

ISIS Leaves Trail of Destruction in Syria

The Islamic State (ISIS) this month moved closer to Damascus, capital of Syria, even as it fights for Aleppo, the war-torn country's largest city. Lying quietly between these two prize cities of Syria is the Mediterranean coastal city of Tartus, where displaced Syrians have arrived in waves.

Civilians in Syria have more than terrorists and rebel bombs to fear. Less than 10 miles east of the center of Damascus, the Syrian Air Force on Aug. 16 bombed the central marketplace of Douma, a rebel-held area, leaving hundreds dead or wounded, according to *The Times of Israel*. The regime of President Bashar al-Assad said the bombing was aimed at the headquarters of the Jaish al-Islam, though the rebel group said its base was almost two miles away.

Opposition groups including ISIS have steadily pressed toward Damascus, abducting about 300 Christians along the way. Suicide bombers on Aug. 6 opened the way for ISIS to invade Qaryatain, thus controlling supply routes in the country's center. ISIS members are reportedly found in Bir Qassab, about 25 miles southeast of Damascus, and already ISIS has operatives adjacent to the Syrian capital in the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk, according to *The Times of Israel*.

While ISIS is not yet fully within striking distance of Damascus, north of Aleppo ISIS militants were suspected of using chemical weapons on civilians last week. With 2.1 million residents before war erupted in 2011, Aleppo has been savagely contested by the regime and rebels, with the insurgents fighting each other as well.

Syrian American Medical Society representatives said about 50 civilians showed symptoms of exposure to mustard gas north of

Aleppo on Friday (Aug. 21). ISIS was the suspected perpetrator, as area sources said Islamic State militants had launched 50 shells. The chemical attack reportedly did not kill anyone, but photos showed those affected with blisters and lesions. ISIS recently used mustard gas against Kurdish soldiers in northern Syria, according to U.S. and German officials. Ironically, the Islamic State likely found a way to filch the mustard gas from the regime in Damascus, analysts said.

Should ISIS and other opposition groups drive Syrian President Bashar Assad, an Alawite, from Damascus, the Alawite stronghold of Tartus is considered one of the top places in which he would take refuge. He would not be the first. After four years of war that has taken 230,000 lives, more than 1.5 million people are estimated to have fled to Tartus, where they are struggling to survive in fetid camps.

Among the displaced was Samir, who fled from an undisclosed city in Syria when rebels demanded \$1,000 a week and told the men in his family that they must join their ranks, according to the leader of a ministry in Tartus that Christian Aid Mission assists. When night fell the day of the rebel demand, the family paid a taxi driver \$350 to help them flee. The driver left and did not return.

"They hired another driver but were stopped by a gang and robbed of the rest of their money," said the ministry director (name withheld for security reasons). "The taxi was stolen, and Samir, his family and the taxi driver were all left stranded on the road with no money, still miles from Tartus."

The family walked and hitchhiked to the Mediterranean coast, begging for food and hiding from bandits and insurgents.

"Once they arrived in Tartus, Samir's two oldest sons left to join the fighting, with the promise of \$2,000 a month," the director said. "Within three weeks, their bodies were returned

for burial. Samir was left with no money, no job, hungry younger children, and a despondent wife.”

Christians who befriended Samir in Tartus had no money to offer him, but they prayed and shared blankets and meals, and one hired Samir to do some work. They also shared their experience of Christ with his family.

Samir’s family attends Bible studies and reads the New Testaments they have received, and the director said knowledge of God’s love is giving them some comfort amid the turmoil in their lives. Their view of Christ still tends to fluctuate, but they do take increasing comfort in His sacrificial death on the cross for them, he said.

“The family would like to go to Europe, but they have no money to get there,” he said. “They’ve considered moving to Lebanon, but Lebanon is trying to keep all Syrians out. Samir and his family hope that they will be safe in Tartus and someday get jobs that will enable them to send their children to school.”

Besides the social and psychological trauma of war and losing their businesses and jobs, such displaced people live in crowded basements and tents in unsanitary conditions that often lead to serious disease. Many lack access to clean water. Some sleep on the streets.

They also need food, medicine, and clothes to prepare for cold weather, said the director, whose ministry has not only found strategic ways to share the gospel with Muslims but also works among Domari Gypsies, a stateless and illiterate people who are often abused. To help prevent unscrupulous people from taking advantage of the Domari, the ministry provides the Gypsies with literacy training.

“Teaching the Gypsies to read and write allows gospel workers to build relationships through which they can eventually share the good news of Christ,” the director said.

The ministry team includes a medical doctor whose work has also helped the team build relationships and trust. The group has been assisting displaced people for four years in spite of few resources. They are praying for assistance in order to provide medicine, clothing and food for 50 displaced families (four members, on average) for \$65 a month.

Sorely needed community water supply and sanitation facilities for 25 shelters or tents would require \$10,000, and the ministry also plans to provide 50 families with tents furnished with cooking stoves, cookware, dishes, blankets and electricity at a cost of \$1,200 per shelter.

“The displaced people fled the missile attacks, cluster bombs, and barrel bombs that wrought havoc and destruction on cities and villages across Syria,” the director said. “We pray our ministry among these people will flourish, and many will come to know Jesus as Savior and Lord.”