

Rays of Hope Appear Amid Syria's Nightmare

Could Syria's headlong descent into war and chaos get any worse?

Yes—possibly much worse.

A grim summary: Civilian deaths in the nearly 18-month-old rebellion against the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad topped 21,000 in early August. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians have fled their homes, seeking safety from government and militia attacks in shrinking sanctuaries within Syria or in neighboring countries. Army and rebel forces battle for control of Syria's major cities, as large swaths of the country fall under control of the rebels – or of criminal gangs.

The blood feud between the ruling Alawite sect and Sunni Muslims (the majority of Syria's population) grows more bitter by the day. Minority Christian communities fear reprisals if the Alawites fall. As the country fragments, Kurds are angling for an autonomous region like the Kurdish zone in northern Iraq, which a wary Turkey vows to prevent at any cost. Sectarian tensions and clashes are spilling across Syria's borders, particularly into volatile Lebanon.

Syria's civil war is turning into a proxy struggle between Shiite Iran—Assad's closest remaining ally—and the Sunni states of Turkey and the Arab Middle East. It's also increasing tensions between Shiites and Sunnis across the region. Jihadist fighters are filtering into Syria to fight government forces, leading to fears of the "Iraqization" of the conflict. Israel watches with mounting alarm.

"As the chaos drags on, it has become more complicated," says a Christian observer based in the Middle East. "The horrible

things going on are coming from both sides”—though most atrocities against civilians continue to be committed by the Syrian military and the feared Shabihah militia groups aligned with the Assad regime. Each new defection of a Syrian general or politician, each successful attack by rebel forces, brings predictions that the regime will collapse any moment. But the military remains far more powerful and well-armed than the rebels. The endgame might play out for months, even years to come.

“The regime is done; it’s just a matter of time,” he predicts. “But I would be very hesitant to say that Assad is done. I think he’s going to want to sow chaos [perhaps from the safety of an Alawite stronghold within Syria]. Ultimately the Sunnis will take power, but the Alawites could remain players for a long time. Assad provided stability, albeit oppressive stability. Syria might turn into what Lebanon is – a sectarian mélange. It could get pretty messy. Or, they might trade an oppressive police state for an Islamic state. It will be a challenge either way.”

Yet as the darkness deepens, rays of light appear here and there, both inside Syria and in neighboring countries where Syrian refugees are fleeing for safety.

At significant personal risk, a Syrian Christian couple living in a neighboring country is delivering food and other basic necessities to internal refugees—mostly Sunni Muslims – in an area near one of the Syrian cities hit hard by shelling and army-rebel combat. The nearby area, populated primarily by Syrian Christians, has been spared the worst of the violence.

No “Safe Zone”

“I don’t know that there’s any ‘safe zone’ in Syria, but because this area is largely Christian, it hasn’t been a target of a lot of the fighting,” says a Christian worker. “A lot of refugees who didn’t leave the country went to this area and sought refuge. There’s a great opportunity there. We’re in

the very beginning stages of that project. The severity of the need is greater inside the country than what we're seeing [among refugees leaving the country]."

More than 37,000 Syrians have crossed the border into northern Lebanon and the eastern Bekaa region seeking sanctuary, according to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. They need food, clothing, medicine and shelter. Assisted by Southern Baptist hunger and relief funds, Lebanese Christians have begun a third round of aid to refugees in border areas in the north. When winter set in, the emphasis moved to providing blankets, inexpensive carpets for insulation and warm clothes, since many refugees arrived with only their summer clothes. In recent months the priority has moved back to food and other basics.

"Each time we're going back to some of the same families and a lot of new families," an aid worker reports. "We've seen an increase in the number of refugees, and they're coming from farther-reaching areas—even as far as Damascus. At first they were fairly concentrated in the area right there on the border, but now a lot of refugees have made their way farther south.

"Up until maybe three months ago we had fairly open access to the border area. But the violence on the border increased to the point where the army began frequently stopping us from going. We continue to have relationship with Syrian families there, but it's increasingly difficult to get to them. Some of them have come out to meet with us, but some of them we haven't seen in weeks. There's firing across the border."

Even so, Christians have shared the Word of God—in addition to physical aid and the compassion of Christ—with thousands of Syrians looking for truth they can hold onto in difficult times.

"In the midst of all the violence, you see these bright spots

and know He really is at work and drawing the hearts of people to Himself,” says the worker. “We’ve shared the Gospel with maybe 15,000 people and left Bibles in their hands.”

One is a 16-year-old Syrian girl who received a Bible late last year. Recently Christian workers entered a different household to deliver aid and the same girl was there.

“None of us remembered her, but she remembered us,” the worker recounts. “She pulled one of the workers aside and said she had been reading her Bible and had written down all these questions on a piece of paper. She said, ‘I need you to help me understand what I’m reading. I have all these questions. Can somebody come back and explain the answers to me?’ It’s like the farmer who goes out to plant the seed and he doesn’t know that it’s growing. You come back later and you see a little sprout.”

Multiple Muslim and Christian-background groups—some family-size, some much larger—are reading and listening to the Word together in a “discovery” format that takes them from God’s creation of the world to the life and work of Christ in about a month.

“It’s been amazing to see, even in a group of Muslims, how people are experiencing truth and the power of God’s Word,” he says. “Our biggest challenge is leadership development. They’ll be able to do it better and carry it farther than we ever will.”

Able to Love

One of the local volunteers working with the aid team is retired from the military. He participated in many armed conflicts during his military career—most of them clashes with the Syrian army. He was shot three times; the wounds are still visible. When he began helping Syrian refugees, at first he did it out of a sense of obligation. Not anymore.

“Of all the people in the world I probably should hate the

worst, it's Syrians," he now tells refugees. "But Jesus has changed me so much; He has changed my heart. Now I don't serve you because it's an obligation. It's a privilege because of the forgiveness and love Jesus has shown me. He has filled my heart with that same love, and I'm able to love you and stand beside you."

In neighboring Jordan, where some 145,000 mostly Sunni Syrians have fled, similar forms of ministry continue in border areas. The Jordanian government has opened a large border camp for the hundreds of refugees arriving daily and will likely open more. But most Syrian families are living in border towns and villages—where they struggle to locate shelter, pay rent and find work. Christians are aiding hundreds of families with food and other needs, listening, forming friendships and sharing hope.

"We encourage them to share with us whatever is on their hearts so that we might know how to best meet their needs and show them His compassion," says a Christian worker. "Some of the things they have seen and experienced recently are shocking. One man we have helped was shot in the head. Another man was hit by an RPG; his arm is messed up. Some refugees we meet are complete families but many others are missing fathers, sons or brothers.

No two situations seem to be the same, except that there are a lot of hurting people pouring out of Syria. We sit with them to hear about what their families are going through. If they want to talk about something from a counseling perspective, we want them to talk, but we are also always hoping for those opportunities God will provide to share and introduce other things that will truly give them peace"—including Bibles and audio players with New Testament stories.

"Despite the awful things that have happened and continue to happen, God is giving us opportunities to share His love and compassion with these refugees. That wasn't happening a whole

lot beforehand. We are finding that during this time in their lives when things are in flux, they find comfort hearing about God's love for them. After our visits, they expect us to pray with them and we are doing that and more. ... Pray that we would continue to have an open door to share life with these families and that they would see His love in our actions."

He, along with other workers in Jordan and Lebanon, also asks prayer for continued open doors, for an end to the violence tearing Syria apart, for boldness and for wisdom in how best to use limited resources.

"God is at work in this crisis, and we're trying to find where," says one worker. "It will take a higher level of creativity and a higher level of sacrifice. Are we going to be good stewards of the crises of our day—even if that means greater suffering, hardship and risk?"

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