

Are Syrian Christians Targeted for Faith or Politics?

Wednesday 28th's twin deadly car bombs in the Christian and Druze suburb of Jaramana in the Syrian capital Damascus appeared to target two communities which so far have not joined the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad's government.

State media said "terrorists" were behind the blasts, which killed at least 38 and injured at least 83; the government says it is protecting these two minorities from "terrorist extremists." The location was not near any strategic targets such as military or government buildings. However, the area is known for its loyalty to President Assad's government, making it a target for armed opposition groups. No group has yet claimed responsibility.

These are not the first attacks in Jaramana to have been blamed on those seeking to overthrow the government. But in the past, the armed opposition has denied any involvement and repeatedly said it is targeting Mr Assad's forces and not minority groups.

Syria appears to be heading towards deepening breakdown, with sectarian fragmentation likened to its neighbour Lebanon's civil war. Inevitably, Christians have been caught up in the chaos over the past months, as we report here – starting with a Syrian Orthodox priest who was deliberately killed.

In an act of courage 43 year old Father Fadi Haddad set off by car to negotiate the release of one of his parishioners, who had been kidnapped. A week later, it became clear that the parish priest from Qatana, some 20 kilometers south-west of Damascus, had paid the highest price. On Oct. 25th, his

lifeless and mutilated body was found on the side of a road. Qatana had been terrorized by radical fighters, locals told Catholic Charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN).

“‘Extremists went through the streets shouting ‘Alawites to the grave, Christians to Beirut’. They want to kick us out”. A pastor who often provided Haddad with Bibles and who met him a few days before he was kidnapped told us ‘Father Fadi’s superiors had asked him why he kept traveling back and forth between Qatana and Damascus. He responded: ‘I cannot not serve Jesus, I need to help people, that is why I have to move around.’

Christians in Syria say the particularly gruesome death of Father Fadi—his eyes had been gouged out—marks a turning point for them. Before, Christians were caught up in the war in the same way as Kurds, Druze, and all other ethnic groups. Also, a part of the Christian community in Syria has been actively supporting President Assad, thus being an actor in the civil war.

But some Syrian Christians say a series of incidents recently points to a trend of violence against Christian civilians, including priests. Particularly worrying, they say, is the growing presence of foreign radical Islamic fighters in the country, and the many Islamist brigades within the opposition Free Syrian Army. Yet there is fear of government forces as well. On Nov. 14, four missiles struck the Christian village of Tel Nasri in northeast Syria. St. Mary’s Church was severely damaged, as were many houses. As the Assyrian International News Agency reports, a 14-year old boy was killed and many were wounded, apparently by Assad’s fighter planes, though that is not confirmed.

Before that, on Oct. 21st, a car bomb exploded near the gate of Bab Touma, the historical Christian neighbourhood in Damascus. The car was parked next to two churches, a Maronite and a Latin church in Bab Touma street, which emerges into

'the straight street' mentioned in the Bible. The explosive detonated at a time when local Christians were heading to church for Sunday Mass. At least 10 people were killed and more than 16 injured. While the nearby police station may have been the target, the timing of the explosion meant that churchgoers would be hurt.

Also, another bomb is said to have been found before it detonated near two churches in the residential district.

The two churches were warned and they told all their parishioners to go home, in case the authorities were unsuccessful in disabling the bomb.

A month before this week's twin car bombs, on Oct. 29, a bomb in Jaramana killed 11 people and wounded 69. Except for one victim, all belonged to the Christian part of the population. On Sep. 3rd a car explosive took the lives of at least 5 residents of the same locality. A clear distinction is often hard to make between violence specifically aimed at Christians on the one hand, and on the other hand the reality of war which Christians, like other groups, get caught up in.

Christian support and aid agency Open Doors received a letter from a Christian in Aleppo, telling about a hundred insurgents who came into the Christian area and infiltrated a main street. The Syrian army quickly retook the zone and no lives were lost. Many Christians in war zones left their houses behind and are staying elsewhere with family- like their Muslim neighbours. That is how much of the city of Homs became a ghost town. But 84-year old Elias Mansour refused to leave and on October 30th, the war took his life. He was the last Christian in Homs, as media worldwide reported.

Maybe less devastating but of high symbolic value are the stories about destroyed, battered or desecrated churches. In Homs and Aleppo, and many other cities and towns, historical church buildings have been damaged as a result of the war.

There are two more reasons why Syrian Christians may find themselves targeted at this lawless time, beyond the indiscrimination of a country at civil war. First, Christian communities in Syria don't arm themselves in any organized way, which makes them vulnerable to criminal groups. This is particularly the case in those regions where the police and the military are almost absent due to war efforts elsewhere in the country.

On July 19th, Staefo Malke was trying to make some extra money for his family as a taxi driver. When several men got into his car and started arguing about the deal they wanted to make with him, a row started. Knowing he was a Christian and not protected by any police or armed group, they shot him dead on the spot, as a family member told Dutch public radio. The same principle may have been applied on Sept 25 to 150–240 unarmed Greek-Catholics who were kidnapped from their village of Rableh, and released the next day.

Second, many Syrian Christians are relatively prosperous and are considered to have family in the West—making them an attractive objective for kidnapping for money. In the case of an Assyrian Christian from the Aleppo area, his family paid a lot of money before he was dropped off in a deserted area, alive but in shock. He and his wife and children then joined the 400,000 plus refugees from Syria, according to latest figures from the UNHCR, including at least 150,000 in Turkey.