

Introduction

The Syrian civil war has negatively impacted every religious and ethnic community. In areas controlled by Islamist militias, religious minorities have suffered particularly appalling treatment. Many have been forced to flee the country due to the hostile living conditions created by these militias, rendering some areas 'religiously cleansed.'

Abduction of Christian clergy

The murders and disappearances of notable Christian clergy provided the first clear indication of a campaign targeting Syria's ancient Christian community. Notable cases include:

- Reverend Basilious Nasser, a Christian priest from the Greek Orthodox Church, murdered by a sniper in January 2012.
- Father Fadi Haddad, abducted in October 2012.
- Archbishop Boulos (Paul) Yazigi of the Greek Orthodox Church, Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim of the Syriac Orthodox Church, abducted on 22 April 2013 – their whereabouts remain unknown.
- Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, an Italian Jesuit priest, abducted on 29 July 2013 – his whereabouts remains unknown.
- Frans van der Lugt, an elderly and respected Dutch priest, murdered in April 2014.
- Father Ibrahim Farah, an Orthodox priest in Idlib, kidnapped by the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda, Al-Nusra Front, in 2015. He fled to exile in Turkey after negotiations secured his release, and subsequently migrated to Canada.

Displacement and massacres

As well as these and other abductions, the campaign against the Christian community has included extortion through kidnapping, rape, seizure and destruction of property, forced conversion under threat of death, and murder. An estimated 650,000 Christians have fled the country, with many others displaced internally. Cities such as Homs and Aleppo, once home to large Christian communities, are now left with a fraction of the previous population.

By July 2014 Islamic State (IS) was reported to be in control of around 35% of Syria's territory, with other hard-line militants controlling large swathes elsewhere. Shari'a courts had been set up in areas occupied by IS, to enforce conformity with their extreme interpretation of Islam. For example, the Christian community in Raqqa was ordered to pay jizya or dhimmi tax, adopt the Islamic dress code,

and worship behind closed doors. In addition, Christians were subjected to harsh living conditions in an effort to compel their conversion. Raqqa was home to nearly 13,000 Christians before 2014; fewer than 80 remain.

Syria's Druze ethnoreligious minority, believed to constitute around 3.2% of the population, has also been targeted in recent years. Originating from the Near East, the Druze self-identify as 'Unitarians' or 'People of Monotheism.' Their religious belief is deemed heretical by hard-line Islamists.

In June 2015 fighters from Al-Nusra Front massacred 20 Druze civilians in the countryside of Idlib. On 25 July 2018 IS terrorists conducted a number of suicide attacks on markets and in residential areas in As-Suwayda Governorate, and stormed villages in the region, killing more than 300 people, injuring 298 and abducting 37. Victims included women and children, and in some instances, entire families were wiped out. After the abductions, IS released footage of the executions of several hostages. On 8 November 2018 the 17 remaining abductees were released, along with the bodies of two children who died in captivity.

Although IS has now lost the territory it once held, Syria remains a war zone. There is an urgent need for a credible and effective ceasefire that also protects civilians and combats enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions. Components of truth, reconciliation and transitional justice should also be included in any negotiated ceasefire, and it must generate measurable improvements in humanitarian access. This will also assist in re-activating the economy, which has been severely damaged by years of fighting. Improving local economies would create jobs and encourage the re-integration of fighters into society, which is a vital step towards a sustainable political solution.

The Turkish incursion into northeast and northwest Syria

On 18 March 2018 a coalition of Islamist militias supported by the Turkish army entered the Kurdish town of Afrin after a fierce battle with PYD (Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat) forces, who had to withdraw after suffering serious losses due to heavy artillery and air bombardment. Turkey called this Operation Olive Branch (Zeytin Dalı Harekâtı). Tens of thousands of civilians fled for safety, including approximately 200 Kurdish Christian families. The only Kurdish Evangelical Church in Afrin closed down and its pastor moved to Aleppo. Islamist militias loyal to Turkey proceeded to implement an Islamic system in Afrin, enforcing Shari'a law and

education. Human rights groups reported widespread abuses such as killings, kidnappings, rape and torture. Other abuses included attacks on the Yazidi minority and their places of worship, many of which were completely destroyed. Yazidi activists also reported many cases of forced conversions and marriages.

Turkey justified the attacks on the PYD as a defensive measure; however, this is questionable, as the PYD and related groups have restricted their activities to Syria. Moreover, Turkey did not fight against genuine potential threats, such as IS, even when it could have done so. For example, in October 2014, the Turkish army used artillery to bombard Kurdish forces that were fighting IS cadres in Kobane.

Many credible sources and reports accuse Turkey of facilitating the influx of thousands of foreign Jihadis into Syria, including many Turkic Jihadis belonging to the Turkistan Islamic Party who are currently operating in Idlib province. Turkish forces in Idlib province appear to co-habit peacefully with many terrorist groups that operate there, including the former Al-Nusra Front. Less than 50 Christians remain in Idlib province, down from approximately 10,000 until 2014, when the Al-Nusra Front took control of the region.

Recent developments

Turkish military offensive March 2020

On 1 March 2020 Turkey launched a military operation in northwest Syria in retaliation to a Syrian airstrike that killed nearly 50 Turkish soldiers. This unilateral operation threatens to destabilise an already fragile situation, especially coming in the aftermath of the defeat of IS. The operation created a massive security, humanitarian and refugee crisis, the very issues the Turkish government claimed it wanted to resolve through the operation. Whilst maintaining watertight control of the border with Syria and preventing the entry of Syrians trying to flee the fighting, Turkey encouraged tens of thousands of refugees already living in Turkey to move to its border with Greece, providing free transportation and opening border gates for them. The ongoing Turkish incursion presents two main challenges. Firstly, it risks the re-emergence of IS. Secondly, there are credible concerns that crimes against humanity may occur.

Violations by Islamist groups loyal to Turkey

Since the invasion of Afrin by Turkey, Islamist groups loyal to the state have carried out human rights violations with

impunity. CSW has received regular reports of grave violations being perpetrated by these groups against local people, and particularly against Yazidis, including rape, assassination, kidnapping for ransom, confiscation of property and desecration of cemeteries and places of worship.

On 30 July 2020 fighters from the Failaq Al-Sham extremist group arrested a 40-year-old Syrian Kurdish man, Radwan Muhammad, at his home in the village of Jaqmaq Kibir near Rajo, a small town close to Afrin. Mr Muhammad, who works as an English teacher and headmaster, refused the group's orders to hand his school building over to them so they could turn it into an Islamic school. The group accused him of apostasy.

In October 2020 another jihadist group loyal to Turkey began to build a mosque on a Yazidi cemetery in Basofan, a Yazidi village in Afrin.

In December, Failaq Al-Sham fighters launched a series of arrests in several Yazidi villages near Afrin. CSW's sources report that five men were arrested in the village of Basofan and taken to a detention centre in a nearby village called Iskan. They were accused of joining the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Kurdish political party whose military wing has been fighting Turkey. Arrests also took place in the nearby villages of Kabashin and Baaya. CSW's sources suggest the arrests are part of an ongoing campaign to terrorise local Yazidis and force them to leave the area or convert to Islam.

Recommendations

To the government of Syria:

- Agree to a nationwide ceasefire that prioritises the protection of civilians, and precludes enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions.
- Ensure that freedom of religion or belief and the protection of religious and ethnic minorities are prioritised during peace negotiations.
- Increase efforts to counter sectarian narratives and conduct detailed investigations into all instances of violence against religious minorities.

To the government of Turkey:

- Respect international humanitarian law and ensure that no further attacks on Syrian civilians occur.
- Open borders to refugees in order to avert further loss of life.
- Restrain Islamist groups responsible for attacks on aid organisations in the Idlib region.

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