

Christian Convert in Refugee Camp Told: 'We Will Kill You'

A Kurdish church leader smuggled to Britain says he received death threats—for having left Islam for Christianity—while living in makeshift camps in northern France.

The church leader, who did not wish to be identified, spent nine months living in camps outside the French cities of Calais and Dunkirk. He told World Watch Monitor that Kurdish Muslims in both camps antagonized him.

"In Calais, the smugglers [saw] my cross [round my neck], and said: 'You are Kurdish and you are a Christian? Shame on you,'" he recalled. "I said, 'Why? I'm in Europe, I'm free, I'm in a free country.' They said, 'No, you are not free, you are in the Jungle. The Jungle has Kurdish rule here—leave this camp.' The smugglers were from inside the camp, and were Kurdish. They said to me, 'We will tell the Algerians and Moroccans to kill you.'"

The church leader, who taught art in his home in Iraqi Kurdistan, as well as helping to lead a church there, said he received further threats in the camp outside Dunkirk. "They [set] fire [to] my tent," he said.

He said he moved from the so-called "Jungle" camp in Calais to the Grande-Synthe camp near Dunkirk after one of the people-smugglers told him, "You're a Kurdish pastor? I've heard about you."

"He was really dangerous, like a gangster. I was really scared," he added.

A convert to Christianity from a devout Muslim family, he left Kurdistan after receiving death threats. He said he was arrested and beaten by police for preaching in the streets,

and twice received letters warning him that he would be killed if he did not return to Islam.

“In the mosque the imams talked about me, and my father, and my little brother, who became a Christian too. ... The imam talked about us—‘they are kafir [unbelievers], they have to die,’ from the stage, into the mosque microphone. My father [a Muslim] was filled with shame,” he said. “They were taught bad things about us in the mosque: ‘The Christians are kafir.’ Of course, they [also] say you are slaves to Israel, to the American people.”

Within his family, five of his close relatives also became Christians, he said. This strained some relationships, including with his father and two brothers, who are imams. He said one of his brothers supports ISIS, which, he said, has “definitely, definitely” created sleeper cells in Kurdistan.

He said his elderly father also tried to kill him, entering his bedroom one night with a knife. He left home the evening that four men, whom he described as having long beards and belonging to IS, came to his family home and asked where he was. He heard his mother lie for him, saying he was not at home, and escaped through the back door without the opportunity to say goodbye to her.

He said he had flown from Kurdistan to Turkey and paid around US\$10,000 to cross the Mediterranean in the bottom of a boat packed with 56 others, including women and children. He also said he had experienced kindness, as he and a friend made their way through Europe from Greece, through Macedonia, Serbia and Croatia. They traveled by bus and train and walked other stretches of the journey.

“The people were really friendly and some people, when they saw us, they cried. I cried too. I cried all the time, because I missed my family and my country,” he said. “We went to Serbia. We were really tired; we didn’t take a shower for a

long time. I don't remember how long for, but we were really dirty. My whole body smelled really badly.

"When I was in Austria ... this family said: 'Stay with us in our house.' They're a really, really nice family. We [he was travelling with another Kurd] took a shower and we talked about our situation. I'm still in contact with them now."

He added that the help they received, such as sharing food, was what he had done for the Syrian refugees who flocked to Kurdistan after the outbreak of civil war.

He said an evangelical church in France had provided him with water, heating and clothes and had paid for him to stay in a hotel for a while.

He said one reason he wanted to reach Britain, rather than remain in France, however, was that he was scared following the gruesome murder of Fr. Jacques Hamel in northern France in July at the hands of two young men who had pledged allegiance to IS.

Now seeking asylum in Britain, he said that when he gets permission to work, he would like to be a missionary and lead a Kurdish church in the U.K. His church in Kurdistan, which was made up of converts from Islam, was closed down by the authorities, but he said that he now feels safe in Britain.

Asked about how he felt about having to smuggle in illegally, he said: "Do you have another choice? No. What do you have to do? You have to get to [the] U.K. With yourself alone? You cannot. You have to find one person to get you in the lorry. I know it's the wrong way, but what do you do?" {eo}

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