

Is Kurdistan the Syrian Church's Best Hope for Survival?

Islamic militants are driving hundreds of thousands of Syrian Christians from their homes, causing Christian leaders to fear that without help from the outside, the Syrian church may disappear.

But there is one group on the inside, the country's Kurdish population, who are friendly to both America and Syrian Christians, and they are offering hope.

Recently, Syrian rebels opened fire on a government army tank protecting an ancient Christian site in the city of Saidnaya.

The House of Cherubim Church and Convent are located there, as well as a giant Jesus statue locals say is larger than the one in Rio de Janeiro.

Defending the Church

Christians usually rely on the Syrian army to protect their holy sites, but not this time. They took up arms to defend the area from Islamists bent on destroying the church and the statue.

The Christians reportedly killed dozens of foreign jihadi fighters during a seven-hour battle, but more Muslim rebels are attacking Syria's Christians.

Last September, they assaulted the ancient Christian city of Maaloula. Islamist fighters with the Al Nursa group rampaged through the city, killing several Catholics in the process.

The Syrian army eventually retook the city, but the rebels invaded again two months later and reportedly kidnapped 12

nuns.

The ongoing targeting of Syria's Christian community has threatened its very existence, causing thousands to flee.

Christians Flee for Safety

Elliot Abrams, former deputy national security adviser for President George W. Bush, said he can't fault the Christians for leaving.

"If you were a Christian father in Syria looking at your children and their future—and I think you'd want them to get out and not just now for safety, but for the future, too—I think you'd be saying, go to Europe, go to America," Abrams argued.

But not all Christians can leave the country or take up arms to protect themselves, so who will protect them?

The answer can be found within the country's Kurdish population, a people willing to risk their lives to protect Syria's Christians.

Protecting the Defenseless

"My experience with the Kurds in Syria was positive and for a long time they were defending Christians that were being persecuted there," Tina Ramirez, founder of Hardwired, said.

Last year, the Kurds declared autonomy over the northeastern part of their country. It's known as Syria Kurdistan because the Kurds control that territory.

The Christians living in the cities, like Qamishli, are better protected.

"It's becoming even more dangerous now, obviously, as the war continues. But in the beginning the ones that lived in the Kurdish areas had greater safety than living in other parts of

Syria,” Ramirez explained.

The Kurdish Militias

The Kurdish militias have won many battles against jihadis bent on controlling the region.

Bilal is a former soldier who works as refugee camp leader in northern Iraq.

“We resist Arabization, to not be controlled by Arabs, to defend our regions,” he said. “That’s why they are attacking us, but still we fight against them. We have fought al-Qaida for the past 13, 14 years with success. We’ve killed many Islamists and their leaders in Syria Kurdistan.”

The same thing happened in Iraq.

Iraqi Kurds stood with America, opposing Saddam Hussein and foreign jihadists in the Iraq war, and today they have their own autonomous region.

Finding a Safe Haven

Iraqi Christians who fled persecution in cities, like Baghdad and Mosul, found a safe haven in the area of northern Iraq called Kurdistan.

“They are pro-American, their economy is terrific, they have something of a free market economy, people who go to Kurdistan will tell you. You think you are in Europe. It’s wonderful,” Abrams said.

Eventually the Syrian war will come to an end, and like Iraq, the country may end up divided into zones of influence, including a permanent, autonomous Syrian Kurdistan.

“It is a Balkanization of the country. I don’t think it will be a judari, legal separation with different countries being set up, but the zones are there just as in Iraq,” Abrams

predicted.

When asked if the United States should provide more support for the Syrian Kurds, he replied, "I hope our intelligence services are in touch with them, and I think we should be willing to help those groups."

America, Working with the Kurds?

Bilal warned that working with the Kurds may be America's only way of applying democracy in the Middle East.

"Who stood with America in the Iraq War? If America wants to apply democracy in the Middle East, if America is looking for long-term friendship in the Middle East, if America is looking for nations that will stand with them, it's the Kurds!" Bilal said.

They are the only secular Muslim force in the Middle East that opposes Islamic extremism, is friendly to Americans and is tolerant of Christians.