

Algerian Christians: 'We Must Not Bow to Fear'

The assassination of a French tourist by militants in Algeria has raised the fear of new terrorist attacks in the country. Hervé Gourdel, 55, was beheaded on Sept. 24 by a radical Islamist group "Soldiers of the Caliphate," linked to Islamic State in Iraq, in the northeastern region of Kabylie.

Gourdel, who was an experienced hiker, was kidnapped on Sept. 21, along with five Algerians, but his companions were released 14 hours later.

His murder has sparked a wave of indignation and anger, notably via social media. It reminds Algeria and the world of the civil war of the 1990s, also known as "The Black Decade" when more than 150,000 people died violently, while thousands of others went missing. This followed the annulment of an election won by an Islamist group, after which the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) sought to gain power, opposed by the Algerian military.

Now, members of the Christian community in Bejaia, one of the main cities in Kabylie, are particularly concerned over the threats posed by militants. "If we consider the fate reserved by IS fighters for Iraqi Christians, there is genuine reason to express concerns over the church in Algeria. That is why we must be vigilant," said Omar, 31, a member of a Protestant church in Bejaia.

For Selma, 26, another Christian in Bejaia, the church constitutes a potential target for terrorists, who have shown "their desire to establish an Islamic theocratic regime everywhere they stamp their feet, to the cost of other beliefs.

"Frankly, I am worried. Christians should be mobilized in

prayer against this approaching darkness.”

On Saturday, many Catholic believers gathered in Bejaia to address this issue among others. Reacting to the killing of the French hostage, the rector of the Basilica of St. Augustine in Annaba—400 km east of Algiers, the capital—has strongly condemned the “barbaric” act.

“This is the first time I shed tears since I arrived in Algeria four years ago. I really cried when I heard the news of the decapitation of the French hostage. I was touched by his murder,” said Father Ambroise Tshibangu Tshiasuma.

The death of Gourdel has brought back memories of the murder of seven Cistercian Trappist monks of Tibhirine, killed in a similar way in 1996. The seven monks, all Frenchmen, were kidnapped on the night of March 26-27, 1996, in their monastery near Medea, 90 km south of Algiers. They were well-liked, and, despite knowing the dangers they faced, chose to stay in Algeria and died at the hands of the GIA. Two members of the community escaped, and the last survivor wrote an account *The Last Monk of Tibhirine*. This later became a moving docudrama *Of Gods and Men*, which won the Grand Prix at Cannes Film Festival in 2010, and also awards for Best Foreign Film.

Other Catholic clerics have also lost their lives in Algeria, notably the Archbishop of Oran, Msgr. Pierre Claverie, killed in a terrorist attack in August 1996, and four bishops known as “White Fathers,” killed in their chapel in Tizi Ouzou on Dec. 27, 1994, by militants.

Father Amboise has not forgotten the murder of his fellow clerics, but there is no need to yield to fear, he said.

“It is true that the presence of the terrorist groups raises a general feeling of fear, but we must not give in to fear. The church must remain calm and continue its work. I think militants constitute a bloodthirsty minority. All Algerian citizens are not involved in terrorists’ activities. We must

live by faith and trust God,” he added.

Support to Iraqi Christians

On Sept. 20, a group of Christian and secular Algerians staged a rally in the northern town of Aokas, to show their support to the Iraqi Christians and other minorities in Iraq.

“Through this gathering, we want to express our solidarity and support to Iraqi Christians and the Yezidi community who suffer because of the terrorists of the Islamic State,” said Abdelkader, a Christian from Aokas who attended. “Iraqi Christians are victims of genocide. We cannot remain silent about this horrible massacre.”

A large banner: “Kabylie in solidarity with Iraqi Yezidi and Christians” was hung between two trees in front of a police station.

Terrorism and Identity Claims

Kabylie is a vast region—its size is similar to that of Denmark—in the northeast of Algeria, on the shore of the Mediterranean. It comprises the provinces of Tizi-Ouzou and Bejaia, among others. Kabylie is considered a “recalcitrant” region where a strong sense of regional identity and resistance to all forms of central control has developed over the years. Mainly populated by Berbers—while the rest of Algeria is predominantly populated by Arabs—the region has always had a tumultuous relationship with the central government in Algiers.

Kabylie is also the home of most of members of the tiny, but fast-growing Christian minority in Algeria.

Because of its landscape of forest and mountainous terrain riddled with caves, Kabylie provides fertile ground for guerrilla activities. The region used to be a refuge for fighters during the war of independence against the French

colonizers. In the 1990s, at the heart of the civil war, the area became a hideout for the Armed Islamic Group's combatants. This group later mutated into al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), responsible for the kidnapping of several Western nationals in sub-Saharan Africa. The group, which is linked to al-Qaida, was deeply involved in the occupation last year of northern Mali, along much of its southern border.

The Algerian army, which regularly carries out searches in the region, has never been able to eradicate terrorism and banditry in Kabylie. The group calling itself "Soldiers of the Caliphate" is a dissident group from AQIM. AQIM itself, formerly known as the Salafist Group for Call and Combat, has its roots in an Islamist militia involved in the civil war in the 1990s.

In a statement posted on the internet in mid-September, the Soldiers of the Caliphate officially pledged allegiance to IS in Iraq, becoming the first IS "wing" on the African continent. The kidnapping and murder of Gourdel then became the first major action of this hitherto-unknown group.