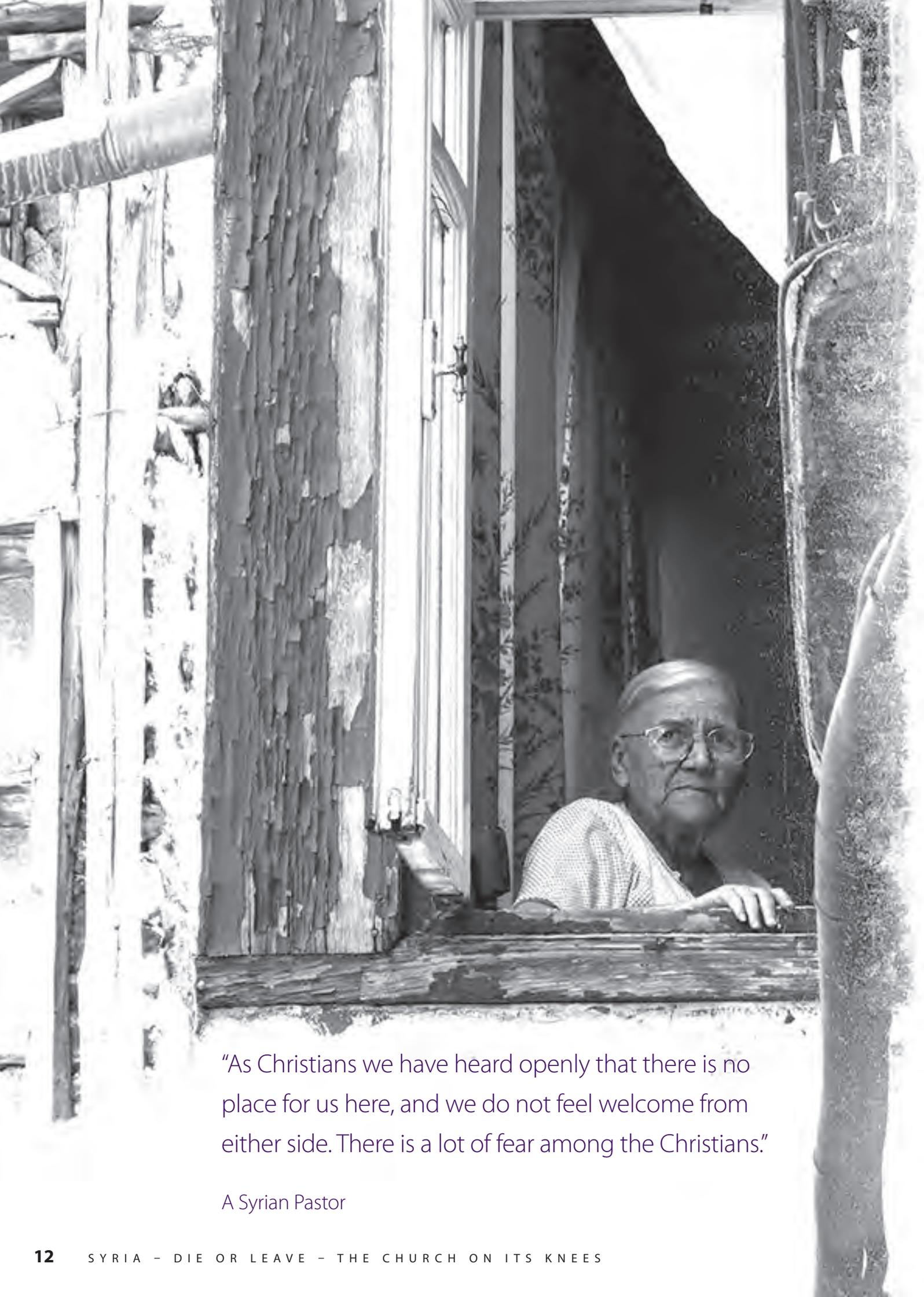
They are also proportionately better-represented among the higher-educated and higher-income parts of Syrian society, and have been significant participants in economic and political life. There are Christians who are officers in the Syrian Army – which is organised on a non-sectarian basis.

Before the crisis Christians were tolerated as a respected minority and had freedom of worship – though every Christian meeting was monitored by the secret police, and most denominations were unwilling to take the political and religious risk of openly engaging in evangelism, often formally agreeing not to evangelise among the Muslim population.

Nevertheless there is a small number of those from a Muslim background who have chosen to follow Christ. In the past they faced a strong reaction from family and friends: now they are under threat from extremist opposition groups, though pressure from the government has diminished where it has lost control.

“ We decided to adopt the motto of a Lebanese pastor who lived through the heat of the civil war in his country: ‘Our loyalty is to Christ, our submission is to the laws of the land, and our love is to all.’ ”

A Syrian pastor  
September 2012



“As Christians we have heard openly that there is no place for us here, and we do not feel welcome from either side. There is a lot of fear among the Christians.”

A Syrian Pastor

# THE CHURCH IN SYRIA: VULNERABLE, TARGETED

The whole Syrian population is clearly vulnerable in a number of ways: physically, emotionally, economically and environmentally. But as the momentum from protest to civil war to regional sectarian conflict grows, so the evidence grows that the Christian community in Syria is particularly vulnerable and, increasingly, specifically targeted.

Environmental security was already an issue before 2011; the civil war has dramatically increased this for the whole population, with high levels of resource depletion, pollution and environmental degradation. One expert notes that, "urban devastation has destroyed water and sanitation systems in most cities other than central Damascus. This is having a ripple effect on health and nutritional status of the population."<sup>13</sup>

*A pastor from Aleppo reported that prices are getting higher and higher. "We are in a very tough situation and we don't know where we are heading. But thank God, after one week without running water, we just have water again. Having water is a luxury these days."*<sup>14</sup>

There is also increased economic vulnerability: inflation has caused a huge depreciation of the Syrian Pound; many factories and businesses have closed or been destroyed. It could be argued that the Christian community have been particularly impacted simply as a result of their significant stake in the Syrian economy.

## Victims of kidnapping

Christians feel particularly vulnerable to the threat of kidnapping for ransom that has become all too common an occurrence. Many are convinced that their community is targeted simply because of their religious identity; others suspect that it is the Christians' reputation for being wealthy that is to blame.

"The absence of the rule of law causes Christians to be one of the least, if not the least, protected minority in Syria," says Abdulmesih BarAbraham of the Yoken-bar-Yoken Foundation, referring to the numerous abductions

of Christians in all regions in Syria to extort money. "Local criminals have taken advantage of the chaotic situation and executed violence against Christians."<sup>15</sup>

Rima Tüzün, Head of Foreign Affairs, European Syriac Union, suggests that there is another factor to take into account: "Hundreds of Christian people were kidnapped by several parties... [They] have no political or military power capable of protecting them."<sup>16</sup>

## Christians targeted?

There is a similar discussion within the Christian community as to whether Christians are being generally targeted because of their faith. When journalist Nuri Kino interviewed refugees in Lebanon, many were convinced that the opposition had been taken over by Islamist extremists determined to create an Islamic state.<sup>17</sup>

He reports one woman saying, "My son and my husband were both viciously killed, shot in the head by terrorists, Islamists." When he asked her if they had a quarrel with anyone in their home town, she replied, "Our only crime is being Christians."

This prompted another refugee to interrupt: "In certain parts of Syria a Christian can no longer report injustices or crimes. We are hostages of the growing Islamism while the rest of the world either watches on or turns the other cheek. Just being Christian is enough to be a target."

Clearly the situation is complex. Many Islamists will hold to the widespread belief that Christians are allied to the Assad regime. And when Christians report hearing cries of 'Christians to Beirut and Alawites to the grave!' it is difficult to distinguish between the religious and political content of this slogan.<sup>18</sup>

An Open Doors field worker says: "The opposition is seeing minorities that did not take their side, even if they were not taking the side of the regime either, as traitors. Christians, in general, fall under this category, and thus they have become a target."

But other Christians want to hold on to the pre-crisis reality of a relatively stable and integrated community, and thus emphasise the extent to which suffering is being shared by the whole Syrian nation, regardless of identity.

They will highlight that when al-Qaida in Iraq announced that the Jabhat al-Nusra Front, a powerful Islamist anti-Assad group, was its representative in Syria, one of the most influential opposition activist groups, the Local Coordination Committees, responded by strongly repudiating its call for an Islamic state in Syria.

They continued: "The Syrian revolution was set out in order to achieve freedom, justice and a civil, democratic, pluralistic state... the future Syria that we seek is a Syrian Republic and civil state owned by the Syrians as one people. Its members are equal in rights and duties according to the principle of citizenship, and no one of them will gain a privilege or have his rights detracted because of his religious or sectarian or ethnic origin... as Syria is a state for all its citizens."<sup>19</sup>

Dr George F Sabra of the Near East School of Theology suggests there are two Middle Eastern Christian responses to Islam: the Arab Christian is anxious to avoid estrangement from Islam at all costs, while the Eastern Christian wants to save Middle Eastern Christianity at all costs.<sup>20</sup> Both these attitudes are reflected in the answers to the question of whether Christians are being targeted in Syria.

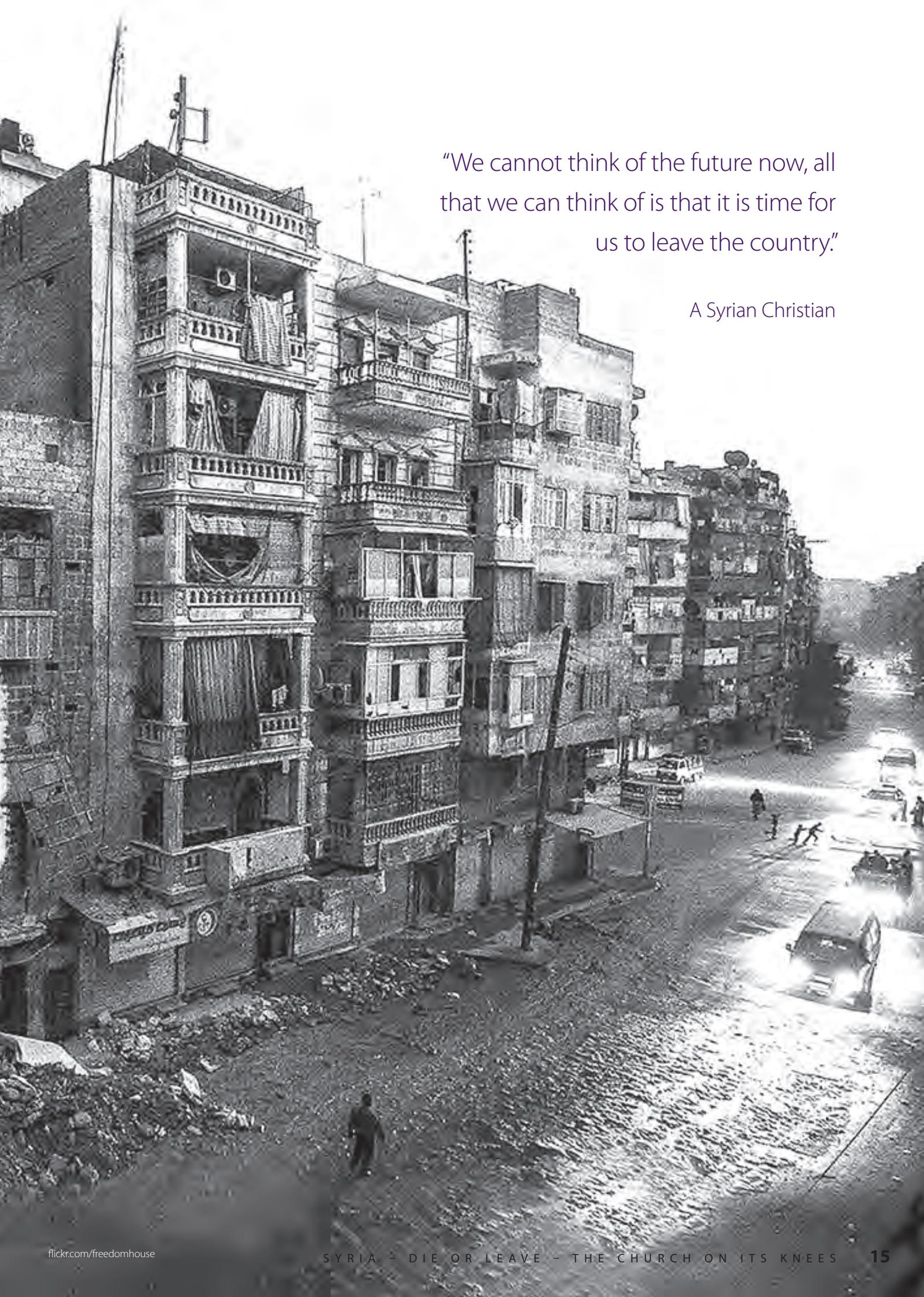
**The indications are that as the conflict has become more sectarian in character, there are increasing signs of Christians being targeted by both sides, and for both political and religious reasons.**

**“The future Syria that we seek is a Syrian Republic and civil state owned by the Syrians as one people ... a state for all its citizens.”**

The opposition Local Coordinating Committees

*Yasmin told me that they had rain and thunder in Damascus. Then she continued with a small laugh, "It's raining and thundering not just what God is sending us..." Music, she calls the sound of bombings, attacks, gun shots and cannons. "We wake up with this sound of music, live with it during the day and go to sleep with it."*

*Yasmin spoke about shelling near her school. "All the windows broke, but I wasn't hit by the glass. While many students were running around crying, I and a friend of mine were not afraid. We felt the peace of Jesus fall on our lives."*



“We cannot think of the future now, all that we can think of is that it is time for us to leave the country.”

A Syrian Christian

## The pressure to leave

One church leader reports, "There are areas where Christians have been intentionally displaced. And once the Christians have left they have destroyed their homes, their churches and everything; this is a clear message that you are not welcome to come back again.

"In one instance," he continues, "there was a half Christian, half Muslim town, with around 7,000 Christian families there. And from the minarets they told the Christians to leave, otherwise they would be slaughtered one by one."<sup>21</sup>

Thus many leave the country. Others become internally displaced. And with every incident and every month that passes, it becomes harder for them to envisage returning home.

The same church leader quotes a recent conversation: "Pastor, do you think after all that has taken place, we can ever go back to the homes we have left? If our homes were not destroyed and burned down, the reality is that there is hatred in our hearts towards them and I don't think we can ever go back there and live as normal! I asked them, 'What do you have in mind for the future?' They said, 'We cannot think of the future now, all that we can think of is that it is time for us to leave the country.'"

## The pressure to take sides

Undoubtedly a majority of the Christian community have maintained tacit support for the Syrian government. But it is also true that Christian communities participated in the initial political demonstrations against the al-Assad government, hoping for greater political freedom and social rights, and several leading opposition members are Christians, including the President of the Syrian National Coalition, and prominent dissidents such as Michel Kilo.

Kilo established a Syrian exile opposition group called 'Syrian Christians for Justice and Freedom', with its stated goal to establish strong relations between the Syrian Christian community and the Sunni Muslim majority.

But many Christians want to stay outside the conflict; they have no wish to take sides. The result is that they find themselves trapped in the middle. Brother Said, pastor of a Syrian evangelical church in Rotterdam says, "The situation of the Christians is very tragic. They are stuck between two evils, between two fires."<sup>22</sup>

Certainly as the fighting has intensified and the bitterness increased, it has become much harder to remain neutral. This adds to the pressure to become a refugee.

**“ The situation of the Christians is very tragic. They are stuck between two evils, between two fires. ”**

Brother Said, pastor of a Syrian evangelical church in Rotterdam

*"Bombings, missiles, shelling, attacks are happening all over the country," Salma says. "Pain and suffering are seen daily, but the church is keeping its hope in Jesus."*

## The pressure to take up arms

A personal testimony from former Assyrian soldiers collected by Nuri Kino says, "We Christians are stuck between the three big combatants – the Syrian Army, the Free Syrian Army and the Salafists. The two latter want to evacuate Syria of Christians and permit us to cross the borders. None of us want to be part of a war. We don't want to fight or kill."<sup>23</sup>

This is a view echoed by many in the Christian community. They are convinced that their refusal to fight is a major factor in their vulnerability. But it would be misleading to pretend it is a universal reality. Christians had – and still have – significant roles in the Syrian Army.

Syrian Christians have also joined pro-Assad *shabiha* militias, or have mobilised local Popular Committees to allow Syrian military forces to engage the armed opposition in the most fiercely contested front-line areas of the country. The government is said to be trying to integrate these Popular Committees into a larger 'National Defence Army', (NDA) reportedly trained with the assistance of the Iranian Quds Force and Hezbollah.<sup>24</sup>

The Free Syrian Army also includes some units composed entirely of anti-Assad Christian militants, most famously the 'Partisans of God Brigades'. They are based in and around Damascus and call for a united Syria that is without sectarianism and is free from the rule of the Assad government.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, the attempt to remain outside the conflict, or take a non-violent stand as a matter of principle, is challenged by the increasing pressure if not to join either side in attacking the other, to at least defend one's own community. The Christian community in Syria is increasingly being forced to choose between abandoning their homes or fighting for survival – and fighting for survival almost inevitably means taking sides.

“ None of us want to be part of a war. We don't want to fight or kill. ”

A Christian ex-member of the Syrian Army

*One Sunday there was a bomb attack in a Christian neighbourhood in the old city of Damascus. Thirteen people died and over seventy were injured. The explosion came just after the morning service in one nearby church. The pastor reported that many of his congregation still came back for the evening service.*

# REFUGEES

Reports of interviews with Christians who have become refugees in Lebanon suggest that most have fled from opposition forces, fearful of what they see as a sectarian anti-Christian agenda.

A pastor from Tartus says, "Christians are considered enemies by the opposition forces and are therefore attacked or driven out. We feel a prevalent fear. At some places we feel unwelcome, so we migrate."<sup>26</sup>

A bishop in Lebanon summed it up: "The circumstances vary with each refugee, but they all fear for Islamists. And all of them are able to testify to reprisals and kidnapping."<sup>27</sup>

This view is held very strongly by the Assyrian International News Agency (AINA): "Assyrians and other Christians in Syria have been disproportionately affected by the war, and have been targeted by the Muslims rebels. The Muslim Jihadists have kidnapped Assyrians for ransom, attacked places of worship and created a climate of fear, forcing many Assyrians to abandon their homes and villages and seek safety in Turkey."<sup>28</sup>

Marcus\* fled to Lebanon with his wife, son (20) and two daughters (15, 24). "The possibility to live ceased to exist," he explains. "The last ten days we had no water, no electricity, no telephone, nothing. We didn't have shelling and shooting, but there was some kind of economic siege of our city. We had some bombs exploding in our city. But the main reason to leave was because of the lack of everything and the main concern of being kidnapped."<sup>29</sup>

Some have stories of being deliberately forced from their homes. AINA quotes the case of Suad Malki as a 'typical example'. In July 2011 her husband, Dr Staefo Malki, was sitting in his car, in Hassaka, when two Muslim men approached and told him to remove the crucifix from his car. He refused and they shot him. Dr Malki died later in hospital. His grief-stricken wife then received a telephone call saying that they would kill her three sons if they did not leave.<sup>30</sup>

But if and when they leave, there are two distinct attitudes among the refugees. Some intend to reach Europe or North America and settle there; this group have emotionally and practically turned their back on Syria. Others are convinced that they have come over the border to wait for a new stability to be established that will allow them to return home.

Marcus says, "I see our leaving as temporary, but it will take much time to get a better situation in our country. I believe most Christians have the same feeling." He will return when "there is peace and a government installed that respects all minorities. Then Syria is the greatest country to live in for everyone, also for us Christians. But if the radicals will take over power there is no place for Christians in Syria."<sup>31</sup>

Many others, of course, do not leave Syria, but join the millions of displaced people still inside Syria. Whether or not they cross a national border, they will look for support from fellow-Christians, often seeking out monasteries or churches.

Many reports highlight the reluctance of Christians to register officially as refugees, meaning that the percentage of Christians among the total is small, smaller than their percentage in the general population.

**“ I see our leaving as temporary, but it will take much time to get a better situation in our country. ”**

A Syrian Christian refugee

Swedish journalist Nuri Kino argues that, “the mostly ignored tragedy of the Christians in Iraq has convinced Christians of Syria that international authorities will not step up to protect them. While their plight is well known to the western media outlets they still are forgotten by international aid organisations. They are fleeing massively.”<sup>32</sup>

Sarah Bakir of the World Council of Arameans says that, “Christian refugees avoid entering the UNHCR camps because of fear of sectarian violence and the wellbeing of their female population (forced prostitution, rape, etc.) Instead they remain either with family, in the churches and monasteries or are renting a small apartment till their money runs out. Seeing the value of their funds in the neighbouring countries, the refugees are mostly turning to the churches and monasteries after a month or two.”<sup>33</sup>

Another report claimed that: “The United Nations, however, automatically registers them as members of the opposition.”<sup>34</sup>

Refusing to register gives less legal protection, but does allow them to seek work to give some income.

In April 2013, it was announced that Turkey was planning to open two refugee camps specifically for Syriac Christians. Christian leaders in Turkey and Syria are divided: some think it is necessary, others that it will make Christians an easy target, or help the process of purging Syria of its Christian community.

\*Name changed for reasons of safety.

*“My name is Daniel\* and I’m sixteen years old. I came here almost seven months ago because of the war in Syria. I couldn’t go to school because I was scared, I couldn’t go to my friends because I was afraid to get killed or get injured. We didn’t sleep a lot during the night. We were afraid when we heard noises. Small children were screaming because they were scared.*

*“Now that I’m in Lebanon I can sleep, but not very well. I worry about my friends and family who are still there. I dream about them. I hope the situation will get better so that we can go back to Syria. All of my family and friends are still there. I contact some of my friends on Facebook and Skype. Things are very bad. I tell them to come to Lebanon, to travel here. But they tell me they cannot, because they don’t have money.*

*“I hope for peace for my country and that the war will end. I hope to go back to Syria and rebuild everything they destroyed. I hope to be a big football player in the future. And I plan to study to become a medical doctor.*

*“There are some people of my age in the place we’re staying now. We talk about what we do in the morning and about our dreams. Of course we talk about the war, but our mind is very tired of this talk, talk, talk. It makes us very sad. We don’t remember anymore that Syria was a good place to live.”*

“The church is doing two things: taking care of what is going on right now and preparing for the future.”

A Damascus pastor



# HOPE: THE CHURCH IN ACTION

One feature of church life in Syria is the way Christians have been meeting the challenge of thousands of internally displaced people – housing them in their monasteries, church buildings and their own homes.

In recent years, before the crisis began, Open Doors built a network of contacts in Syria, working with several denominations. This has proved to be a very significant resource. A staff member explains: “Thankfully we can use the network to offer relief throughout a large part of the country. Of course we do this in coordination with other agencies, so we don’t step in where people already are supported. We don’t offer only practical help, we also combine this with spiritual help.”

So many church leaders – and their churches – have discovered in the crisis the opportunity to respond positively to the needs of others, and not just within their own community. They long for more space to be able to do this even more effectively.

Thus Open Doors is working with Syrian churches to deliver food supplies, medical help, blankets and bedding – and supporting over 3,000 families (a family is usually five people) on a monthly basis.

A pastor in Aleppo explained that, as the needs around increased, the church ‘could not stand doing nothing, watching all this happening’. The response began with two tiny gifts, one from a child. “These amounts were

small, but we saw them as signs of hope and blessing,” he says. “We went into the church and prayed; we asked the Lord Jesus to repeat what he had done when he multiplied the bread and fish. We put our trust in Him and went ahead.” Now they have over 40 volunteers, and they are helping around 8,000 people.

Pastor Imad\* is based in Damascus and is helping Christian and Muslim families. “We’re a humble church but nowadays we are helping over 1,350 displaced families,” he says. “It is rewarding that God allows us to reach that many people.”

“God sent the people of Homs to our church and the revival is happening right there,” Pastor Ouseph\* explains. “They renew their faith in the midst of this crisis. If we keep praying, God will do something incredible; this is what we all feel.” “It’s important the church stays in Syria,” his wife stresses: “If the church leaves Syria, Syria will be spiritually destroyed.”

Pastor Edward is another who believes faith is a vital resource in the face of despair: “Who else can give hope and really spread peace at this time in the hearts of the people other than our Lord? So we feel this is the time for the church and nobody else can do it.”

\* Name changed for reasons of safety

**“The church could not stand doing nothing, watching all this happening.”**

A pastor from Aleppo

# A CALL TO PRAYERFUL ACTION

## PRAYERFUL ACTION

Open Doors has been working to strengthen and encourage Christians in Syria – supporting their heroic efforts to assist those in great need, mobilising Christians outside the country to pray, and responding to the call from within Syria to take up their cause through advocacy.

One pastor in Syria put it like this: “You have a role to not only help us reach out with food and medicine. You have a role to be advocates to your governments.”<sup>35</sup>

That’s why this report is published to coincide with the launch of a global petition, calling for people – especially those who share in the same Christian family – to sign and urge action on behalf of the Christian community in Syria.

The petition will be used as backing for an advocacy campaign in a number of individual countries, in the European Union and the United Nations. Concern for Syria will be expressed both privately and publicly. The whole campaign will be informed by the views of Christians in Syria.

We recognise that it is impossible and impertinent to in any way seek to formally represent the church in Syria, and equally foolish to imagine that there is a common view amongst Syrian Christians about what should be done.

But we are convinced that it is timely and vitally necessary to urge all those who have influence over events in Syria to consider carefully the impact of their actions on the people of Syria, and not least those who belong to a vulnerable and increasingly targeted religious minority.

The Middle East is in the midst of an enormous upheaval. The Christian church, which originated in this area, is facing destruction by exile. The massive exodus, prompted by the war in Iraq and reinforced by events in Egypt, is being accelerated by the conflict in Syria.

Indifference is less than human; inaction is indefensible. Now is the time to speak out. Thoughtfully. Passionately. Above all, we believe, prayerfully.

### The SAVE SYRIA petition

The crisis in Syria has resulted in the people of Syria experiencing terrible suffering and facing enormous challenges. In particular, the Christian community – around 8 per cent of the population and rooted in two thousand years of history – is paying a high price for living in a war-zone. It is threatened with complete destruction.

**We therefore urge, on behalf of the Christians of Syria, that all those with influence and power do everything possible to:**

- **Protect the lives, livelihoods and freedoms of all the people of Syria**
- **Safeguard the existence of the Christian community** and in particular stop the

assaulting, kidnapping, torture and killing of Christians by extremist and criminal groups

- **Guarantee safe fair and proper access** for all to humanitarian assistance, both inside and outside Syria
- **Make it possible for Christians to remain** in and/or return safely to their homes without fear or threat of violence
- **Safeguard the right of Christians to be able to worship** in peace and safety and allow them space to offer compassionate care and contribute to making peace
- **Ensure the establishment of a new Syria** with a society and constitution that in theory and in practice guarantees and respects the right to freedom of religion or belief for all.

# SYRIA: RESPONDING TO THE POLITICAL CHALLENGE

## POLITICAL CHALLENGE

### The UK government

*"The UK continues to support transition to a democratic and stable Syria. We have condemned the brutal violence of the Assad regime. We have recognised the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people and provide it with practical support. We are supporting diplomatic efforts that lead to an end to violence and process of genuine political transition, and investigations into the grave human rights situation. The UK is also providing significant humanitarian assistance inside Syria and to refugees in neighbouring countries."*

UK Foreign Office website<sup>36</sup>

The UK has pressed for an end to the EU arms embargo, arguing that if no one will arm the moderate opposition forces, there is no hope that they will emerge with the most power and influence. Many would prefer that UK efforts should focus on a political solution, encouraged by the news of the Geneva 2 conference proposed by USA and Russia.

The Foreign Office stated that while it wants to see a diplomatic solution to the Syrian civil war, any peace agreement must involve the departure of President Assad and his close associates from the political scene. "They have lost all legitimacy," said a spokesman on 7 May 2013. "They have no place in the future of Syria."<sup>37</sup>

Foreign Secretary William Hague said on 20 May 2013: "The case for further amendments to the arms embargo on Syria is compelling, in order to increase the pressure on the regime, and to give us the flexibility to respond to continued radicalisation and conflict. We have to be open to every way of strengthening moderates and saving lives rather than the current trajectory of extremism and murder.

*"We have not sent arms to any side during the conflicts of the Arab Spring. No decision has been made to go down this route, and if we were to pursue this, it would be under the following conditions: in coordination with other nations, in carefully controlled circumstances, and in accordance with our obligations under national and international law. The United Kingdom and France are both strongly of the view that changes to the embargo are not separate from the diplomatic work, but essential to it. We must make clear that if the regime does not negotiate seriously at the Geneva conference, no option is off the table.*

*"There remains a serious risk that the Assad regime will not negotiate seriously. This is the lesson of the last two years, in which the regime has shown that it is prepared to countenance any level of loss of life in Syria for as long as it hopes it can win militarily. And we also have to persuade the opposition to come to the table; recognising how difficult it is for them to enter into negotiations with a regime engaged in butchering thousands of people."<sup>38</sup>*

## The European Union

*“As the violence and repression continued, the EU decided to introduce restrictive measures to increase pressure on the government of President Bashar al-Assad. In total, 22 sets of restrictive measures have been introduced since the beginning of the crisis. The EU is also working closely with the international community to increase pressure on the Syrian Government in order to put an end to oppression and violence. The EU welcomes all efforts to bring a peaceful solution to the violence in Syria. The EU continues to believe that the key to the solution of the conflict lies in facilitating the Syrian-led political process.”*

The European Union and Syria factsheet, April 2013<sup>39</sup>

## The United Nations

*“The United Nations and the League of Arab States cooperate to help explore a peaceful, political solution to the conflict in Syria through the Joint Special Representative for Syria. In August 2012, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced the appointment of Lakhdar Brahimi as Joint Special Representative for Syria. They have asserted from the outset their conviction that a negotiated political solution is the only way to end this prolonged and ever-deepening crisis. The goal should be clear to all – it must be an end to violence, a clean break from the past and a transition to a new Syria in which the rights of all communities are protected and the legitimate aspirations of all the people in Syria for freedom, dignity and justice are met.”*

United Nations website, May 2013<sup>40</sup>

In August 2011, an independent commission of inquiry on Syria was set up to establish the facts and circumstances of crimes being committed, and, where possible, to identify those responsible.

Meanwhile the political reality is that Russia and China have consistently vetoed Security Council resolutions on Syria, although the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council (HRC) have passed a number of strong resolutions on Syria with overwhelming majorities.

**““ The goal should be clear to all ... a new Syria in which the rights of all communities are protected and the legitimate aspirations of all the people in Syria for freedom, dignity and justice are met.”“**

United Nations

# UN AGENCIES JOINT STATEMENT

**On 15 April 2013, for the first time ever the heads of the leading humanitarian UN agencies published a joint appeal, calling for an end to the suffering in Syria.**

## Enough. Enough.

After more than two years of conflict and more than 70,000 deaths, including thousands of children.

After more than five million people have been forced to leave their homes, including over a million refugees living in severely stressed neighbouring countries.

After so many families torn apart and communities razed, schools and hospitals wrecked and water systems ruined...

After all this, there still seems an insufficient sense of urgency among the governments and parties that could put a stop to the cruelty and carnage in Syria.

We, leaders of UN agencies charged with dealing with the human costs of this tragedy, appeal to political leaders involved to meet their responsibility to the people of Syria and to the future of the region.

We ask that they use their collective influence to insist on a political solution to this horrendous crisis before hundreds of thousands more people lose their homes and lives and futures—in a region that is already at the tipping point.

Our agencies and humanitarian partners have been doing all we can. With the support of many governments and people, we have helped shelter more than a million refugees. We have helped provide access to food and other basic necessities for millions displaced by the conflict, to water and sanitation to over 5.5 million affected people in Syria and in neighbouring countries, and to basic health services for millions of Syrians, including vaccinations to over 1.5 million children against measles and polio.

But it has not nearly been enough. The needs are growing while our capacity to do more is diminishing, due to security and other practical limitations within Syria as well as funding constraints. We are precariously close, perhaps within weeks, to suspending some humanitarian support.

Our appeal today is not for more resources, needed as they are. We are appealing for something more important than funds. To all involved in this brutal conflict and to all governments that can influence them:

In the name of all those who have so suffered, and the many more whose futures hang in the balance: Enough! Summon and use your influence, now, to save the Syrian people and save the region from disaster.

Signed,

**OCHA Emergency Relief Coordinator** – Valerie Amos

**World Food Programme Executive Director** – Ertharin Cousin

**UN High Commissioner for Refugees** – António Guterres

**UNICEF Executive Director** – Anthony Lake

**World Health Organization Director-General** – Margaret Chan

# ISTANBUL STATEMENT ON THE CHURCH IN SYRIA

**Issued by the Religious Liberty Partnership,  
April 2013** <sup>41</sup>

As members of the Religious Liberty Partnership meeting in Istanbul, Turkey, we support the appeal of our brothers and sisters in Syria for the worldwide church to pray for the nation of Syria and the Syrian church at large amidst the current crisis. We specifically call on Christian denominations and organisations worldwide to take this appeal to their members in recognition that we are one body united in Christ.

## **The RLP acknowledges:**

- The call of Syrian Christian leaders for prayer as they struggle to survive amidst this crisis;
- The frustration and fears of the Syrian people following decades of political repression;
- The Syrian refugees and displaced finding protection and critical assistance in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and other countries;
- The important international efforts to broker a solution to the ongoing conflict in Syria; and
- The nation's historic ethnic and religious diversity and peaceful coexistence which is now placed at risk.

## **The RLP is concerned about:**

- The exodus of Christians and other ethnic and religious minorities from Syria as well as the attacks on and destruction of religious sites of all faiths;
- The lack of respect for humanitarian law, including kidnappings, and ongoing violence;
- The security and well-being of Syrian refugees and those internally displaced; and
- The inadequate input from and representation of ethnic and religious minorities in the political dialogue regarding the ongoing crisis in Syria.

## **We call on the international community:**

- To provide sufficient protection for all ethnic and religious communities as well as their historical, religious, and cultural sites;

- To encourage all relevant parties to uphold international humanitarian standards, including appropriate and principled communication, fundraising, and programme administration;
- To collaborate with organisations assisting the church in Syria and to promote peaceful coexistence between all ethnic and religious communities;
- To support organisations and agencies working to improve the security and provide for the well-being of those displaced;
- To work toward a peaceful political and diplomatic solution to the conflict that ensures the participation of all Syrians including all ethnic and religious communities.

## **We call on the worldwide church:**

- To participate with the Refugee Highway Partnership ([www.refugeehighway.net](http://www.refugeehighway.net)) in World Refugee Sunday, June 23, 2013 and designate it as a special day of prayer for Christians in Syria and all those affected by the current crisis; and
- To write to the UN Special Envoy for Syria and ask him to pay particular attention to vulnerable ethnic and religious minorities, ensuring their equal participation in his mandate.

## **The RLP commits:**

- To pray for the church and its leaders as they stand amidst the ongoing attacks on their communities throughout the crisis;
- To raise awareness and work toward a peaceful solution of the current crisis, including reconciliation among the various ethnic and religious communities; and
- To utilise practices that prioritise the well-being of all Syrians when providing assistance and advocating on behalf of the vulnerable.

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- 5 "Firstly, the FSA - that you have been hearing so much about - does not exist. A better title would be MWG, or men with guns, because having guns and firing them in the same direction is the only thing that unites them. The word "army" suggests a cohesive force with a command structure. Almost two years after the FSA was created, that remains elusive. The situation has been further complicated by the introduction into the arena of al-Qaeda-linked jihadists and armed criminal gangs. Secondly, the Syrian opposition's political leadership - which wanders around international capitals attending conferences and making grand speeches - is not leading anyone. It barely has control of the delegates in the room with it, let alone the fighters in the field. These two things can help explain why this crisis has so far shown no sign of being resolved politically." Danahar, P, BBC, 9 May 2013: Syria's protracted conflict shows no sign of abating <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22456875>
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- 18 "Homs is Syria's third largest city, and the country's most religiously diverse. Inter-marriage was common for all but the most conservative, and it was considered gauche to discuss sect. In the months leading up to the revolution, Ali and Mohammad, who were both engaged to be married, spoke endlessly about saving up enough money to have a joint wedding. 'We dreamed that our children would play together, and that they too would be best friends,' says Ali. But as pressure mounted against the regime, Assad resurrected old sectarian tensions in order to bolster support from the country's religious minorities. 'The regime was trying to create fear among the Alawites and the Christians,' says Ali. 'He [Assad] said to us, if the Islamists take over, they will kick you out of Syria.' Many of Ali's Alawite friends, who hold government jobs, were offered extracurricular stipends—as much as \$500 a month—to fan those fears through a graffiti campaign. 'The Christians to Beirut, the Alawites to the grave' was one of the more common ones. Another friend was told to shout sectarian slogans at anti-government rallies. Ali says he doesn't blame his friends for participating in the propaganda campaign. 'They are poor, and were terrified that they would lose their jobs if they didn't do it.'" Baker, A, Time Magazine, 1 March 2012: Eyewitness from Homs: An Alawite Refugee Warns of Sectarian War in Syria <http://world.time.com/2012/03/01/eyewitness-from-homs-an-alawite-refugee-warns-of-sectarian-war-in-syria/#ixzz2UVm8kKH>
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The Religious Liberty Partnership (RLP) is a collaborative effort of Christian organisations from over 20 countries focused on religious liberty. The RLP seeks to more intentionally work together in addressing advocacy, assistance, and in raising the awareness of religious persecution globally. Members of the RLP are substantially involved (time, personnel, and resources) with ministry to persecuted Christians and/or on religious liberty issues in various contexts and strategy.

“Christians in Syria must choose between two bitter chalices: to die or leave”

Samir Nassar, Maronite Catholic Archbishop  
of Damascus

“In the name of all those who have so suffered,  
and the many more whose futures hang in  
the balance: Enough! Summon and use your  
influence, now, to save the Syrian people and  
save the region from disaster”

UNICEF, WFP, UNHCR, WHO and UNOCHA  
joint statement, April 2013

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