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Remaining Armenians pray for peace at Christmas in Damascus

Reuters (06.01.2014) - A small congregation of Armenian Orthodox Christians prayed for peace at a Christmas service in Old Damascus on Monday and reflected on the hardships of living in an uneasy middle ground in Syria's increasingly sectarian conflict.

They lamented a low turnout compared to previous years - many have fled Syria and others were unable to get through a maze of checkpoints and traffic bottlenecks to reach the church of St. Sarkis for Armenian Christmas, celebrated on January 6.

"You used to see this entire church courtyard full, but it's been fewer and fewer people every season," said one of the community organisers who, like all those interviewed for this article, asked to remain anonymous due to sensitivities.

"The trouble is many would have liked to come today but they couldn't because of the traffic at checkpoints."

Syria's conflict has grown increasingly sectarian since it started as a peaceful uprising in March 2011 and then evolved into an armed rebellion against President Bashar al-Assad.

Majority Sunni Muslims dominate the uprising while minorities have for the most part stuck with the government, which is dominated by members of Assad's Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shi'ite Islam.

Syria's Christians, around 10 percent, occupy an uneasy middle ground. Some Christians have fled to government-held territory, while others have stayed with the rebels. Some have joined the insurgency.

Better days

Archbishop Armash Nalbandian led the mass then delivered a short sermon, with a prayer for better days.

"Last year witnessed many martyrs and kidnappings ... There have been martyrs in our schools ... children aged six and seven killed." he said. "We pray this year for the release of the kidnapped, and for peace in our country, Syria," he said.

An estimated 100,000 Armenians live in Syria, many the descendants of displaced Armenians from the early twentieth century Ottoman wars.

Many of the Armenian Orthodox Christian congregation live in the outlying Damascus district of Jaramana, a densely populated area that is home to many of the city's Christians.

Jaramana has been the site of several car bombs and dozens of mortar and rocket attacks that the government blames on rebels who control the adjacent suburbs. Some rebels blame Christians for sitting on the fence during the uprising.

The community organiser said it took him one and a half hours to arrive from his home in Jaramana to the church, walking most of the way. Two years ago, before the checkpoints, the drive would have taken around 20 minutes.

The church pews snugly fit about 100 congregants but were mostly empty when the service commenced. By the end of the two-hour service about 200 worshippers had shown up, spilling over into the courtyard. Congregants estimated that in 2013 there were twice as many in attendance and in years passed there were hundreds more.

Among the congregants were newly displaced Armenians from Aleppo and elsewhere in Syria. One couple said they escaped dire conditions in Aleppo, where power and water cuts continue for days at a time.

"It took us 52 hours by bus to get here and we slept two nights inside our bus, which was parked inside a garage," said the wife. The journey took about eight hours before the war.

Some Armenians also tried to escape the violence and repatriate to Armenia. But community leaders say many of those who left have come back to Syria.

"We might feel that our origin is Armenia but the country is totally alien to us," said a community elder. "Armenia is a very modern country with lots of big companies. But here? We're used to small family business. It just doesn't work over there, so people came back."

In Syria, Nuns moved from captured Christian village by Islamist fighters

Reuters (03.12.2013) - Islamist fighters who captured a Christian village north of Damascus have moved some nuns to a nearby town but it was not clear if they had been kidnapped or evacuated for their safety, the Vatican's ambassador to Syria said on Tuesday.

The militants took the ancient quarter of Maaloula on Monday after heavy fighting with President Bashar al-Assad's forces, activists said. Syrian state media said they were holding the nuns captive in the Greek Orthodox monastery of Mar Thecla.

Vatican envoy Mario Zenari said the 12 nuns had been taken from Maaloula to Yabroud, about 20 km (13 miles) to the north.

Zenari said the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate had told him armed men had entered the monastery on Monday afternoon.

"They forced the sisters to evacuate and to follow them towards Yabroud. At this moment we cannot say if this is a kidnapping or an evacuation," he told Reuters by telephone from Damascus. "I heard now there is a very fierce conflict going on in Maaloula."

The fighting, which pits al Qaeda-linked Nusra Front fighters and other rebels against Assad's forces, is part of a wider struggle for control of the Damascus-Homs highway in central Syria.

An official at the Greek Patriarchate confirmed that he believed the nuns were taken to Yabroud, but gave no details.

Syrian state television said Christians had held a service in Damascus on Monday to protest against the capture of the nuns and the kidnapping of two bishops near Aleppo in April.

Pro-rebel activists said the nuns were safe and that the real threat to them came from what they described as random Syrian army bombardment of Maaloula.

The village was the scene of heavy fighting in September, when it changed hands four times in a series of attacks and counter-assaults by rebels and government forces.

Zenari said the nuns were among the last residents left in Maaloula after most fled south for relative safety in Damascus.

The army, backed by pro-Assad militias, has been trying to secure towns on the road from Damascus to the city of Homs and Assad's Alawite heartland overlooking the Mediterranean.

Control of the road would help secure Assad's grip over central Syria, and would also enable safe passage for hundreds of tonnes of chemical agents which are due to be shipped out of the country by the end of the year for destruction.

Death and destruction in a Christian town

Aid to the Church in Need (05.11.2013) – Horrific details are emerging of atrocities carried out in a Christian town in Syria in what is being seen as the worst act of anti-Christian persecution since the war in Syria began.

Inhabitants of Sadad, near Homs, who fled the largely Syrian Orthodox town when rebels attacked last month, are now returning home to discover the scale of atrocities, where 1,500 families were held hostage and 45 were killed, including two teenage boys, their mother and three of their grandparents who were thrown down a well.

The reports, sent by Church leaders to Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), describe how, in this ancient Christian town mentioned in the Bible (Ezekiel), vulnerable people unable to escape, including the elderly, disabled, women and children, were subjected to torture, such as strangulation.

Church sources say 30 bodies were found in two separate mass graves.

Discovered dead in a well in Sadad were the remains of six members of one family including Matanios El Sheikh, 85, his wife, Habsah, 75, their daughter, Njala, 45, and grandsons Ranim, aged 18, a first-year university student, and his 16-year-old brother Fadi, in class XI at school.

Reports state they were thrown down a well on October 26th along with the boys' paternal grandmother, 90-year-old Mariam.

Their funerals, which took place Monday, November 4th, came as a community, whose town dates back to 2000BC, begins to grieve the loss of those being described as "martyrs" by Church leaders.

The atrocities took place during a week-long occupation of Sadad by the Al-Nusra Front and Daash, rebel forces who, according to Church leaders, held 1,500 families as "human shields" in a bid to stop Government troops retaking the village.

The tragedy in Sadad began on October 21st when rebel forces invaded the town and carried out what Syrian Orthodox Archbishop Selwanos Boutros Alnemeah, Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan of Homs and Hama, called the "most serious and biggest massacre of Christians" since the conflict began in Syria in March 2011 (Fides, 10//31/13).

At least 2,500 families fled with no more than the clothes they were wearing to the likes of Homs, 37 miles away, as well as Damascus, Al-Fhayle, Maskane, Fayrouza, Zzaydal and elsewhere.

Some who escaped traveled 5 miles by foot to find shelter.

Those unable to flee Sadad were quickly rounded up by the rebels as part of a bid to fend off a counter-attack by forces loyal to Syria's President Bashar Al Assad.

In the days that followed, at least 30 were wounded and 10 are reported still missing.

Accounts from Archbishop Alnemeh and other Church leaders described widespread looting and destruction of shops, homes and government buildings, as well as the state hospital, clinic, post office and schools.

According to reports, young people described receiving taunts and insults against their Christian faith and obscene words were written on church artifacts.

Sadad, where Aramaic, the language of Jesus Christ is spoken, has up to 14 churches, one of which, the Syriac Orthodox Church of St. Theodore, was used by the rebels, who desecrated it.

In an interview Monday, November 4th, with ACN, Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch Gregorios III of Damascus described the atrocities in Sadad as "bestial."

Highlighting the murder of the family thrown down the well, Patriarch Gregorios said, "How can somebody do such inhumane and bestial things to an elderly couple and their family?"

"I do not understand why the world does not raise its voice against such acts of brutality."

Reiterating his call for an end to the transfer of arms to Syria, especially extremist rebel groups, Patriarch Gregorios said that already the atrocity had instigated another wave of emigration of Christians from Syria.

He said that, until now, the faithful had seen Sadad as a safe haven, compared to the likes of Homs where Christian communities had come under attack.

Describing the atrocity as "a sign of the rise of fundamentalism and extremism" in the country, he said, "What happened in Sadad is very significant in that it is frightening the Christians into leaving the country."

"I have heard from the parish priest [of Sadad] and the [local] bishop that a number of the people are leaving Syria."

Mortar fire hits Nunciature in Damascus, no casualties

Asianews (05.11.2013) - A mortar round hit the Vatican Nunciature building this morning in Damascus. The bomb was aimed at the third floor, where the sleeping quarters of the Nuncio Mgr Mario Zenari (see photo), his secretary Fr George, and the sisters working at the residence are located.

"Thank God no one was hit," Fr George told *AsiaNews*. The mortar round destroyed part of the roof, including the eaves of the building and part of the facade.

Archbishop Zenari is one of the few diplomats who never left his post in the past two years of civil war.

He continues, along with the pope, to push the international community for a peace conference on Syria, without any veto on participants.

Christians buried in mass graves, city destroyed in 'Biggest Christian Massacre' in Syrian civil war

The Christian Post (01.11.2013) - More than 30 bodies of Christian civilians have been uncovered in mass graves in the Syrian city of Sadad, which was destroyed in an attack by Islamic militants, with the Syrian Orthodox Archbishop describing the incident as "the most serious and biggest massacre" of Christians in the past two years and a half.

A total of 45 Christians were reported to have been killed in the small town halfway between Homs and Damascus, after Islamist militants apparently invaded on Oct. 21. Fides News Agency reported that representatives of the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate and relatives of the victims found the mass graves when they returned home, and later provided a proper burial for their dead relatives and friends.

"45 innocent civilians were martyred for no reason, and among them several women and children, many thrown into mass graves. Other civilians were threatened and terrorized. 30 were wounded and 10 are still missing," explained Archbishop Selwanos Boutros Alnemeh, Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan of Homs and Hama.

"For one week, 1,500 families were held as hostages and human shields. Among them children, the elderly, the young, men and women. Some of them fled on foot travelling 8 km (5 miles) from Sadad to Al-Hafer to find refuge. About 2,500 families fled from Sadad, taking only their clothes, due to the irruption of armed groups and today they are refugees scattered between Damascus, Homs, Fayrouza, Zaydal, Maskane, and Al-Fhayle."

Eyewitnesses said the 15,000 population city has been entirely destroyed and looted. Sadad was described as an ancient village dating back to 2,000 B.C. with a number of churches, temples, historic landmarks and archaeological sites.

Syria has been locked in a civil war for over two years and a half now, with various rebel factions trying to take down the government of President Bashar al-Assad. Christians, who make up 10 percent of the population, have been caught in the crossfire, and worries are that a victory for radical Islamist groups will put them in even greater danger.

"I think the Islamic rebels winning is a bad idea for the Christians. All of a sudden we'll have another Islamic state where Christians are persecuted," Senator Rand Paul (R-Ky.) asserted in September.

Archbishop Alnemeh said in his account of the mass attack in Sadad that people now have no electricity, water or telephone, and that all the houses have been robbed.

"The churches are damaged and desecrated, deprived of old books and precious furniture. Schools, government buildings, municipal buildings have been destroyed, along with the post office, the hospital and the clinic," he added.

"We have shouted aid to the world but no one has listened to us. Where is the Christian conscience? Where is human consciousness? Where are my brothers? I think of all those who are suffering today in mourning and discomfort: We ask everyone to pray for us."

Thousands of Syrian Christians ask for Russian citizenship

AsiaNews/Agencies (18.10.2013) - About 50,000 Syrian Christians have asked for Russian citizenship, fearing "banishment from our land" for "first time since the Nativity of Christ," the Russian Foreign Ministry said on its website where it published an appeal by residents of Qalamoun, an area of predominantly Christian villages, like [Maaloula](#), which was recently targeted by the al-Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front. For the petitioners, the West is to blame for supporting "terrorists" in their attacks against Syria. By contrast, the Russian Federation is praised as "a powerful factor of global peace and stability".

"Since Syrian law allows dual citizenship, we have decided to seek citizenship of the Russian Federation if this is possible. Russian citizenship would be an honour for any Syrian Christian who wished to acquire it," the group said in its letter to the Russian Foreign Ministry.

"Our appeal does not mean that we have any mistrust in the Syrian army or government. However, we are scared of the conspiracy of the West and hateful fanatics who are waging a brutal war against our country," the letter went on to say.

Classified as a UNESCO heritage site, Maaloula lies 40 km north of Damascus. The village is famous throughout the world as one of the symbols of Christianity in the Middle East and is the only place in the world where Aramaic is still spoken. The village is considered a symbol of religious coexistence.

"It is for the first time since the Nativity of Christ that we Christians of Qalamoun living in the villages of Saidnaya, Maara Saidnaya, Maaloula and Maaroun are under threat of banishment from our land. We prefer death to exile and life in refugee camps, and so we will defend our land, honour and faith, and will not leave the land on which Christ walked," the letter said.

"The Christians of Qalamoun believe that the purpose of the Western-backed terrorists is to eliminate our presence in what is our native land, and with some of the most revolting methods as well, including savage murders of ordinary people," the letter read.

"We see the Russian Federation as a powerful factor of global peace and stability. Russia pursues a firm line in the defence of Syria, its people and its territorial integrity," the letter added.

The attack by Islamic extremists in Maaloula has become a symbol of Christian suffering in the Middle Eastern country.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which is connected to the rebels, has confirmed the presence of al-Qaeda affiliated groups among the fighters that invaded the town.

During their attack, the extremists defiled the monasteries of St Thecla and St Sergius, destroying the crosses on their domes and wrecking their ancient sacred furniture. (N.A./S.C.)

Resolution of the European Parliament on persecution against Christians

European Parliament (10.10.2013) -

European Parliament resolution of 10 October 2013 on recent cases of violence and persecution against Christians, notably in Maaloula (Syria) and Peshawar (Pakistan) and the case of Pastor Saeed Abedini (Iran) (2013/2872(RSP))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to its resolutions of 15 November 2007 on serious events which compromise Christian communities' existence and those of other religious communities⁽¹⁾ , of 21 January 2010 on recent attacks on Christian communities⁽²⁾ , of 6 May 2010 on the mass atrocities in Jos, Nigeria⁽³⁾ , of 20 May 2010 on religious freedom in Pakistan⁽⁴⁾ , of 25 November 2010 on Iraq: the death penalty (notably the case of Tariq Aziz) and attacks against Christian communities⁽⁵⁾ , of 20 January 2011 on the situation of Christians in the context of freedom of religion⁽⁶⁾ , of 27 October 2011 on the situation in Egypt and Syria, in particular of Christian communities⁽⁷⁾ , and of 13 December 2012 on the annual report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World 2011 and the European Union's policy on the matter⁽⁸⁾ ,
- having regard to its recommendation to the Council of 13 June 2013 on the draft EU Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief⁽⁹⁾ ,
- having regard to the EU Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief,
- having regard to the statement of 23 September 2013 by Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the Commission, condemning the attack on the Christian community in Peshawar, Pakistan,
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 21 February 2011 on intolerance, discrimination and violence on the basis of religion or belief, as well as the Council conclusions of 16 November 2009 underlining the strategic importance of freedom of religion or belief and of countering religious intolerance,
- having regard to Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948,
- having regard to Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966,
- having regard to the UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion and Belief of 1981,

- having regard to the reports of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief,
- having regard to Rules 122(5) and 110(4) of its Rules of Procedure,

A. whereas the European Union has repeatedly expressed its commitment to freedom of religion, freedom of conscience and freedom of thought, and has stressed that governments have a duty to guarantee these freedoms throughout the world; whereas political and religious leaders have a duty at all levels to combat extremism and promote mutual respect among individuals and religious groups; whereas the development of human rights, democracy and civil liberties is the common base on which the European Union builds its relations with third countries and has been provided for by the democracy clause in the agreements between the EU and third countries;

B. whereas, according to international human rights law and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in particular, everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; whereas this right includes freedom to change one's religion or belief, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest one's religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching; whereas, according to the UN Human Rights Committee, the freedom of religion or belief protects all beliefs, including theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs;

C. whereas several UNHRC resolutions call on 'all States, within their national legal framework, in conformity with international human rights instruments, to take all appropriate measures to combat hatred, discrimination, intolerance and acts of violence, intimidation and coercion motivated by religious intolerance, including attacks on religious places, and to encourage understanding, tolerance and respect in matters relating to freedom of belief or religion';

D. whereas according to various reports, government repression and social hostility against individuals and groups from various religious or belief backgrounds are on the increase, in particular in Pakistan, Arab Spring countries and parts of Africa; whereas in some cases the situation facing Christian communities is such as to endanger their future existence and, if they were to disappear, this would entail the loss of a significant part of the religious heritage of the countries concerned;

Maaloula, Syria

E. whereas on 4 September 2013, militants from Jabhat al-Nusra, a group with ties to al-Qaeda, launched an assault on the Syrian village of Maaloula;

F. whereas Maaloula is a symbol of Christian presence in Syria and has been home to different religious communities who have lived in peaceful coexistence for centuries; whereas every September Syrians of all religions have participated in the Day of the Cross festival in this town; whereas Maaloula is one of the three towns and villages in the country where Aramaic is still spoken by the local population;

G. whereas the violent clashes in Maaloula are the first attacks specifically targeting a notable Christian community since the beginning of the violent crisis in Syria; whereas at least four people – Michael Thaalab, Antoine Thaalab, Sarkis Zakem and Zaki Jabra – were killed in these clashes while others – Shadi Thaalab, Jihad Thaalab, Moussa Shannis, Ghassan Shannis, Daoud Milaneh and Atef Kalloumeh – were kidnapped or disappeared; whereas since fighting began in the town, most of its 5 000 residents have fled to neighbouring villages or to Damascus; whereas events in Maaloula are evidence of the further sectarianisation of the Syrian conflict;

H. whereas the Convent of St Tekla (Mar Takla) has historically been home to nuns and to orphans of both the Christian and Muslim religions; whereas around 40 nuns and orphans have stayed in Maaloula despite the intense fighting and are trapped in the convent under deteriorating conditions due to the lack of water and other supplies;

Peshawar, Pakistan

I. whereas on 22 September 2013, in a double suicide bomb attack on the All Saints Church in Kohati Gate, a suburb of Peshawar, at least 82 people were killed and over 120 injured;

J. whereas the Islamist group Jundullah with links to Tehrik-i-Talibaan Pakistan claimed responsibility for the attack, saying it would continue with attacks on Christians and non-Muslims because they are enemies of Islam and would not stop until US drone attacks in Pakistan cease; whereas Tehrik-i-Talibaan Pakistan denied any involvement in the blast and having any links with Jundullah;

K. whereas Pakistan's Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, condemned the attack, saying that targeting innocent people is against the teachings of Islam;

L. whereas Christians, who represent about 1,6 % of the population in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, suffer from prejudice and sporadic bouts of mob violence;

M. whereas the majority of Pakistani Christians lead a precarious existence, often fearful of allegations of blasphemy, a subject which can provoke outbursts of public violence;

N. whereas on 9 March 2013, Muslims in Lahore torched more than 150 Christian homes and two churches in response to an allegation of blasphemy;

O. whereas Pakistan's blasphemy laws make it dangerous for religious minorities to express themselves freely or engage openly in religious activities;

The case of Pastor Saeed Abedini, Iran

P. whereas Saeed Abedini, an Iranian-American pastor imprisoned in Iran since 26 September 2012, was sentenced on 27 January 2013 by a revolutionary court in Iran to an eight-year prison term on charges of disturbing national security by creating a network of Christian churches in private homes; whereas it is reported that Saeed Abedini has suffered physical and psychological abuse in prison;

Q. whereas the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran asserts that Christians should not face sanctions for manifesting and practising their faith, and therefore remains concerned that Christians are reportedly being arrested and prosecuted on the grounds of vaguely worded national security crimes for exercising their beliefs;

1. Strongly condemns the recent attacks against Christians and expresses its solidarity with the families of the victims; expresses once again its deep concerns about the proliferation of episodes of intolerance, repression and violent events directed against Christian communities, particularly in the countries of Africa, Asia and the Middle East; urges the governments concerned to ensure that the perpetrators of these crimes and all persons responsible for the attacks, as well as for other violent acts against Christians or other religious minorities, are brought to justice and tried by due process;

2. Strongly condemns all forms of discrimination and intolerance based on religion and belief, and acts of violence against all religious communities; stresses once again that the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is a fundamental human right;

3. Reiterates its concern about the exodus of Christians from various countries, especially Middle Eastern countries, in recent years;

Maaloula, Syria

4. Is worried about the current situation facing Christians in Syria; condemns the actions of Jabhat al-Nusra and associated militants in Maaloula and the surrounding area; notes that until now Christians and Muslims used to coexist peacefully in this village, even during the conflict, and agreed that the town must remain a place of peace; recognises that the attack on Maaloula is only one aspect of the Syrian civil war;

5. Emphasises that the monasteries of Maaloula have to be protected in order to preserve life, religious activities and architectural treasures, and to allow Christians and Muslims to live peacefully together;

6. Calls for immediate support and humanitarian assistance to the nuns and orphans trapped in the Convent of St Tekla (Mar Takla); calls on all sides involved in the conflict to allow access to the convent to humanitarian groups;

7. Is concerned about the consequences of these attacks and the possible risks to the Christian community; is aware that Christian and other communities are being caught in the crossfire and are being forced to take sides in a war that continues to sectarianise;

8. Stresses that all actors have a duty to protect all the different minorities present in Syria, including Shias, Alawites, Kurds, Druzes and Christians;

Peshawar, Pakistan

9. Strongly condemns the attack on the All Saints Church in Peshawar and the other recent terrorist attacks;

10. Welcomes the widespread condemnation of the attacks by political players and sections of Pakistan's civil society;

11. Urges the Government of Pakistan to do everything in its power to bring the perpetrators of the attack on the All Saints Church in Peshawar to justice; calls for stronger action to ensure the protection of all Pakistani citizens – regardless of their religion or belief – and to bring to justice all groups and individuals responsible for inciting and carrying out acts of terror;

12. Calls on the Government of Pakistan to take action to protect victims of religiously motivated mob violence, to actively address religious hostility by societal actors, to combat religious intolerance, acts of violence and intimidation, and to act against the perception of impunity;

13. Is deeply worried about the growing danger for Christians in Pakistan, given the recent rise in attacks on this minority, such as the persecution of hundreds of Christians by Islamic zealots in March in Lahore over allegations of blasphemy against Islam;

14. Is deeply concerned about the general situation facing religious minorities in Pakistan, and especially the Christian churches, which have received threats from the Taliban and other extremist groups;

15. Expresses its deep concern that the controversial blasphemy laws are open to misuse that can affect people of all faiths in Pakistan; expresses its particular concern that use of the blasphemy laws, which were publicly opposed by the late Minister Shahbaz Bhatti and by the late Governor Salman Taseer, is currently on the rise to target Christians in Pakistan;

16. Calls on the Government of Pakistan to carry out a thorough review of the blasphemy laws and their current application, in particular Sections 295 B and C of the Penal Code, which prescribe mandatory life sentences (295 B and C) or even the death penalty (295 C) for alleged acts of blasphemy;

17. Recalls that freedom of religion and minority rights are guaranteed by Pakistan's constitution; encourages all Pakistanis to work together to promote and ensure tolerance and mutual understanding;

18. Welcomes the measures taken in the interest of religious minorities by the Government of Pakistan since November 2008, such as establishing a five per cent quota for minorities in the federal job sector, recognising non-Muslim public holidays and declaring a National Minorities Day;

The case of Pastor Saeed Abedini, Iran

19. Is deeply concerned about the fate of Pastor Saeed Abedini, who has been detained for over a year and was sentenced to eight years of prison in Iran on charges related to his religious beliefs;

20. Calls on the Government of Iran to exonerate and immediately release Saeed Abedini and all other individuals held or charged on account of their religion;

21. Reiterates its call on Iran to take steps to ensure that full respect is shown for the right to freedom of religion or belief, including by ensuring that its legislation and practices fully conform to Article 18 of the ICCPR; points out that this also requires that the right of everyone to change his or her religion, if he or she so chooses, be unconditionally and fully guaranteed;

22. Welcomes the talk of moderation and religious tolerance from Iran's new president, Hassan Rouhani; believes that the EU should engage in a human rights dialogue with Iran;

23. Reiterates its call on the Council, the Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission to pay greater attention to the subject of freedom of religion or belief and to the situation of religious communities, including Christians, in agreements and cooperation arrangements with third countries, as well as in human rights reports;

24. Welcomes the adoption by the Council on 24 June 2013 of the EU Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief; urges the Commission, the EEAS and the Member States to fully implement these guidelines and to make full use of any tools and suggestions presented therein;

25. Supports all initiatives aimed at promoting dialogue and mutual respect between communities; calls on all religious authorities to promote tolerance and to take initiatives against hatred and violent and extremist radicalisation;

26. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the European External Action Service, the Vice-President of the European Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, the governments and parliaments of the Member States, the Secretary-General of the UN, the UN Human Rights Council, UN Women, the Government of Syria, the Syrian National Council, the Government and Parliament of Pakistan, and the Government and Parliament of Iran.

Leaving home: Muslim rebels drive Christians out of Syria

Assyrian International News Agency (10.07.2013) - A couple of days after she fled Syria for Turkey, a colleague sent me a message.

"Dear Nuri, this is a court that the extremists established in my city, Lattakia, in the [Syrian] village of Kansabba. This Islamic court issues the law according to the extremists' religion. It started today. They are forcing everyone to adopt their fundamentalist Islamic laws. See the picture." Here is her photo:

Now she is waiting for smugglers to take her to Sweden.

The same day she sent me the message, fighting intensified between rival Syrian opposition factions and [12 Islamic groups that had left the Free Syrian Army](#). That fact scared all non-Muslims.

As well it should. I opened my Facebook account, and saw that a friend, Nicholas Al-Jeloo, had posted news about the Sept. 21 murder in Tabqa, in Syria's al-Raqqah province, of a 26-year-old Assyrian man named Ninar Odisho.

I picked up the phone and called Al-Jeloo. He's an Australian-born Assyrian with a Ph.D. in modern Assyrian Studies. He has visited the Middle East since 2002 for fieldwork and research among indigenous Assyrians. He has been to Syria many times to connect with extended family members in the Jazirah, an island between two rivers in northern Syria, and in al-Raqqah province.

I wanted to know more about the murder. Why was one person's death so important? It's a war, and many people die every day in Syria.

"It's about the future for Christians which, as it stands, looks grim if nothing is done to protect the country's vulnerable minorities," he said to me in Assyrian. "Therefore, killings that are religiously and ethnically related are important to report about. On the eve of Syria's civil war, more than 200 Christian Assyrian families, 1,000 individuals, lived in Tabqa."

Nearly all of them have left the country and now live in Lebanon. Some have made it to Germany. Others are stranded all over the world, abandoned by smugglers who failed to get them to Europe.

Three families had remained in Tabqa. The rebels told them that they would not be harmed. They had nowhere else to go, and were too scared to leave because there is so much danger on the roads. They were poor, and were trying to maintain what little they had.

One of those family members was Ninar Odisho.

Ninar was killed by the rebels because he is a Christian [AINA [9-23-2013](#)]. They even burnt a cross into his face. Apparently, the rebels do not want to openly show that they are against non-Muslims, lest their sponsors stop arming them and sending them aid. Thus, they let some Christians remain in areas that they take over, and then kill them one by one, causing the rest to flee voluntarily, so it doesn't appear as if they are committing a massacre.

The three last families in Tabqa have since fled, badly traumatised. Al-Jeloo has spoken to some of them.

My journalist friend, waiting in Turkey for passage to Sweden, confirms what Al-Jeloo has told me. She says that in places where the fundamentalists have established Islamic courts, there is no future for Christians - or any others who don't want to live their lives according to Sharia law. She says I will even find Swedish jihadists on YouTube, preaching Sharia in Syria, in Swedish even. It took me only two minutes to find several.

With the help of a Palestinian living in Sweden, whose asylum case I followed 10 years ago, I get in touch with one of the Swedish jihadists.

"Everybody who wants to live in Syria, and who obeys to live according to the Sharia laws and the holy Koran, are welcome to stay in the country," he tells me. "All the others have to go to sinful places. It's our duty to preach the word of the prophet Muhammad. If we don't do that and don't force people to follow his words, we will be punished ourselves."

I ask the jihadist if he can give me his name. "I cannot," he says. He doesn't want to hurt his family in Sweden by revealing his identity.

Next day, scrolling through Facebook, I spot that my Syrian journalist friend also is online. I send her a message about the interview I made with the Jihadist.

"I met hundreds of bearded young men like him, from all over the world, on the streets of my native city," she writes back. "That's why I left."

Christians flee Syria village that speaks the language of Jesus

Christians in Syria were fleeing one of the oldest Christian towns in the world on Sunday, after regime forces failed to win it back from Islamist rebel fighters.

The Telegraph (08.09.2013) - Rebel groups, including a branch of al-Qaeda, have taken control of Maaloula, one of the few remaining villages where the language of Christ is still spoken, residents and activists reported.

"Our army, the Syrian army, has failed us," said Sister Antoinette, a nun from Maaloula, claiming the regime had forsaken control of the town. "We called the army, we begged them to come inside Maaloula and save us but they stayed outside. They sold us because we are a minority. They abandoned us because we are Christians."

The Syrian government denied that it had lost control Maaloula. The state television channel SANA announced a series of victories against the "terrorist" invaders.

But video footage posted on YouTube on Sunday from the picturesque town told a different story: rebel fighters are shown walking through the streets of the village. A commander points out damage to the wall's of the town's ancient St Thecla monastery, which, he says, was caused by government tank fire.

Nestled deep in the mountains outside of Damascus, Maaloula was long known as a place for peaceful reflection. St Thecla, who is supposedly buried in the convent, was a follower of St Paul who fled to the village in Syria to avoid marriage, having taken an oath of chastity. It is said that the cleft of rock in which the convent is placed opened up to allow her to escape her pursuers.

This is one of only three places in the world where Western Aramaic, a dialect of the language spoken by Christ. It's inhabitants are mostly Melkite Greek Catholic and Orthodox Christians have historically lived alongside a Sunni Muslim minority. Throughout the civil war, that has already claimed over 100,000 lives and torn apart the sectarian fabric of the country, Maaloula remained one of the last few places where Sunni Muslims and Christians could peacefully coexist.

Many of the rebels who stormed the town this week however, residents said, were overtly sectarian. The attack on Maaloula was a joint operation between moderate rebels from the Free Syrian Army, and Jabhat al-Nusra, a jihadist group aligned with al-Qaeda.

Rebels had initially tried to take the village last Wednesday, launching the operation by detonating a car bomb at the checkpoint to the entrance of the town. The army initially pushed back against the onslaught, but were eventually forced to flee the central part of the town.

Villagers told the Daily Telegraph that, having won control of much of the town, the rebel groups had turned on each other, with the hardline Jabhat al-Nusra, who believes in turning Syria into an Islamic emirate seeking to force the more moderate FSA fighters from the area.

Sister Antoinette said her brother in law had been "killed" by rebel fighters, and that his son has been kidnapped. Another resident in the village, speaking anonymously, told the Daily Telegraph that his neighbour was slaughtered in his home, and that rebels had tried to "force a man to convert to Islam".

Gregorios III, the Greek Catholic Patriarch in Damascus denounced the attack: "Why do the rebels make trouble in Maaloula, a peaceful town? Why create war where there are churches and where the people are peaceful? Leave us alone!"

He added: "I hope your country can distinguish between the opposition and al-Qaeda bandits. The opposition are Syrian's too, that is OK, push them to dialogue. But to let these extremists commit these tragedies in our country is deeply immoral. Why not put the same effort into creating a peace agreement, as you are in planning to bomb Syria?".

What caused Syria's civil war?

Syrian Anglican priest gives his take on how the current conflict came into being

WWM (16.08.2013) - Throughout its history, ancient and modern, Syria has played host to ethnic and religious minorities living together very much in harmony.

Syria, in the original sense of what is now known as "Greater Syria", encompassed much of the Levant – today's states of Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan, plus a portion of Turkey. This is the cradle of the three major monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam; two were born in Syria, and Islam found its way there very early in its existence.

Its geopolitical position brought Syria to the attention of many different superpowers and, sadly, it has often been a battleground for these foreign powers. Throughout millennia of occupation and recent decades of independence, the minorities in Syria have always stayed true to their homeland: they played a major role in the liberation from the Ottomans after more than 500 years of oppression, and from the French Mandate in the twentieth century, leading to independence in 1946.

Christians, Druze, Alawites, Kurds and other, smaller minorities worked hand in hand with the majority Sunnis to secure the liberation of Syria from all foreign occupation.

In 1970 the political situation in Syria took a dramatic turn when a faction of military leaders who were Alawites – an Islamic sect – took power. After many centuries in which the Syrians had been ruled by outsiders, they now found themselves ruled by one of their own minorities.

For years Syrians hoped that the Assads, the ruling family, would bring stability and freedom after the troubled 1950s and 60s, during which a series of coups d'états pushed the country into uncertainty and military conflict.

In 1973, just three years after he seized power, Hafez al-Assad joined with Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat in a new major war against Israel. The Soviet Union supplied Egypt and Syria with arms, while the United States of America backed Israel. This disastrous war damaged relations throughout the Middle East and achieved little for Syria.

Before the region could recover, civil war engulfed Syria's southern neighbour, Lebanon. The superpowers and regional powers, including Syria, used their allies in Lebanon to wage their own proxy wars in the midst of the 17-year-long Lebanese Civil War. This act by the ruling minority dragged Syria into the heart of the bloodshed through indirect and direct military intervention.

At this time, President Hafez al-Assad focused most of his energy on foreign politics, especially the on-going conflict with Israel, and left Syria to be run mainly by members of his family and the Intelligence Services.

Trade with the rest of the world was tightly controlled by the Assad regime, and many benefitted from the Lebanese Civil War through establishing smuggling rings and black markets across the Syrian-Lebanese border – with the support of many of those in power; this was the beginning of the awful corruption that has infected Syria.

In an extremely closed economy, smuggling became the norm – even fruit, vegetables and daily products like butter, tea, sugar, bananas and tissues had to be smuggled into Syria from Lebanon and Jordan.

The corruption deepened as time went on, creating a new upper class of people from all religions who took advantage of the situation and got closer to the Alawite regime in order to further their business.

This squeezed the traditional middle class and deprived them of much of their income, fomenting anger and hostility towards the regime and towards Alawites in general.

The regime maintained its hold on power through the usual measures employed by a dictatorship: eliminating dissent through censoring the media, silencing opponents and critics, preventing free speech and denying political expression.

That created an atmosphere of fear and resentment of the Alawites and the Assad family in particular.

In the early eighties the Assad regime killed tens of thousands in the western city of Hama to silence the uprising of a Sunni group, the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood had been terrorising parts of Syria through assassination and bombing.

This brutal act did not end the Syrian people's resentment against the regime but merely drove it deeper underground where it would smoulder under the fist of the regime.

When Hafez al-Assad died in 2000, his second son, Bashar, an ophthalmologist living in London, inherited the Presidency.

The people hoped that a young President, who studied in the West and who had married an intelligent and charming Syrian-British woman, could change the situation which his father had created. Many people were almost euphorically optimistic – they saw Bashar as an open-minded, well-travelled reformer.

Indeed, Bashar al-Assad began to restore proper international trade and he started to reform the country, but everything quickly slipped back to the old corrupt ways. Most of the promises of change that Bashar made in his inauguration speech evaporated.

For most Syrians, religion was not a source of tension and conflict. I have always had dear Muslim, Alawite and Druze friends, and differences in belief were never an issue.

Sadly this has now changed in my homeland. Sectarianism was not a part of a Syrian lifestyle until recently. It has been imported by foreign religious fanatics.

The conflict in Syria began as a protest against the corruption that blighted every aspect of people's lives and the lack of freedom; the people demanded radical reforms in how Syria was governed.

The lack of response to these demands was followed by severe and sustained military action against those who protested, and this violence drove some in the opposition to seek help from foreign governments in the region.

Many of these governments are keen to shatter the age-old alliance between Syria and Iran, and the fall of the Assad regime would help them greatly; for this reason, they offered military and financial aid to the opposition but only on the condition that the "new Syria" would cut links with Iran and with Hezbollah in South Lebanon.

Some religious leaders outside Syria then called for a Sunni uprising against the minorities – with the Alawites being at the top of the list. Sadly, Christians are also on that list because they are wrongly seen as having been protected by the Alawites.

As the conflict continued, this new sectarianism spread; it became popular because it legitimised violence against others – even those who were not part of the regime. The

regime's acts of war against its own people across Syria only encouraged further resentment against the regime and the Alawites.

What is happening in Syria today is not merely the result of a minority ruling a majority. Some of those who are supported by external powers would like the conflict to be seen in this way, but the changes the people seek have nothing to do with Assad coming from a minority.

The change the Syrians desire with all their hearts is the change from oppression to freedom, from corruption to the rule of law, from dictatorship to democracy. This change would be to the great benefit of all Syrians.

Paolo Dall'Oglio reported dead: Missing Jesuit Priest killed in Syria according to human rights group

Huffington Post (14.08.2013) - Al-Qaeda-linked rebels in Syria have killed an Italian Jesuit priest who disappeared in the east of the country late last month, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Paolo Dall'Oglio, a vocal supporter of the uprising against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and some Islamist rebel groups, disappeared in the rebel-held city of Raqqa on July 29.

He had served for three decades at the Monastery of Saint Moses the Abyssinian, or Deir Mar Musa, before being expelled from the country in 2012. Since then he had returned to Syria at least twice.

The British-based monitoring group cited local activists in the city of Raqqa with close links to Dall'Oglio as saying he was killed while being held by fighters from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

It was not immediately possible to confirm the report.

The Observatory urged all Syrian opposition forces to pressure the ISIL fighters to reveal exactly what happened to Dall'Oglio "so his killers can be held to account, and to hand over his body for burial".

Activists initially said he was kidnapped by the ISIL fighters, although some later said he had been meeting the al Qaeda-linked fighters to agree a truce with Kurdish brigades.

He was instrumental in restoring Deir Mar Musa, whose cathedral houses an exquisite 11th century fresco of the Last Judgment.

Syria conflict destroys Churches & Mosques, desecrates Icons

The Huffington Post (06.08.2013) - Violence in the city of Qusayr in central Syria has caused its 50,000 original inhabitants to almost totally desert it, as government and rebel forces battled for control of the strategically important site for the last two years.

The devastation is evident everywhere. According to the government telecoms chief Mtanios al-Shaer, "The terrorists destroyed everything 24 hours before the town was liberated, and caused damage of a billion Syrian pounds (\$57 million)."

Qusayr had a significant Christian and Muslim population, and both suffered the ransacking of their holy sites. The Greek Catholic Mar Elias Church and the Sunni Muslim Grand Mosque were both almost totally destroyed. Though some icons have been recovered, they suffered grievous damage, with burns and tears running through the gilded works of art.

The golden dome of Mar Elias Church is riddled with holes now, and its marble altar has been broken. The mosque's minaret was badly damaged, and the prayer hall is covered with debris.

Some of the few residents who have stayed in Qusayr remain hopeful for the future as they try to rebuild their shattered lives. A 40-year-old technician Jafaar Nassur, explained, "We have cleaned up our desecrated church, and together we'll try to return it to the state it should be in with whatever means we have."

Kidnapped Syrian Bishops have been held captive for over 100 days

The Huffington Post (04.08.2013) - Metropolitan Mar Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim and Metropolitan Boulous Yazigi have been captured for over 100 days now, despite the calls for their release by religious leaders of all faiths from around the world.

The bishops were kidnapped on Monday, April 22, 2013, by an unknown group near the Turkish-Syrian border between Aleppo and Antioch. Ibrahim is the Syrian Orthodox Archbishop of Aleppo, and Yazigi is the Greek Orthodox Bishop of Aleppo.

The Committee of the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate made an official statement on Monday, demonstrating their frustration and sadness at the lack of progress that has been made in this case. They said:

The two sister churches have publicly and in private and continue today to exert every effort at local, regional and global levels. These efforts concentrated on all types of communication with honorable ministers, members of parliament, ambassadors, their holiness patriarchs and their graces archbishops and bishops and extending the communication channels to include the United Nations and many other stakeholders and friends, as the two churches pursued every opportunity that was proposed by the loving friends and left no stone unturned to secure their release which to date has not eventuated.

We note with utmost surprise how small and big states have shown their ignorance when it came to this serious and dangerous event.

Today, on the occasion of the centenary day of this inhumane absence and unethical handling of two Archbishops that represent the love of God and serve the people of every religion and national affiliation, especially humanitarian organizations working in the service of human beings.

The kidnappers have not indicated the whereabouts of the two Archbishops and have not announced their identity and what are their demands or the purpose behind their inhuman act.

We appeal to the international community on various levels and in every place to work with us to facilitate the work of our committee and the friends of the two Archbishop who seek to spread peace and tranquility all over the world, and emphasize that any service provided to this committee is a service to God and humanity, remembering the words of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. (Mathew 5:9)

Religions for Peace, the world's largest multi-religious organization, called again on Wednesday for the release of the two leaders. In a call to action they said, "Release the Bishops! Let them take up together with Syria's other religious leaders the hard but essential work of stemming sectarian violence and building a just peace. Religions for Peace asks all men and women of religious belief to pray—each according to his or her tradition—for the Bishops and for the well-being of all Syrians."

Syria's ancient Christian community forced to flee by sectarian violence, targeted kidnappings

The Telegraph (02.08.2013) - Towns and villages in Syria that have been home to Christians for hundreds of years are being emptied by sectarian violence and targeted kidnappings.

Tens of thousands Syriac Christians – members of the oldest Christian community in the world – have fled their ancestral provinces of Deir al-Zour and Hasakah in north-eastern Syria, residents have said.

"It breaks my heart to think how our long history is being uprooted," said Ishow Goriye, the head of a Syriac Christian political organisation.

Mr Goriye told how, during the past two years, he had watched as Christian families from Hasakah packed their possessions on the roofs of their vehicles and fled their homes "with little plan to come back".

Conflict in the area, desperate economic conditions, lawlessness, and persecution by rebel groups born from the perception that Christians support the regime remain the main reasons why Christian families are fleeing the area.

The growing presence of radical jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda, has also seen Christians targeted. "It began as kidnapping for money, but then they started telling me I should worship Allah," a male Christian resident of Hasakah who was kidnapped by jihadists said.

"I was with five others. We were tied and blindfolded and pushed down on our knees. One of the kidnappers leant so close to my face I could feel his breath. He hissed, 'Why don't you become a Muslim? Then you can be free'."

Another Christian in Hasakah said he knew of "five forced conversions" in recent weeks.

Mr Goriye's Christian Syriac Union party has long been opposed President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

While speaking to The Daily Telegraph, its members were loath to criticise the opposition rebels, but many admitted that the situation had become "too bad" not to talk about it.

'The West wants to arm the seculars or 'West-friendly' people. Well we, the Syriac Christians, are those people. We want arms to protect our communities'

Hasakah and other towns in north-eastern Syria have long been one of the main centres for Christians, who make up about 10% of the country's population of 21 million.

Residents estimate that at least a third of Christians in north-eastern Syria have fled, with few expecting to return. One Hasakah resident, who has now escaped from the area, said: "Rebels said we had to pay money for the revolution. My cousin is a farmer, and wanted to check on his land. I warned him he should take armed security but he refused.

"A group kidnapped him in the barn of his farm. We had to pay US\$60,000 for his release. They are milking the Christians".

Although accused by some opposition groups of supporting Mr Assad, much of Syria's Christian community has avoided "choosing sides" in the war, seeking self-preservation in neutrality.

But the strategy has left Christians defenceless in the face of sectarian attacks and the lawlessness that now define rebel-held areas.

Last year, when government forces pulled out of Hasakah province, leaving the area in the hands of Kurdish groups and Sunni opposition rebel, Christians became an easy target.

One of the kidnappers leant so close to my face I could feel his breath. He hissed, 'Why don't you become a Muslim? Then you can be free'

A Christian man calling himself Joseph and living in Hasakah said: "The only unprotected group are the Christians. The Arabs had arms coming from Saudi and Qatar, the Kurds had help from Kurdistan. We had no weapons at all."

Local residents said many Christians had tried to join the rebellion against Mr Assad, but their efforts were marginalised early on by sectarian-minded Sunni rebel groups.

Joseph added: "We are not with the regime. Many times the Islamists didn't want us to join them in the demonstrations. We tried to participate but we were not given a role.

"It felt as though it was a strategy to force Christians out of the revolution."

Bassam Ishak, a Christian member of the main opposition bloc the Syrian National Coalition, who comes from Hasakah, said he and his colleagues had tried "several times" to approach Western officials asking for weapons for Christian groups to defend their areas.

"The West wants to arm the seculars or 'West-friendly' people. Well we, the Syriac Christians, are those people. We want arms to protect our communities," he said.

"We spoke to Western diplomats asking for help, and everyone ignored us."

Fresh clashes between Kurdish fighters and jihadists erupted in Hasakah early Friday, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

The group said that at least 12 members of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) were killed. It added that 22 Kurdish fighters had been killed over the past few days.

Kurds have been involved in clashes with jihadists groups since mid-July.

Al Qaeda group kidnaps Italian Jesuit Paolo Dall'Oglio

Reuters (29.07.2013) - Al Qaeda-linked fighters in the rebel-held eastern Syrian city of Raqqa on Monday abducted a prominent Italian Jesuit priest who championed the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad, activists said.

Members of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant kidnapped Father Paolo Dall'Oglio while he was walking in the city, which had fallen under the control of militant Islamist brigades, the sources in Raqqa province told Reuters.

Syrian authorities expelled Dall'Oglio from the country last year after he helped victims of Assad's military crackdown from a monastery in the Anti-Lebanon mountains north of Damascus.

Rocket attack kills custodian of Syrian Shi'ite shrine

Reuters (19.07.2013) - A rocket strike near a Shi'ite Muslim shrine in Damascus killed a custodian of the site on Friday, activists and residents said, in an attack that could inflame sectarian tensions in Syria's 28-month-old conflict.

Opposition activists and residents said shrapnel killed Anas Romani, the respected caretaker of the gold-domed Sayyeda Zainab shrine in the capital's southern suburbs, a renowned pilgrimage destination for Shi'ites from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and beyond.

There were conflicting reports about damage to the shrine. The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which has a network of activists across Syria, cited sources as saying the shrine's blue-tiled sanctuary had been hit. But a local resident told Reuters the rockets landed outside the mosque.

The Syrian government accuses rebels of targeting Sayyeda Zainab, which is now protected by hundreds of Shi'ite militants from Iraq and the powerful Lebanese Hezbollah group.

They have been helping Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces battle rebels mostly from the Sunni Muslim majority, whom they accuse of threatening Shi'ite symbols in Syria.

The rebels say they are only attacking pro-Assad forces in the area, though many in their ranks use sectarian rhetoric against Assad's Shi'ite supporters.

Syria's uprising-turned-civil war has sectarian dimensions that risk spilling over into neighboring Iraq and Lebanon, which have both suffered their own communal conflicts.

Several Syrian minorities have supported Assad, including his own Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shi'ite Islam. They say they fear the rising Sunni Islamist current in the insurgency.

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has said protecting Sayyeda Zainab is vital for his group, which now openly acknowledges its involvement on Syria's battlefields, and has threatened "grave retribution" if any harm befalls the shrine.

The modern mosque houses what Shi'ites believe is the tomb of Zainab, the granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammad.

The boy killed for an off-hand remark about Muhammad - Sharia spreads in Syria

BBC News (02.07.2013) - The murder of a boy accused of blasphemy has come to symbolise concerns about the power of Islamist radicals in Syria's armed uprising. Paul Wood reports from Aleppo on how Sharia is spreading in rebel-held areas.

Mohammed Qataa's mother wanders the streets of Aleppo looking into strangers' faces as she tries to find her son's killers.

She knows she would recognise them. She was looking right at them when, in front of a dumbstruck and terrified crowd, Mohammed was shot dead, accused of blasphemy.

She remembers Mohammed as a happy, dutiful son, well known and well-liked in the Shaar neighbourhood where the men of the family scrape a living with a coffee cart.

He was 14 years old, but with no schooling possible because of the war he was usually to be found on the busy main thoroughfare through Shaar, selling the thick, sweet coffee they prefer here.

One day last month, someone asked him for a free cup. "Not even if the Prophet himself returns," he had replied, laughing. That remark was a death sentence.

It was overheard by three armed men. They dragged him to a car and took him away. Half-an-hour later, a badly beaten Mohammed was dumped back in the road by his cart.

The men, showing no fear that anyone would question what they were doing, summoned a crowd with shouts of "Oh People of Aleppo. Oh people of Shaar." Their bellows alerted Mohammed's mother.

Recalling what happened next, she buries her face in her hands and weeps.

"One of them shouted: 'Whoever insults the Prophet will be killed according to Sharia'," she told me.

"I ran down barefoot to the streets. I heard the first shot. I fell to the ground when I got there.

"One of them shot him again and kicked him. He shot him for a third time and stamped on him.

"I said: 'Why are you killing him? He's still a child!' The man shouted: 'He is not a Muslim - leave!'"

'Capital offence'

After the murder on 10 June, pictures of Mohammed's body went viral on Facebook and Twitter in Arabic.

He had been shot in the face, a hole where his nose and mouth should have been.

There was an outcry. It was claimed that the killers were from the main group linked to al-Qaeda here, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Suspicion also fell on the Nusra Front, the biggest Islamist organisation in the uprising.

Both issued statements condemning the murder, as did almost all of Aleppo's rebel brigades, and the city's main Sharia court.

We met a judge there, a 26-year-old Islamic scholar barely out of university, with a wispy beard and round glasses.

He told me the men were regime militia, "shabiha", trying to foment trouble between jihadis and other fighters.

I found that explanation rather convenient, along with the disavowals of the murder by the two Islamist groups linked to al-Qaeda.

Would regime thugs really have risked entering the heart of opposition-held Aleppo to abduct a boy - and then have returned half-an-hour later to kill him in the street?

The family say the evidence is confusing. The men spoke the classical Arabic of the Koran, yet made simple mistakes. They made the odd statement that blaspheming against God could be forgiven but insulting the Prophet was a capital offence.

The four looked like jihadis but stopped to buy a packet of sunflower seeds. People explained that the truly pious would not eat sunflower seeds because they take so long to shell - and the Prophet said not to waste time.

But though the family don't know - or are too afraid to say - which armed group is to blame for Mohammed's death, they maintain that the rebel authorities bear ultimate responsibility.

"We have no freedom left," says Mohammed's older brother, Fouad.

"We had it when the rebels first took over in Aleppo but now we have nothing. What we have instead are countless [Sharia] committees, each following its own interpretation of religion."

Public flogging

Aleppo's main Sharia court has taken pains to stress that though Mohammed Qataa's murderers said they were acting in the name of Islam, the killing was un-Islamic, a criminal act.

But whatever the killers' real motives - whether a brutal trick by the regime or a cruel and extreme interpretation of Islam by jihadis - it is also true that Sharia is spreading in rebel-held parts of Syria.

A documentary team from BBC Arabic went to the northern town of Saraqeb to follow the work of the Sharia court there, gaining extraordinary access over a period of six weeks.

Four men convicted of trying to steal a taxi in Saraqeb's Sharia court were sentenced to whipping using an electric cable

The court is run by a 27-year-old former preacher, Sheikh Abdullah Mohammed Ali, who hands out sentences dressed in Afghan-style shalwar kameez, a Kalashnikov at his side.

Sheikh Abdullah tells them their weapons will be confiscated and they will not be allowed to be part of any armed group in future.

He swiftly decides that the sentence will be a public flogging. The men are driven to the centre of Saraqeb for sentence to be carried out. The instrument of punishment is an electrical cable.

Sheikh Abdullah takes a megaphone to address a small crowd that has gathered.

"In the name of God," he says, reading out the names of the four prisoners standing in a row. "Fifty lashes for the leader of the gang. Forty for each of his men."

He declares: "God's law is the best protection for the weak."

The first of the prisoners is forced to his knees, a man on either side of him holding his arms. When it starts some of the crowd chant, "The Prophet is our leader". Others just count the lashes.

Afterwards, Sheikh Abdullah explains to the documentary crew that the punishment was actually quite lenient. They had been convicted of highway robbery. The normal penalty for that is death, he says.

"In wartime, punishments according to Sharia are suspended until peace returns," he says.

"Now, we are at war. We must concentrate on fighting the regime's army. Full punishments will be enforced as soon as the regime falls and an Islamic State is declared."

'Alternative to chaos'

The uprising's rural, conservative and religious supporters approve of Sharia's harsh penalties.

So too, perhaps, do many of those afraid of the criminal anarchy, the looting, killing, kidnapping and theft, that has become an everyday fact of life in rebel-held areas.

But many in Saraqeb are dismayed by the rise of the Islamists. There have been small street protests in the town against Sharia.

"We did not hope for what we have come to today," said Lyas Kadouni, an activist interviewed by BBC Arabic.

"The names of [rebel] brigades tell you how people think now - names like 'Lovers of the Prophet Brigade' and so on. It is not necessary to throw religion into every corner of your life. This is killing our revolution."

Painfully earnest, Lyas Kadouni wants to tidy up Saraqeb's streets. "The most important thing is to practise the duties of citizenship," he says.

"We have to show... we have an alternative to chaos."

He says he is "100% certain they [foreign jihadis] will disappear". It could take a month, two, or three months, he says.

But the influence of relatively secular activists like Lyas Kadouni, always marginal, is waning still further.

Almost two years after peaceful protest became a civil war, they are still painting murals and handing out leaflets. Others, meanwhile, are taking power at the point of a gun.

Revenge

Things are not going entirely the Islamists' way, however. They have split and split again over the question of whether to unify with al-Qaeda. There is also a bitter ongoing battle with elements of the Free Syrian Army.

While most fighting on the rebel side are Muslim, many of those do not want a religious state.

The commander of one such unit told me the Islamist Nusra Front had sent a suicide bomber to one of his positions, killing a dozen of his men. Then his brother was kidnapped by the jihadis. After paying a ransom of tens of thousands of dollar to get his brother back, he would now seek revenge.

"There will be nowhere for them to hide."

Even as government forces sweep into previously opposition-held towns, the rebels are fighting amongst themselves, hardline jihadis against the relatively secular FSA, a civil war within the civil war.

The battle, though sporadic, seems just as bitter as that against the regime.

Its outcome will determine what kind of state Syria will become if the rebels win. In the meantime, though, Sharia justice is the only kind available in many parts of Syria.

The sectarian divide

USCIRF (16.05.2013) - The two-year armed conflict in Syria has left at least 80,000 people dead and more than 5 million displaced. In his May 13, 2013 press conference with UK Prime Minister David Cameron, President Obama noted the difficulty of "putting things back together" in Syria after "the furies have been unleashed."

These "furies" include a brutal conflict that increasingly is sectarian in nature. The recent massacre in Bayda and the kidnapping of bishops of the Syriac and Greek Orthodox Churches underscore the fact that what began as a political struggle in Syria has become a war in which sectarian rhetoric and religiously-motivated violence have led to sectarian divides.

"We are deeply worried for the lives of Archbishop MorGregoriusYohanna Ibrahim of the Syriac Orthodox Church and Bishop BoulosYazigi of the Greek Orthodox Church, who were kidnapped on April 22 while providing humanitarian aid to the war-ravaged people of Syria," said USCIRF Chair Katrina Lantos Swett. "These two religious leaders put aside their own safety by travelling to one of the worst areas of fighting to help those Syrians left with few basic necessities after more than two years of war. The United States and the international community must leave no stone unturned to free the Archbishops and halt sectarian violence," said Dr.Swett.

The civil war in Syria began in March 2011 when peaceful protests by mostly Sunni Muslim opponents of the al-Assad regime called for the repeal of the country's abusive emergency law, space for political parties, and the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad. The civil war that has now entered into its third year has caused at least 80,000 deaths 1.3 million refugees and at least 3.6 million internally displaced people. The brutal massacre by al-Assad's armed forces in the town of Bayda on May 2 claimed the lives of dozens, including women and children, largely from that town's Sunni Muslim community.

"The use of sectarian violence and rhetoric will destroy any hope that Syria will emerge from this war as a representative democracy in which human rights and religious freedom for all Syrians is promoted and protected," said Dr. Lantos Swett. "The kidnapping of the Archbishops and the massacre of innocents are only the latest attempts to inflame tensions between religious communities and divide them along sectarian lines. The al-Assad regime and some opposition forces, including those foreign to Syria who espouse violence based on extreme religious ideologies, increasingly are stoking sectarian tensions as a tactic in the civil war."

USCIRF's report, "[Protecting and Promoting Religious Freedom in Syria](#)" includes preliminary findings and recommendations on the situation in Syria and underscores the detrimental effects of sectarianism on Syria's current and future religious freedom environment.

Kidnapped bishop urges Christians to stay in Syria

Nephew shares bishop's wish for Christians 'not to empty Syria'

World Watch Monitor (26.04.2013) - The nephew of bishop Yohanna Ibrahim, one of the two archbishops kidnapped in Syria on Monday, said he hopes Syrian Christians will not use the incident as an incentive to flee the country.

Jamil Diarbakerli, who represents the Assyrian Democratic Organisation (which petitions for the rights of the Assyrian minority) said bishop Ibrahim, head of the Syriac Orthodox Church in Aleppo, was kidnapped on Monday, alongside his counterpart from the Greek Orthodox Church, bishop Boulos Yaziji, after travelling to the Turkish border in an attempt to secure the release of two priests kidnapped in February – Michel Kayyal (Armenian Catholic) and Maher Mahfous (Greek Orthodox).

The driver of the vehicle, Fathallah Kaboud, was later killed, although Diarbakerli said he learned from ecclesiastical sources in Syria that the shooting took place in another part of the city after Kaboud had driven to inform the bishop's office of the kidnapping.

Kaboud had been the personal chauffeur of bishop Ibrahim for a number of years. He leaves behind a wife and two children.

A fourth passenger escaped, but his identity remains unknown.

Reports on Tuesday claimed the bishops had been released, but these were later refuted by church officials.

This latest kidnapping comes a week after bishop Ibrahim told the BBC that there has been no targeting of Christians in Syria during the rebel uprising. Yet on April 17, Greek Melkite Catholic Patriarch Gregory III Laham told the press that more than 1,000 Syrian Christians have been killed and 20 churches destroyed.

The bishop's nephew acknowledged that "there are parts of Syria where there is persecution of Christians", however he said he believes his uncle's desire is for Syrian Christians to remain in the country, wherever possible.

"Things can change dramatically after the kidnapping of two important Christian leaders, but even though there is a war in Aleppo, the two bishops stayed and want their people to do the same – not to leave the country, not to empty Syria of Christians," he said.

Diarbakerli said the latest kidnapping has increased tensions between Muslims and Christians in Syria, but said he is hopeful a resolution will dissolve tensions.

"I don't want the perpetrators to win by using the archbishop as a weapon for religious and sectarian violence," he said. "I hope that all of Syria will cooperate to immediately find and release the bishops, because these kind of acts shall not serve any part of the conflict."

Syriac Orthodox and Greek Orthodox Archbishops of Aleppo, Yohanna Ibrahim and Paul Yazigi abducted

Reuters (22.04.2013) - Two Syrian bishops were kidnapped on Monday by armed rebels in the northern province of Aleppo, state news agency SANA said.

It said the Syriac Orthodox and Greek Orthodox Archbishops of Aleppo, Yohanna Ibrahim and Paul Yazigi respectively, were seized by "a terrorist group" in the village of KfarDael as they were "carrying out humanitarian work".

Several prominent Muslim clerics have been killed in Syria's two-year-long uprising against President Bashar al-Assad, but the two bishops are the most senior church leaders to be caught up in the conflict.

A Syriac member of the opposition Syrian National Coalition, AbdulahadSteifo, said the men had been kidnapped on the road to Aleppo from the rebel-held Bab al Hawa crossing with Turkey.

Ibrahim, who is familiar with the route and had crossed there several times before, had gone to collect Yazigi and the two men were driving to Aleppo when they were kidnapped, Steifo said.

Asked who had kidnapped them, Steifo said: "All probabilities are open."

Last September Ibrahim told Reuters that Christians in Aleppo were suffering as a result of the uprising and the city, where rebels and pro-Assad forces have fought prolonged battles, was facing one of the most critical periods of its modern history.

Islamic law comes to rebel-held Syria

The Washington Post (20.03.2013) - The evidence was incontrovertible, captured on video and posted on YouTube for all the world to see. During a demonstration against the Syrian regime, Wael Ibrahim, a veteran activist, had tossed aside a banner inscribed with the Muslim declaration of faith.

And that, decreed the officers of the newly established Sharia Authority set up to administer rebel-held Aleppo, constitutes a crime under Islamic law, punishable in this instance by 10 strokes of a metal pipe.

The beating administered last month offered a vivid illustration of the extent to which the Syrian revolution has strayed from its roots as a largely spontaneous uprising against four decades of Assad family rule. After mutating last year into a full-scale war, it is moving toward what appears to be an organized effort to institute Islamic law in areas that have fallen under rebel control.

Building on the reputation they have earned in recent months as the rebellion's most accomplished fighters, Islamist units are seeking to assert their authority over civilian life, imposing Islamic codes and punishments and administering day-to-day matters such as divorce, marriage and vehicle licensing.

Numerous Islamist groups are involved, representing a wide spectrum of views. But, increasingly, the dominant role is falling to Jabhat al-Nusra, also known as the al-Nusra Front. The group has been designated a terrorist organization by the United States for suspected ties to al-Qaeda but is widely respected by many ordinary Syrians for its battlefield prowess and the assistance it has provided to needy civilians.

Across the northeastern provinces of Deir al-Zour and Raqqah, where the rebels have been making rapid advances in recent weeks, Jabhat al-Nusra has taken the lead both in the fighting and in setting out to replace toppled administrations. It has assumed control of bakeries and the distribution of flour and fuel, and in some instances it has sparked tensions with local fighters by trying to stop people from smoking in the streets.

Here in the war-ravaged city of Aleppo, more than half of which has been under rebel control since July, Jabhat al-Nusra is also widely identified as the leading force behind the Hayaa al-Sharia, which loosely translates as the Sharia Authority and is known simply as the Hayaa.

Based out of the city's former Eye Hospital, which was damaged during the fighting and then occupied by Jabhat al-Nusra as its headquarters, the Hayaa is also backed by other rebel units, including the Tawhid Brigade, the city's biggest fighting force, and the Ahrar al-Sham, a homegrown Islamist force that has played a relatively minor role in Aleppo but is powerful in several other provinces.

Islamic administration

These days, the bomb-scarred former hospital has taken on the semblance of a wartime city hall, with people milling in and out seeking permits to carry a gun or transport fuel through checkpoints, complaining about neighbors, reporting thefts and informing on people suspected to be regime loyalists.

At the gate, a guard dressed in a black shalwarkameez, the tunic-and-pants outfit traditionally worn in Pakistan but alien to Syria, refuses admittance to women unless they are clad in an abaya, a full-length cloak, something that is common in conservative Syrian communities but is far from ubiquitous.

Inside, in a sparse, dingy office, a burly man who identified himself as the head of the authority and gave his name as Abu Hafs, received what he said was the first journalist to be admitted to the facility. Seated beside him was a slight, heavily bearded man with a scholarly air who did most of the talking but who refused to give his name because, he said, he was speaking on behalf of Abu Hafs.

The two men refused to identify the group they belong to or who was behind the creation of the Hayaa, except to say that it has the support of the biggest battalions operating in Aleppo, "one of which isn't comfortable with the media," according to Abu Hafs, an apparent reference to the media-shy Jabhat al-Nusra.

Conferring often, the men said the body had been set up at the request of the people of Aleppo after the units involved in creating it had won their trust, through "their honesty on the battlefield and the fact that they are not interested in looting," the spokesman said.

A wide range of cases are adjudicated, including kidnapping, murder, marriage and divorce, he said, and the authority has a department that administers issues such as property and vehicle ownership.

The codes applied are "derived from the Islamic religion," the spokesman said, but the most extreme Islamic punishments, such as cutting off the hands of thieves, are not imposed because Islamic law requires that they be suspended during war.

Instead, he said, sentences of five to 40 lashes for offenses such as drug abuse, adultery and theft are handed down, so that wrongdoers can return to their families, which otherwise might be deprived of wage earners if they were kept in prison. "It is not a big punishment, and we don't use heavy pipes — they are small pipes — to tell him off," the spokesman said.

For many Aleppo residents weary of the months of chaos after the takeover of their neighborhoods by unruly rebel fighters who have looted homes and shaken down civilians, the authority is welcomed as an attempt to restore order. The Hayaa has won plaudits for targeting some of the city's most notorious rebel battalions, and one of its top leaders, a Jabhat al-Nusra commander known as Abu Omar, was killed in a confrontation this week with one of them.

Rival activists vexed

Inevitably, however, the assertion of Islamic laws is sparking tensions with the more secular opposition activists, who look askance at the creeping Islamization of the revolution that they say they started.

Among those who have fallen afoul of the authority is Othman al-Haj Othman, a respected activist and physician renowned for his role in treating those injured in the shelling and airstrikes that persist on a daily basis. He was detained last week by armed men dispatched by the Hayaa after he removed a poster from the wall of his hospital inscribed with the Muslim declaration of faith and was held overnight in a cell at the former Eye Hospital.

More than 50 people were held in the same cell, he said on his release the following morning, adding that he saw at least three other cells containing a similar number of people. Calling Othman's detention a "mistake," Abu Hafs's spokesman said the authority apologized to him — after an outcry by activists in Aleppo and beyond.

But Othman didn't seem mollified. "They think the same way as Bashar. There is no difference," he said, in reference to the Syrian president, as he stepped out of the hospital gates to be greeted by supporters, who had staged a small demonstration to demand his release.

"Those people don't represent the revolution. They don't understand the revolution," he said. "They have power, they have guns, but they don't have support. When there are free elections, you will see."

Whether there will be free elections anytime soon is in doubt. Jabhat al-Nusra has denounced elections as anti-Islamic, and Abu Hafs and his spokesman refused to discuss whether there would be elections.

With President Bashar al- Assad showing no sign that he is prepared to give way, the Islamists gaining ground in the areas he no longer controls and Western countries still refusing to arm more-moderate battalions, "Jabhat al-Nusra will grow stronger and stronger," said Mohammed Najib Banna, an Islamist jurist who belongs to a rival effort to set up a judiciary in Aleppo that has been eclipsed by the Hayaa. Last month, the authority's gunmen surrounded the courthouse where the United Judicial Council had installed itself, detained all those inside, including judges, note-takers and bodyguards, and imprisoned them at the former Eye Hospital.

They were freed the following day, and negotiations are underway to merge the two councils. But the talks have not borne fruit, in part because of ideological differences, the jurist said.

"Their ideology comes from outside Syria, and, unfortunately, it is the same ideology they tried to apply in Afghanistan and Iraq. They failed there, and now they are trying here," he said.

In the dingy storefront in one of the Aleppo neighborhoods where activists still organize regular peaceful protests against the regime, Ibrahim, widely known by his nickname, Abu Mariam, dismissed the beating he received as "nothing."

It didn't hurt, he said, because the pipe was thin, "like the ones used in a toilet. It was just a reprimand, a way of saying, 'Don't do it again.' "

And it won't happen again, he said, because he and his fellow activists have since made peace with the local Islamist protesters whose attempts to usurp a demonstration by Ibrahim's group prompted him to toss aside their flag.

"We as Syrians feel it is more important to focus on toppling the regime," said Ibrahim, a wiry, 30-year-old truck driver who joined the revolt in its first weeks two years ago. "It is not in our interest to open a second front in our revolution. We have one enemy now; we don't want to end up with two."

"I think the real war will start after toppling the regime," he added, reflecting the fears of many Syrians that their war has only just begun.

Attacks on religious sites raise tensions

Human Rights Watch (23.01.2013) – Armed opposition groups appeared to have deliberately destroyed religious sites in mixed areas of Northern Syria, in November and December 2012, Human Rights Watch said following investigations in Latakia and Idlib governorates. An armed opposition group destroyed a Shia place of worship in Idlib governorate, and two Christian churches in Latakia governorate were looted. In all three cases evidence examined by Human Rights Watch suggests, and witnesses stated, that the attacks took place after the area fell to opposition control and government forces had left the area.

While some opposition leaders have pledged to protect all Syrians, in practice the opposition has failed to properly address the unjustified attacks against minority places of worship, Human Rights Watch said. The opposition also has failed to rein in gunmen engaging in looting and other criminal activities, like kidnappings. Human Rights Watch urged armed opposition groups to protect all religious sites in areas under their control and to discipline members who loot or kidnap.

Human Rights Watch has previously documented the destruction and vandalization of a mosque in Taftanaz, Idlib by Syrian government forces.

"The destruction of religious sites is furthering sectarian fears and compounding the tragedies of the country, with tens of thousands killed," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "Syria will lose its rich cultural and religious diversity if armed groups do not respect places of worship. Leaders on both sides should send a message that those who attack these sites will be held accountable."

Under international humanitarian law, parties in an armed conflict have a responsibility not to intentionally attack religious buildings that are not being used for military purposes. They are prohibited from seizing, destroying, or doing willful damage to religious buildings or institutions and from theft, pillage, or vandalism directed against important cultural property. Deliberate attacks on religious sites that are not military objectives are war crimes.

Human Rights Watch researchers conducted a four day investigation in the Latakia and Idlib countryside in opposition-controlled areas into abuses by both government and opposition fighters in Sunni, Alawite, Christian, and mixed sect villages. In three villages – Zarzour, Ghasaniyeh, and Jdeideh – Human Rights Watch found evidence of attacks against religious minority sites after the areas fell under the control of armed opposition groups and government forces had left the area.

Residents also told Human Rights Watch that armed opposition gunmen looted some homes after taking control of the town and kidnapped two local villagers in Ghasaniyeh and Jdeideh. Human Rights Watch was unable to determine whether the looting and kidnapping were religious attacks. Media reports also indicate that looting and kidnapping of Sunni residents has taken place in opposition controlled areas.

In all three villages, religious minorities had either all fled or left their homes in large numbers. Residents in Zarzour, a predominantly Sunni village with a small Shia population, told Human Rights Watch that their Shia neighbors had fled because they feared retaliation by opposition forces because, in their opinion, the local Shias had been supportive of government forces.

These residents said this perceived support was reflected in alleged preferential treatment that government forces gave to Shia residents when the government forces were in the village. In Ghasaniyeh and Jdeideh, two Christian villages in Latakia, residents told Human Rights Watch that many of their neighbors fled because of dire humanitarian conditions, fear of armed opposition fighters in their area, and fear of air and artillery strikes by government forces.

All parties to the conflict should promote conditions that would allow civilian populations to remain in their homes, Human Rights Watch said. The Syrian government should stop deliberate and indiscriminate air and artillery strikes against civilians, and opposition leadership should protect all civilians in their areas, including members of religious minorities, from any retaliatory attack or criminal activity. All parties should facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance to areas under their authority.

Attack on ZarzourHusseiniya

Human Rights Watch researchers observed what appeared to be deliberate damage to the local *husseiniya*, a Shia place of worship, caused by opposition fighters after they had taken control of Zarzour village on December 11. Local opposition fighters who spoke to Human Rights Watch said that Syrian government forces caused the damage in the *husseiniya* before they left the town, but two local residents said that the armed opposition started the fire in the mosque when they took control of the city. Other evidence observed by Human Rights Watch researchers indicated that the damage was deliberate. The *husseiniya* windows were broken, prayer stones littered the floor, two of the interior walls were blackened from flames, and a religious poster had been torn off of the wall, with remnants of the poster left behind. Human Rights Watch researchers also saw remnants of burned posters and papers, and what appeared to be the remnants of a burned prayer rug in the building. Burned items were lying together on the floor, appearing to indicate they were piled on top of one another and deliberately set on fire.

A [video](#) published on YouTube on December 12 taken in front of the *husseiniya* showed opposition fighters celebrating their victory in the town as a fire burns in the mosque in the background. The video supports the claim that the damage was intentionally inflicted after the government forces had left the area, Human Rights Watch said. In the video, one man who appears to be an opposition fighter announces the "destruction of the dens of the Shias and the Rafida," a derogatory term used to refer to Shias. He identifies himself as a member of the Amr bin Ma'adYakrib al-Zubaydi Brigade. The video also shows graffiti on the wall in front of the mosque, which exclaims, "No, and a thousand nos, to sectarian strife." By the time Human Rights Watch researchers were in Zarzour one week later, this graffiti had been written over.

One resident told Human Rights Watch that while the Syrian army was in the village, they used the *husseiniya* as barracks. According to him however, the army withdrew from the building after Shias in the village complained and before the opposition attacked. Two residents said that an army sniper remained on top of the building after that, but

withdrew before the opposition forces attacked the building. Human Rights Watch observed several sandbags on top of the mosque, appearing to corroborate the claim that a sniper was positioned there.

Human Rights Watch condemns the Syrian government's use of the *husseiniya* for military purposes before the opposition took control of the village. The use by any party to a conflict of property of great importance to the cultural heritage of any people for purposes that are likely to expose it to destruction or damage is prohibited, unless imperatively required by military necessity. However, such behavior does not absolve the opposition of the obligation not to inflict intentional damage to the *husseiniya* once it was no longer a military object.

Looting of Churches in Ghasaniyeh and Jdeideh

Local residents told Human Rights Watch that armed gunmen operating "in the name of the opposition" also broke into and stole from Christian churches in the villages of Ghasaniyeh and Jdeideh, in Latakia governorate, after the villages fell under opposition control.

A Jdeideh resident told Human Rights Watch that after the armed opposition took control of the village on December 11 and government forces had fled, gunmen broke into and stole from the village church and fired numerous shots inside, causing structural damage. Human Rights Watch visited the church on December 18 and observed that the doors bore signs of forced entry, and the windows were shattered. The church doors had been welded shut since the attack to protect against further attack.

The resident said that opposition forces also used the priests' quarters next to the church to shoot at a neighboring village where government forces were present. In the process, the windows of the priests' quarters were broken. He also told Human Rights Watch that people acting "in the name of the opposition" had stolen medicine from a clinic belonging to the church, looted homes, and kidnapped civilians. In one kidnapping during the summer of 2012, before opposition fighters controlled the village, he said that a family paid three million Syrian pounds (approximately US\$42,250) to free their relative.

A Ghasaniyeh resident told Human Rights Watch that after armed gunmen operating "in the name of the opposition" came into the village in late November they broke into the local church and stole the gas and diesel fuel there. On December 15, Human Rights Watch visited the church, and observed that the church doors had been forced open. A cross had been left on the floor of the church, but the church otherwise appeared undamaged.

The resident also told Human Rights Watch that opposition fighters had looted homes and kidnapped one resident, who remained missing. Two men from a local opposition group took the kidnapped man, a civilian whom he knew personally, from his home after opposition forces had taken control of the village. Despite his family's efforts to secure his release by communicating with the kidnappers and the opposition fighters' leader, they had not freed him as of December 15.

But the resident who spoke to Human Rights Watch said that people in the town had good relationships with many opposition fighters. Armed opposition fighters with whom Human Rights Watch spoke in the village maintained that they were not responsible for the attack on the church.

While the motivation for the church break-ins may have been theft rather than a religious attack, opposition fighters have a responsibility to protect religious sites in areas under their control from willful damage and theft, Human Rights Watch said.

"The opposition in Syria should back up its claims that it will uphold minority rights by protecting places of worship, and more generally ensuring that gunmen acting in its name respect civilians and civilian properties," Whitson said.

Syrian Sunni rebels destroy Shi'ite 'Husseiniya' site and loot Churches

Reuters (23.01.2013) - Rebels in Syria have burned and looted the religious sites of minorities, Human Rights Watch said on Wednesday, as the longest and deadliest of the Arab Spring revolts becomes increasingly sectarian.

The 22-month-old rebellion against President Bashar al-Assad started as a peaceful protest movement but has turned into civil war, pitting mostly Sunni Muslim rebels against a state security and military establishment dominated by Assad's minority Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shi'ite Islam.

In the northern Idlib province, where rebels have taken swathes of territory from government forces, the New York-based rights group said opposition fighters destroyed a Shi'ite "husseiniya" - a religious site devoted to Hussein, a martyr in Shi'ite tradition.

A video published online showed rebels hoisting assault rifles in the air and cheering as the site in the village of Zarzour, taken by rebels in December, burned in the background.

In the video, which Reuters cannot independently verify, one man announces the "destruction of the dens of the Shi'ites and Rafida," a derogatory term used against Shi'ites.

Human Rights Watch said local rebel fighters had blamed Syria's government for the damage but residents said the insurgents had started the fire when they took control of the village.

Regional Sunni power Saudi Arabia and Shi'ite Iran have backed opposing sides in Syria's civil war, raising the prospect the country could become a frontline in a sectarian divide and could suck in neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey.

The conflict has killed more than 60,000 people and pushed more than 650,000 to flee the country, the United Nations estimates.

Indiscipline and looting by rebels in some areas has also undermined civilian support for their cause, especially among minority groups, and hampered their ability to advance against government forces.

Foreign backers of the opposition are wary of supporting a revolt in which religious hardliners have grown in prominence.

In the western Latakia province, Human Rights Watch quoted residents as saying gunmen working "in the name of the opposition" had broken into and stolen from Christian churches in two villages.

A resident in Jdeideh, one of the villages, reported that gunmen had broken into the local church, stolen and fired shots inside, after government troops had fled, the rights group said. Local rebels denied they attacked the church, it added.

"While the motivation for the church break-ins may have been theft rather than a religious attack, opposition fighters have a responsibility to protect religious sites in areas under their control from willful damage and theft," Human Rights Watch said.
