

According to one senior Church leader, 450,000 Christians have fled from Syria to neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. Christian civilians have been expelled from their homes, whilst reports indicate that approximately 40 Churches and Christian centres have been desecrated or destroyed.

The Christians of Syria

Summary

- As the conflict in Syria escalates, a growing number of Christians are fleeing to neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. Some believe they fear an uprising that has grown more radical in outlook.¹
- Christians in Syria are said to be largely supportive of President Bashar al-Assad, having to choose between two extremes, partly driving their flight out of the country. They have been targeted by rebels and feel at threat from increasingly hard-line rebel groups.²
- According to one senior Church leader, almost a third of the country's Christians have fled their homes. Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch Gregorios III Laham has stated that more than 450,000 Christians have been displaced, or have left the country.³
- In Homs, jihadist rebels have expelled Christian civilians from their homes.⁴
- Reports indicate that approximately 40 Churches and Christian centres have been desecrated or destroyed.⁵
- The situation for Syria's Christians has greatly deteriorated. In the northern city of Raqqa, Christians were forced to choose between converting to Islam, paying a protection tax, or being killed.⁶

History, Facts and Figures

- Before the conflict, the Christians of Syria were said to represent approximately 10 per cent of the country's total population of 23 million.⁷
- Syria's Christian community is one of the oldest in the world, going back two millennia,⁸ and corresponds with the early history of Christianity itself; it was on his way to Damascus that Saint Paul is said to have converted to the Christian faith. The language of Christ is still believed to be spoken in villages such as Maaloula.⁹
- They belong to a number of different sects, including Antiochian Greek Orthodox, Melkite Greek Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, Assyrian Church of the East, Armenian Churches, Maronites and Chaldeans.¹⁰
- The restrictions that Christians faced in Syria under the Assad regime, were those shared with other citizens living under a dictatorial system of government. These included constant surveillance and the need to express allegiance to the regime.¹¹
- In March 2012, radical militants from the opposition's Faruq Brigade had gone door to door in Homs, expelling local Christians. Of the more than 80,000 Christians who lived in the city, approximately 400 remain today.¹²

Of the more than 80,000 Christians who lived in Homs, approximately 400 remain today.

Noteworthy Events

- 27 February, 2014 – Christians in the northern city of Raqqa have been forced to pay a levy in gold and accept curbs on their faith, or face death, by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a jihadist group in Syria. The directive requires Christians in the city to pay tax in exchange for their safety. Christians are prohibited from making renovations to Churches, displaying crosses or other religious symbols, ring church bells or pray in public. Many Christians have fled Raqqa, after ISIS started attacking and burning Churches.¹³
 - 10 March, 2014 – Rebels freed a group of Greek Orthodox nuns who were held for three months. They were freed as part of a prisoner exchange, negotiated by officials from Qatar and Lebanon. It is believed they were held by the al-Nusra Front, a rebel group affiliated to al-Qaeda.¹⁴
 - 26 March, 2014 – Parts of Latakia Province, predominantly made up of Armenian Christians, have been taken over by hard-line rebels, supported by the Turkish army. Opposition fighters from the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front, launched their assault, seizing a border crossing, and gaining control of an outlet to the sea for the first time since Syria's uprising began. According to one Armenian pastor, 3,000 Christians have fled the area.¹⁵

Reports indicate that approximately 40 Churches and Christian centres have been desecrated or destroyed.

References

1. Yackley, A.J. (2014), 'Generations on, Christians fleeing Syria return to Turkish homeland', *Reuters US Edition* [Online] (Last updated 2:56am on 28 February 2014), Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/28/us-syria-crisis-christians-turkey-idUSBREA1R09J20140228> [Accessed on 27 March 2014]
2. *Ibid.*
3. BBC News Middle East. (2013), 'Syria conflict: Christians 'fleeing homes'', *BBC* [Online] (Last updated 4:48pm on 16 October 2013), Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-24547263> [Accessed 31 March 2014]
4. Brode, D., Farhat, R. and Nisman, D. (2012), 'Syria's Threatened Christians'. *The New York Times: The Opinion Pages* [Online] (Last updated on 28 June 2014), Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/29/opinion/syrias-threatened-christians.html?_r=0 [Accessed 27 March 2014]
5. BBC News Middle East. (2013), 'Syria's beleaguered Christians', *BBC* [Online] (Last updated 7:51pm on 23 April 2013), Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22270455> [Accessed on 27 March 2014]
6. BBC News Middle East. (2014), Syria crisis: Nuns freed by rebels arrive in Damascus'. *BBC* [Online] (Last updated 4:49pm on 10 March 2014), Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-26510202> [Accessed 3 April 2014]
7. Brode, D., Farhat, R. and Nisman, D. (2012), 'Syria's Threatened Christians'. *The New York Times: The Opinion Pages* [Online] (Last updated on 28 June 2014), Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/29/opinion/syrias-threatened-christians.html?_r=0 [Accessed 27 March 2014]
8. Al-Tamimi, A.J. 2012. Christians in Syria: Separating Fact from Fiction. *The Henry Jackson Society*. [Online], Available at: <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/HJS-Christians-in-Syria-Report.pdf> [Accessed on 25 March 2014]
9. BBC News Middle East. (2013), 'Syria's beleaguered Christians', *BBC* [Online] (Last updated 7:51pm on 23 April 2013), Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22270455> [Accessed on 27 March 2014]
10. *Ibid.*
11. CIA: The World Fact Book. (2013), 'Syria'. *CIA* [Online], Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html> [Accessed 3 April 2014]
12. *Ibid.*
13. BBC News Middle East. (2014), Syria crisis: ISIS imposes rules on Christians in Raqqa'. *BBC* [Online] (Last updated 1:08pm on 27 February 2014), Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-26366197> [Accessed 31 March 2014]
14. BBC News Middle East. (2014), Syria crisis: Nuns freed by rebels arrive in Damascus'. *BBC* [Online] (Last updated 4:49pm on 10 March 2014), Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-26510202> [Accessed 3 April 2014]
15. Surk, B. (2014), Syrian forces pound rebels in Assad's home province'. *The Spokesman Review* [Online] (Last updated on April 2 2014), Available at: <http://www.spokesman.com/stories/2014/apr/02/syrian-forces-pound-rebels/> [Accessed 3 April 2014]

For Further Information

www.shiaresearch.com

info@shiaresearch.com

+44 (0) 20 7372 4049

The Stone Hall, Chevening Road, London NW6 6TN