

*Syrian church leaders have called for Saturday 11 May 2013 to be observed as a day of prayer and fasting, asking for prayer for peace in Syria and for protection for the church. They have sent out a list of prayer requests (see below).*

The civil war in Syria, which has had a devastating effect on the church, grew out of the 2011 Arab Spring protest movement. Syrians began to protest against President Bashar al-Assad's Baath Party government and to demand the release of political prisoners, and in March 2011 troops were ordered to fire on protestors. The ensuing unrest led to the development of an armed opposition. This opposition has grown into coalition of rebels trying to overthrow the government and includes numerous jihadi groups, including foreign Muslim extremists who have flooded into Syria to join the fight, with the aim of setting up an Islamic state.

The civil war has resulted in an estimated 350,000 casualties, including more than 70,000 dead. Between three and four million people are internally displaced and about 1.4 million are refugees in other countries. Rival armed militias roam Syria's cities and law and order have largely broken down. Many buildings have been destroyed and houses looted; food, medicine and fuel are in short supply. Seven million Syrians are in need of humanitarian assistance.



Map: Operation World

**Population: 22.5 million**  
**Majority religion: Islam (90%)**  
**Government system: Republic**  
**Christian population: 1.4 million (6.3%)**

## The suffering of Christians in the civil war

Many Syrian Christians have been raped, tortured, kidnapped for ransom and killed. Many churches and monasteries have been attacked, making it impossible for some congregations to hold services, and priests have been kidnapped and even killed, like Father Fadi Haddad of Qattna in the capital, Damascus.

Some Muslims in Syria claim ownership of anything belonging to a Christian by touching it and saying three times "Allahu Akbar". This practice is used to take possession of cars, buildings and even Christian women, who are then raped. Many Christians have been kidnapped due to the perception that they are wealthy and lack armed security - many of those kidnapped are doctors, lawyers and other professionals. In recent months, however, kidnappings have extended to include the poor. The incidence of kidnapping has increased so much that some Christians are afraid to leave their own neighbourhoods.

Tens of thousands of Christians have been displaced from their homes by threats and violence, and many have fled the country. Almost the entire Christian population of some cities has fled. The Christian population of Homs, a city particularly badly affected, is reported to have declined from at least 60,000 to fewer than 1,000.

Refugees often end up living in squalid and dangerous conditions, many of them trafficked by brutal, extortionist smugglers. Church leaders in Lebanon and Turkey are overwhelmed by the numbers of Christian refugees arriving every day, looking for food and shelter. Christians who end up in refugee camps face the additional hazard of violence from extremist Muslims in the camps.

## Priests in trouble

Two bishops were kidnapped on 22 April 2013 in the village of Kfar Dael on the road to Aleppo in northwestern Syria. Aleppo's Syriac Orthodox bishop, Yohanna Ibrahim, and Greek Orthodox bishop, Boulos Yaziji, were on a mission to negotiate the release of two priests abducted on 9 February (Michel Kayyal of the Armenian Catholic church and Mahar Mahfouz of the Greek Orthodox church). The bishops' car was intercepted and their driver was shot dead.

The identity of the kidnappers is unknown, and the bishops are still being held. Some reports say that rebel forces have taken responsibility, although another report blames radical Chechens. The opposition and those loyal to President Assad blame each other for the abduction.

### Why are Christians being targeted?

Christians are being targeted by Islamist opposition factions who want Syria to become a Sunni Muslim state, notably the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra. Such extremists adopted a slogan, "*Alawites to the tomb and Christians to Beirut*". (President Assad and his supporters are Alawites, members of a Shi'ite sect that makes up only 12% of Syria's population – the majority is Sunni Muslim – but is influential in the army and government.)

Christians are widely believed by the opposition to be supporters of President Assad, since they enjoyed relative freedom and security under the rule of the secular Baath party (which many Christians joined). The Baath party and other secular parties suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood and the more radical Salafists. Christians who try to stay neutral, however, are in danger from government security agents. Another factor leading to the targeting of Christians is the fact that many radical fundamentalists come from poor rural communities and urban slums and hold grudges against prosperous Christians.

### What do Christian leaders fear?

Christians in Syria fear the collapse of the state. In other countries where dictatorships were overthrown in the Arab Spring, such as Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, the result has not been encouraging for Syrian Christians. In those countries, Christians are suffering more persecution under Islamist regimes than they did under the dictatorships that offered them some protection from Islamist groups. Christians fear that a Sunni takeover of Syria would lead to increased restrictions and persecution.

Christians in Syria are afraid that their church will go the way of the church in Iraq. There, in the anarchy following the fall of Saddam Hussein, Christians were given the same three options that are being put to Syrian Christians: convert to Islam, leave the country or die. This threat was followed up by kidnappings, murders and the bombing of church buildings. More Christians have left Iraq in the past ten years - over half a million - than remain. Many Christians have already left Syria, but church leaders are calling on those who remain to stay.

### Before the civil war

The Syrian church goes back to New Testament times. Before the civil war, Syrian Christians enjoyed relative freedom and stability, were prosperous, had good relations with Muslims and were respected in society. They were allowed to worship and practise their faith without much official interference, and although meetings were monitored, Christian literature was freely available. There was some discrimination (for example in connection with housing and employment) and some emigration, but Syria was one of the easiest places in the Arab world to be a Christian.

The Christian population was concentrated in cities and consisted mainly of Orthodox and Catholic Christians. There was a small but growing Protestant church, mostly comprising Christians from Orthodox and Catholic backgrounds. Conversion from Islam was rare. (*Barnabas Fund, Christian Post, Irish Times, Middle East Concern, Morning Star News, Operation World, Reuters, Tear Fund, Voice of the Martyrs Canada, World Watch List*)

### Prayer Requests

- 1. That violent conflict will end and reconciliation processes will begin.**
- 2. That those bereaved and traumatised will know the healing touch of Jesus.**
- 3. That those displaced will know the provision and protection of the Father and that those supporting them will know the wisdom and enabling of the Spirit.**
- 4. That those from all communities who have been kidnapped, including the two bishops and two priests, will be released unharmed soon.**
- 5. That unity amongst Christian communities will be strengthened and that Christians will know the Lord's equipping as they respond to the overwhelming needs around them.**
- 6. That all those choosing to use violent methods will know the Spirit's conviction of sin and respond to the Father's offer of forgiveness and new life in the Son.**