

Wiping Out the Christians of Syria and Iraq to Remap the Middle East: Prerequisite to a Clash of Civilizations?

PART I

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Historically, the Levant is the birthplace of Christianity and the oldest Christian communities have lived in it and the entire Fertile Crescent since the start of Christian history. Early Christians called themselves followers or people of «the Way» before they adopted the term Christian; in Arabic their antiquated name would be «Ahl Al-Deen». [1] Traces of this original name are also available in the New Testament of the Bible and can be read in John 14:5-7, Acts 9:1-2, Acts 24:4 and 14. From the Fertile Crescent these Christian communities spread across Africa, Asia, and Europe. Since that time the ancient communities of Christians, many of which still use the Syriac dialects of Aramaic in their churches, have been an integral and important part of the social fabrics of the pluralistic societies of Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran. Nevertheless, the Christians of the Levant and Iraq are now in the cross-hairs.

Deceit and mischief has been at play. It is no coincidence that Egyptian Christians were attacked at the same time as the South Sudan Referendum, which was supposed to signal a split between the Muslims in Khartoum and the Christians and animists in Juba. Nor is it an accident that Iraq's Christians, one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, began to face a modern exodus, leaving their homes and ancestral homeland in Iraq in 2003. Mysterious groups targeted both them and Palestinian refugees...

Coinciding with the exodus of Iraqi Christians, which occurred under the watchful eyes of US and British military forces, the neighborhoods in Baghdad became sectarian as Shiite Muslims and Sunni Muslims were forced by violence and death squads to form sectarian enclaves. This is all tied to a US and Israeli project of redrawing the map.

The Christian communities of the Levant and Iraq have long distrusted the US government for its support of Israel, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and fanatical militants with anti-Christian leanings. Lebanon's Christians have also been weary of US support for Israeli expansion and ideas about resettling Palestinians into Lebanon. There is also a widely held belief that the US and Israel have been involved in a policy to remove or «purge» the Christians from Iraq and the Levant in some type of Zionist-linked resettlement plan. Since the US-supported anti-government fighters started targeting Christian Syrians, there has been renewed talk about a Christian exodus in the Middle East centering on Washington's

war on Syria.

Silencing the Ancient Church Bells of Sham and Shinar

Christian Arabs and both the Assyrian and Armenian ethnic communities, which are overwhelming composed of Christians, inside Lebanon and Syria have been in the crosshairs. From Homs and Maaloula to Kessab, Syria's Christians have been under siege. Various ecclesiastic councils or synods have expressed concerns as have Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I, the Vatican or Holy See, Russian Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow Cyril (Kirill) I, Armenian Apostolic Catholicos Aram I, the Maronite Greek Catholic Patriarchate in Lebanon, Jerusalemite Greek Orthodox Archbishop Theodosios (Attallah) Hanna of Sebastia, the Anglican See of Canterbury, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan, Lebanese President Michel Suleiman, the Free Patriotic Movement of Lebanon's Michel Aoun, the World Council of Churches, and various interfaith bodies. Even US celebrities Cherilyn Sarkisian (Cher) and Kimberly Kardashian joined the chorus and voiced their concerns about Syria's Christians after the Turkish government perfidiously helped Al-Nusra overrun the predominately Armenian town of Kessab in Lattakia Governate on March 24, 2014. [2]

Inside Syria, Maronite Greek Catholic Archbishop of Damascus Samir Nassar, Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch Gregory III Laham, Antiochian Greek Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius IV, and Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Zakka I Iwas have all condemned the violence. The leaders of Syria's other faiths, Druze Sheikh Al-Aql Hamoud Hennawi, Sunni Grand Mufti Ahmed Badreddin, and Ashari Imam Mohammed Said Ramadan, have joined the Christian leaders in their calls for peace and condemnations of Washington's war on Syria. These leaders have risked their lives and the lives of their loved ones by taking these positions. Sheikh Ramadan, who was also an ethnic Kurd, was murdered while he was teaching in a mosque for his backing of the Syrian government on March 21, 2013. Patriarch Ignatius IV had his brother kidnapped in Aleppo whereas Grand Mufti Hassoun had his twenty-two year-old son murdered on his way to university in Idlib. Despite the threats, all these figures have spoken against the insurgency as a cancerous threat to coexistence in Syrian society and the broader region. Melkite Patriarch Gregory III Laham has very vocally said that his country is being attacked by bandits and terrorists under the fiction of a revolution that seek to destroy the Christians and all Syria. [3]

The Christian communities of Syria, which constitute at least 10% of the Syrian population, have been systematically targeted; their churches have been attacked and desecrated; their priests, monks, and nuns murdered; and generally discriminated against by the anti-government forces that the US, UK, France, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and their allies support. The objectives of establishing this exodus are reflected by the anti-government chants: «Alawites to the ground and Christians to Lebanon!» What this chant means is that Syria is no longer a place where either Alawis or Christians can live.

America's Foot Soldiers and the Rape of Christians in Syria and Iraq

Fides News Agency, the official news agency of the Vatican and the Roman Catholic Church, has reported that the so-called religious leaders of the anti-government fighters declared it lawful for the anti-government fighters to rape «any non-Sunni Syrian woman» that they desired; the declarations of these corrupt pastors have been used to justify the rape, humiliation, torture, and murder of women and girls in towns and territory captured by groups like the so-called Free Syrian Army, Jabhat Al-Nusra, and the so-called Islamic State

of Iraq and the Levant/Al-Dawlah Al-Islamiyah fi Al-Iraq wa Al-Sham (ISIL/DAISH). [4]

Here is the account given to the Fides News Agency by two priests about what was done to one fifteen year-old Syrian Christian girl in Homs Governate after the anti-government fighters took control of it:

The commander of the battalion «Jabhat al-Nusra» in Qusair took Mariam, married and raped her. Then he repudiated her. The next day the young woman was forced to marry another Islamic militant. He also raped her and then repudiated her. The same trend was repeated for 15 days, and Mariam was raped by 15 different men. This psychologically destabilized her and made her insane. Mariam, became mentally unstable and was eventually killed. These atrocities are not told by any «International Commission» say to Fides two Greek-Catholic priests, Fr. Issam and Fr. Elias who have just returned to town. [5]

These same US-supported multinational insurgent groups have begun to do this to Iraqi Christians too. «On June 12, [2014,] only two day after capturing Mosul and other territories in Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria issued a decree ordering the people to send their unmarried women to 'jihad by sex'» and made a decree ordering that unmarried women sexually be offered to their fighters for fornication. [6] The following account, which was confirmed by the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights and reported by the Assyrian International News Agency, deals with Mosul after its takeover by the insurrectionary forces entering Iraq from Syria on June 25, 2014:

A Christian father who watched his wife and daughter get brutally raped by members of the militant group, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) because he couldn't pay them a poll tax in Mosul, Iraq, killed himself under the weight of the trauma this past weekend. [7]

The molestation and rape of Christian women and girls as sex objects has not been limited to Christians alone. Syrian women and girls, regardless of their faiths, that have been captured by the anti-government forces are being raped and molested. Muslims, Christians, and Druze are all equally at risk. These perverted acts are being encouraged by corrupt clerics issuing legal opinions and decrees (fatwas) that support rape and womanizing.

These twisted legal opinions and decrees being issued include calls for foreign women to become concubines to the anti-government fighters in Syria in what is disgracefully called a «sexual holy struggle» (jihad al-nikah). The Tunisian government was even prompted to react in mid-2013 to these calls for sexual offering, because they were exploiting young Tunisian girls. [8] Tunisian Minister of Religious Affairs Nouredine Al-Khadimi condemned the corrupt and ignorant clerics and individuals behind the calls, insisting that they had nothing to do with Muslim teachings:

The minister's statements came after the spread of an anonymous «sexual jihad» fatwa on the Internet calling on young women to support opposition fighters in Syria by providing sexual services. According to media reports and mujahideen who returned to Tunisia after participating in jihad in Syria, 13 Tunisian girls headed to the battlefield in response to the «sexual jihad» fatwa. [9]

«After the sexual liaisons they have [in Syria] in the name of ‘jihad al-nikah’ — (sexual holy war, in Arabic) — [these girls] come home pregnant», Tunisian Interior Minister Lotfi bin Jeddou testified to Tunisian legislators months after Al-Khadimi’s condemnations, explaining that the misguided girls could have over a hundred partners. [10]

Targeting Bishops, Priests, Monks, and Nuns: Besieging the People of «The Way»

Since the start of the fighting, Christian spiritual figures have been targeted in one way or another. There are the cases of Greek Orthodox Archbishop Sayedna Paul (Boulos) Yazigi and Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan Mar Gregorios John Abraham (Yohanna Ibrahim), which were kidnapped near the Turkish border, on April 22, 2013. Their driver, a Christian priest himself, was killed instantly for protecting the two Christian metropolitans by refusing to let them leave their car. A fourth person in the car, Fouad Eliya, managed to remain free (and explain what happened). [11]

The Turkish government is directly involved in the kidnapping of the two Orthodox Christian bishops. The Turkish newswire Dogan News Agency (Dogan Haber Ajansı) reported on July 23, 2013 that the murders or, using the report’s words, «assassins» of the two Syrian bishops were arrested in Konya. [12] The arrest happened to be of anti-Russian fighters from the North Caucasus, which corresponded to Foud Eliya’s account that Boulos Yazigi and Yohanna Ibrahim were taken by North Caucasian militants dressed like Taliban fighters from Afghanistan. [13]

Grand Mufti Hassoun revealed that Turkish-trained Chechen fighters were dispatched by Ankara to kidnap Sayedna Boulos Yazigi and Mar Gregorios, because of two important reasons. According to Sheikh Hassoun, the first reason is that Metropolitan Gregorios was asked by Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Zakka I Iwas to head a church committee to begin the process of reclaiming the vast holdings of the Syriac Orthodox Church that the Turkish government had confiscated during its persecution of Syriac Orthodox Christians. [14]

In a meeting between Prime Minister Erdogan and Mar Gregorios, the Turkish government asked that the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch establish a eparchy (an ecclesiastical province or administrative division of the church with a metropolitan) in Turkey and to even relocate its patriarchate from Damascus to Hatay (Antioch), but Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim refused and said that the patriarchate of the Syriac Orthodox Church will never change locations, that Syriac Orthodox Christians recognized the Levant as one unified land, and that a bishop would be assigned to Turkey when the Syriac Orthodox Church’s properties were returned by the Turkish government, which angered Turkish officials. [15] The other reason that the Orthodox Christian cleric was targeted was that he was reconciling anti-government fighters peacefully with the Syrian government in Aleppo Governate, which upset Turkey and its allies. [16]

Other cases include those of: Father (Abouna) Fadi Jamal Haddad, a Antiochian Greek Orthodox priest acting as a mediator in Qatana during the fighting, who was tortured and shot in the head after he tried to mediate the release of a doctor that was being ransomed for money; Father (Abouna) Francois Al-Mourad, a Catholic priest of the Franciscan Order, who was shot for preventing fellow Christians and Syrians from being hurt by the anti-government fighters; and Father Frans van der Lugt, a Dutch priest of the Jesuit Order working in Homs. When Abouna Fadi went to pay the insurgents for the doctor they had abducted, they kidnapped him too; they would later kill the Christian priests and leave him

on the side of the highway, «horribly tortured and [with] his eyes gouged out», where his body would be found on September 25, 2012. [17]

According to the Franciscan Order's representatives in Syria, the insurgents «broke into the convent, looted it and destroyed everything. When Fr. François tried to defend the nuns and other people, the gunmen shot him dead» on June 23, 2013. [18]

The insurgents murdered Father Frans van der Lugt on April 7, 2014. This an account of the circumstances behind his murder:

Wael Salibi, 26, recalled how when the Christian area in Homs was taken over by rebels, 66,000 of the faithful «left their home, and just few of them stayed there. He was the only priest, he stayed in his church.»

«Just months before he died, he said 'I can't leave my people, I can't leave my church, I am director of this church, how can I leave them?'"» Salibi told CNA on April 11.

Salibi, who hails from the now-ravished city of Homs, grew up as a close friend and pupil of Fr. Frans, who was brutally killed on April 7. Days before his 76th birthday, an unknown gunman entered his church, beat him and shot him in the head. [19]

In Hasakah (Hasce) many of the Christian Syrians fled, but almost 30,000 stayed as internal refugees. The Syrian Christians who belonged to the Chaldean Catholic Church, Syriac Orthodox Church, Syriac Catholic Church, Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church, and the Armenian Catholic Church collectively asked the world for help and to put an end to the fighting, in an appeal that went unheard, in late-2012; they have suffered from persecution, lawlessness, kidnappings, ransoms, and murder. One Christian from the area told Fides News Agency that Al-Nusra was targeting «all young people who were born between 1990 and 1992. They look for them, accuse them of being soldiers for the national service and kill them cold-bloodedly. They want to terrorize young people to prevent them from enlisting.» [20]

Another example of the assault on the Christian community is Al-Nusra's assault on the town of Maaloula. Maaloula is one of a few villages maintaining an old dialect of Aramaic, known as the language of Jesus of Nazareth. Many Christian structures and historic sites fill the Syrian town, but the Melkite Greek Catholic Saint Sergius (Mar Sarkis) Monastery and Antiochian Greek Orthodox Saint Thecla (Mar Taqla) Monastery stand out. The town became the scene of fighting between Al-Nusra and the Syrian Arab Army and switched hands between the insurgents and Syrian government four times between late-2013 and mid-2014.

Many of Maaloula's residents, both Christian and Muslim alike, became trapped in their homes and local buildings, including forty Greek Orthodox Christian nuns and the orphans they were looking after, which sparked panic in the Christian populations of Syria and Lebanon. Hence the strong backing of Bashar Al-Assad's government by all of Syria's minorities and the expression of these type of sentiments were nearly universal among Christian Syrians: «'They're coming after us,' [said] Odette Abu Zakhm, a 65-year-old woman in the congregation who lives in the nearby historic Christian district of Bab Touma. 'All they do is massacre people, all they know is killing.'» [21] Not only were the nuns held hostage by Al-Nusra, but the anti-government fighters desecrated absolutely all of

Maaloula's shrines and Christian buildings, stole its historic artifacts to sell in the black market, and scattered the partially Aramaic-speaking population of the town. Eyewitnesses who escaped Maaloula give this account below:

[The insurgents] tried to change the religious and architectural-historical look of the ancient Christian town entirely: completely destroying some churches, the militants brought down all bells from other ones. The fate of two other world-famous monuments of Ma'loula was no less tragic: extremists blew up the statue of Christ the Savior, which had stood at the entrance of St. Thecla Convent, as well as the statue of the Most Holy Virgin Mary, which had stood close to the Safir hotel, the latter of which served as the main shelter for Takfirists for many months. [22]

Easter, in 2014 was a special time for Maaloula. Around Easter, the Syrian government regained the town. Maaloula was finally secured and residents were returning. «The display of hatred was clear — the houses are totally destroyed, the whole village was destroyed. I can't describe the amount of damage to the village», a returning resident by the name of Lorain told the press about what the insurgents did. [23] President Al-Assad visited too. Al-Assad himself came to visit it as a sign of the Syrian government's commitment to its entire population regardless of their faith or ethnicity. Both the Western rite and Eastern rite Christian celebrations of Easter, respectively using the Gregorian and Julian calendars, fell on the same date too: April 20, 2014.

(To be continued in part two; to read part two please [click here](#))

NOTES

[1] The term Christian is akin to the term Mohammedian, which was once used to describe Muslims. It was a name originally used as a derogatory term by non-Christians to identify the followers of Jesus of Nazareth and «the Way» by them, but would eventually be accepted and adopted by many of the Christians; the Arabic word «deen» means «way» and not religion as it is commonly substituted for.

[2] Pinar Tremblay, «Armenian-Americans blame Turkey for Kassab invasion, Al-Monitor, April 3, 2014.

[3] «Syria has been reduced to banditry and anarchy, says Gregory III Laham», Vatican Insider, May 4, 2012.

[4] «13 Syrian Christian Women Raped and Killed by Islamists» Pravoslavie, April 5, 2013; «Rape and atrocities on a young Christian in Qusair», Fides News Agency, July 2, 2013; Stoyan Zaimov, «Syrian Christian Mother Reveals Stories of Rape, Church Attacks in Streets of Damascus», Christian Post, October 17, 2013; Jamie Dettmer, «Syria's Christians Flee Kidnappings, Rape, Executions», Daily Beast, November 19, 2013.

[5] «Rape and atrocities», Fides, op. cit.

[6] «ISIS in Mosul Orders Unmarried Women to 'Jihad By Sex,'» Assyrian International News Agency, June 21, 2014.

[7] Leonardo Blair, «Christian Father Commits Suicide After ISIS Members Rape Wife and Daughter in Front of Him Because He Couldn't Pay Poll Tax», Christian Post, June 25, 2014.

[8] Mohammed Yassin Al-Jalassi, «Tunisians Raise Alarm on Fatwa Encouraging 'Sexual Jihad,'» Al-Monitor, March 27, 2013.

[9] Ibid.

[10] «Sex Jihad raging in Syria, claims minister», Agence France-Presse, September 20, 2013.

[11] Dikran Ego, «Turkey's Role in the Kidnapping of the Syrian Bishops», Assyrian International

News Agency, February 1, 2012.

[12] Ismail Akkaya, «Suriyeli metropolitlerin katil zanlıları Konya’da yakalandı» [«Syrian metropolitan’s alleged assassins were caught in Konya»], Dogan Haber Ajansı, July 23, 2013.

[13] Dikran Ego, «Turkey’s Role in Kidnapping», AINA, op. cit.

[14] Grand Mufti Hassoun explains this in a video released by the Stockholm-based Syriac Foundation on May 4, 2014.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] «Fr. Fadi Jamil Haddad: Priest, Trusted By All, Martyred in Syria», Pravmir.com, October 28, 2012: .

[18] «Custos of the Holy Land: Fr François Mourad killed by Islamist insurgents in al-Ghassaniyah», AsiaNews.it, June 25, 2013: .

[19] Elise Harris, «‘I can’t leave my people’: Priest killed in Syria hailed as martyr», Catholic News Agency, April 15, 2014.

[20] «Appeal from the people of Mesopotamia, left to themselves», Fides News Agency, January 17, 2013.

[21] Lee Keath, «Seizure of nuns stokes Syrian Christian fears», Associated Press, December 8, 2013.

[22] «All Shrines of Ma’loulou Either Destroyed or Desecrated», Pravoslavie, January 13, 2014.

[23] Firas Makdesi, «Syria’s Assad pays Easter visit to recaptured Christian town», Reuters, April 20, 2014.

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