

Rebel Killings Are Blamed on Regime

June 14—*The following is an abridged translation of a French-language report dated April 1, 2012, about atrocities against civilian populations, refugees, and religious minorities by Syrian opposition militias, in the area of the Convent of St. James the Mutilated, in Qara, Syria. The account, including photographs, is by the convent's leader, Mother Agnès Mariam de la Croix, a Lebanese-Palestinian. The convent's website is http://www.maryakub.org/index_en.html.*

*Notably, Mother Agnès Mariam de la Croix documents atrocities by Syrian opposition gangs, which then film or photograph the carnage, and supply to the media as alleged "government atrocities."*¹

News from Homs

In Homs, population 1 million, two-thirds of the people have fled the area. More than 90% of the Christians were forced out, often without being able to take anything with them. Several hundred Christian families have abandoned Homs and the province to seek refuges in the Valley of the Christians, Damascus, or its province.

Progressively but effectively, the armed wing of the Syrian opposition is carrying out what one would call "demographic redistribution." Thanks to the snipers and acts of criminal aggression, they are harassing the civilian populations of which they disapprove: Alawite, Christian, Shi'ite minorities, and many "moderate" Muslims who have no desire to participate in dissident

activities. This is not massive genocide but liquidation, bit by bit.

Since August 2011, and especially since November, when we saw the situation with our own eyes in visits to Homs and Kusayr, we have had confirmed intelligence of acts of barbarism against the civilian population to force them to withdraw from ordinary civic life, thereby paralyzing the institutions of the state.

From the beginning of the school year, repeated abuse against schools were noted: kidnapping the teaching staff, both men and women; harassment of students; burning or bombing school buildings. This led progressively to the shutdown of schools, and then the universities.

Minorities in the neighborhoods controlled by armed bands linked to the Syria opposition were targeted for extortion: Their goods were looted, their autos requisitioned, many were taken hostage simply be-

cause they were from a religious minority, and not released unless they could come up with ransom (which created counter-kidnapping, with negotiations for swaps of one hostage for the other).

All actors in civil life were the preferential targets of hidden terrorism by the armed resistance: taxi drivers, street vendors, mailmen, and especially civil functionaries, were innocent victims of acts that went from simple assassination to gratuitous barbarity: their throats were slashed, [their bodies] mutilated, disemboweled, cut into pieces, thrown into street corners or public trash cans. There was no hesitation about shooting at children, probably just to create distress and hopelessness, as happened with little Sari, the nephew of our stonecutter. These acts of atrocity were then exploited by the media to blame the government forces.

We were taken by surprise ourselves by this tactic, during a visit to Homs. That day we counted some hundred bodies arriving at the hospitals, victims of the fury of opposition-linked armed bands. Going along Avenue Wadi Sayeh, we were surprised by a burned-out car; a man had just been attacked by part of the armed gangs, because he refused to close his shop. His car was blown up, and he was literally "hacked to pieces" and tossed



<http://www.maryakub.org>

Mother Agnès Mariam de la Croix of the Monastery of St. Jacques le Mutilé in Qara, Syria

1. The original French-language version of this statement can be found at http://www.maryakub.org/Article_dernieres_nouvelles_de_Homs_et_Qousseir_1_avril_2012.html

under the storefront window. At the moment we were arriving, passersby were gathering. We were surprised that several of them opened their mobile phones and were filming, and we overheard one of them say, doubtless talking to one of the satellite TV networks: "This is what Syrian citizens endure at the hands of Bashar al-Assad's death squads." We photographed this event, and we then proceeded to take the body of the poor killed man to the hospital.

The neighborhoods of Bab Sbah, Warcheh, and part of Hamidiyeh were emptied of their residents for the reasons stated above. Bands of Islamist terrorists invaded these places, took over the houses, looted, and then burned them, alleging that government forces had pillaged them. The terrorists, before going into neighborhoods inhabited by religious minorities, destroyed them with mortars, rockets, or Israeli-made LAU missiles. They do this against unarmed civilian populations, and in places where there is no presence of the regular military. It is false to say that the civilian population is caught in the cross-fire. The truth is that in several places the Christian neighborhoods are the targets of systematic bombing by armed gangs, to take revenge for the fact that the Christians won't join the opposition.

We should say that there is a lot of confusion with the respect to full-fledged adherents of the opposition's armed branch. Just as there are several factions, independent of each other, their abuses have different motivations. Don't be hasty to discredit the testimony of Christians who have experienced real "persecution" at their hands. It's no mystery to anyone that the Salafists are active in many places in Homs, in particular, and in Syria in general. However, it is also true that in general, Christians are not under systematic and general persecution, because Salafist grouplets are not everywhere.

Situation in Kusayr

Kusayr is a large suburb of Homs, on the border of Lebanon. The situation is dramatic: The minorities are victims of terrible abuses, several innocent people have

FIGURE 1
Syria



died, assassinated.

People speak of old feuds. Not true. One well-known clique in the village slandered the Kasouha family, by far the most numerous and most representative, in order to justify all the violence against Kusayr and its Christians. The latter were massacred after having suffered for months from atrocities by armed gangs, who nonetheless have been presented to everyone as being among the valorous resistance factions seeking to install democracy. In reality, these armed gangs have applied the law of the jungle: Either they are seeking to revive the old demons of communal friction, or

they are, as they are also doing in Homs, attempting to bring about religious warfare.

Several Christians in Kusayr were slaughtered, sometimes dismembered, in order to incite the population to flee. Since all this is enough to empty Kusayr of its Christian residents, the terrorists are openly attacking the Christian neighborhoods. They pounded them with mortars and rockets, then entered them, throwing the inhabitants out and killing any recalcitrants.

Keep in mind that these bombardments are not taking place in the context of a firefight with the Syrian Army, but constituted gratuitous aggression on an unarmed civilian population.

Latest news: The Kusayr Christians have heard the Islamists confirm repeatedly that the local coordinating committees have already distributed the real estate and personal property of Christians to Sunni families.

When the regular [Syrian] army seized Baba Amro, the terrorists gathered their hostages (Alawites and Christians) into a building in Khalidiyeh, which they blew up, creating a terrible massacre, and attributing it to the regular forces. But while this act was imputed to the regular [government] forces, including by the Arab League, the proof and eyewitnesses are irrefutable: It's a maneuver by the armed gangs tied to the opposition.

Retrospective

It has now been a year that I've been looking into the situation in Syria, to try to understand it. I've gone three times into the hot spots of our diocese, and I can

say that I've become an eyewitness. In looking back, I see that I was not mistaken in my forecasts. Along with Belgian journalists, we were the first in the world to detail the "unidentified armed gangs." Today, these gangs are identified. We can give them a name: They are grouped under the title Syrian Free Army, whether they are Salafist or Wahhabi, that is, ultra-radical paramilitary formations.

We thank all the authorities who, over the past year, have called upon the Syrian regime, even if so often it was mistaken and because of bad intelligence, to stop the violence against the civilian population. But, what of the abuses by the Syrian opposition? Or rather, the armed factions who call themselves that? Today, the evil is done. What we feared is in the process of taking place: The exodus of Christians from Syria is beginning. They are being joined by their brothers and sisters of other religions. We're reminded of the exodus of Christians from Iraq. We hope that the tendency will be stemmed by a halt to hostilities and the establishment of dialogue among all components of the Syrian people.

We are all for freedom and democracy.

Unfortunately, the noble objectives brandished by the Syrian opposition have been infected with the virus of Islamism. In praising the opposition to the heavens—at first quite rightly—everything that the phony Syrian Human Rights Observatory said was believed without verification.

The mainstream press is beginning, bit by bit, to understand the reality of the Syrian conflict in revealing certain of its far-too-long-hidden sides: the presence of armed factions, whose objective is to create all the pieces for a scenario for religious warfare, like that in Lebanon. This explains the relentless fury suffered for months by the Alawites at the hands of armed gangs. The Christians, too, have been victims, but to a lesser degree. The objective of the armed groups was to push the minorities to arm themselves, in order to explode the religious war. But this reaction never came. Aside from isolated cases, minorities did not get weapons. They waited patiently for the forces of law and order to come and protect them. Thus, they paid a very heavy tribute in blood, in awaiting their deliverance.

History will pay homage to the maturity of the Syrian people, who by its wisdom of millennia, refused to descend to the worst, when everything was at its disposition to wreak vengeance on "the other." It must also be said that the majority of Muslims in Syria denounced

the Salafists, and took their distance from Wahhabism. They say that all extremism is a deformity, and that Salafism, inspired by Wahhabism, became a heresy, especially when it took recourse to eliminating the *kuffar*, or "renegades"—in fact, any person who does not agree with its foundations.

Definitively, the West, hooked on tendentious information, was massively fooled in applying to these heterodox Islamist groupings the title "Free Syrian Army." You have to distinguish things in order not to favor the worst.

And what more need be said? Human Rights Watch wrote an open letter to the "Syrian National Council" to invite it to denounce the acts of barbarity against the Syrian civilian population and forces of order, acts contrary to the Charter of the Rights of Man and the Geneva Convention, committed by armed gangs affiliated with the opposition. The U.S. ambassador to Damascus bemoaned the unacceptable violence of armed gangs acting in the name of the opposition. The major powers and the international media openly spoke of a religious tendency among certain armed branches linked to the Syrian opposition, among whom were uncovered factions from al-Qaeda, the Salafists, and the Wahhabites. Pax Christi Canada addressed a letter to the world leaders to demand they no longer intervene into the Middle East by military means.

While the international community seeks to bring dialogue and to calm things down, it is nonetheless unacceptable that reporters and officials continue to blindly believe the statements of tendentious intelligence networks which cover for the crimes of the armed gangs affiliated with the Syrian opposition, lest it be highly displeased. By ignoring the abuses and crimes of these armed gangs and hailing their "struggle," they encourage their crimes and provide no aid to people in danger. Only objective information, without taking sides, faithful to the facts, can help stop the violence and bring all factions into dialogue in view of a truly democratic process. Evil has to be exposed wherever it is, without any qualms. A minimum of verification is required in the confusion that prevails.

We pray that Syria be purified and pacified from this terrible experience, and that the voice of the overwhelming majority of the Syrian people, of all confessions together, be heard: Implement the necessary reforms without breaking the national pact, or descending into religious war; to the contrary, *forgive*, and begin the road to reconciliation and dialogue.