

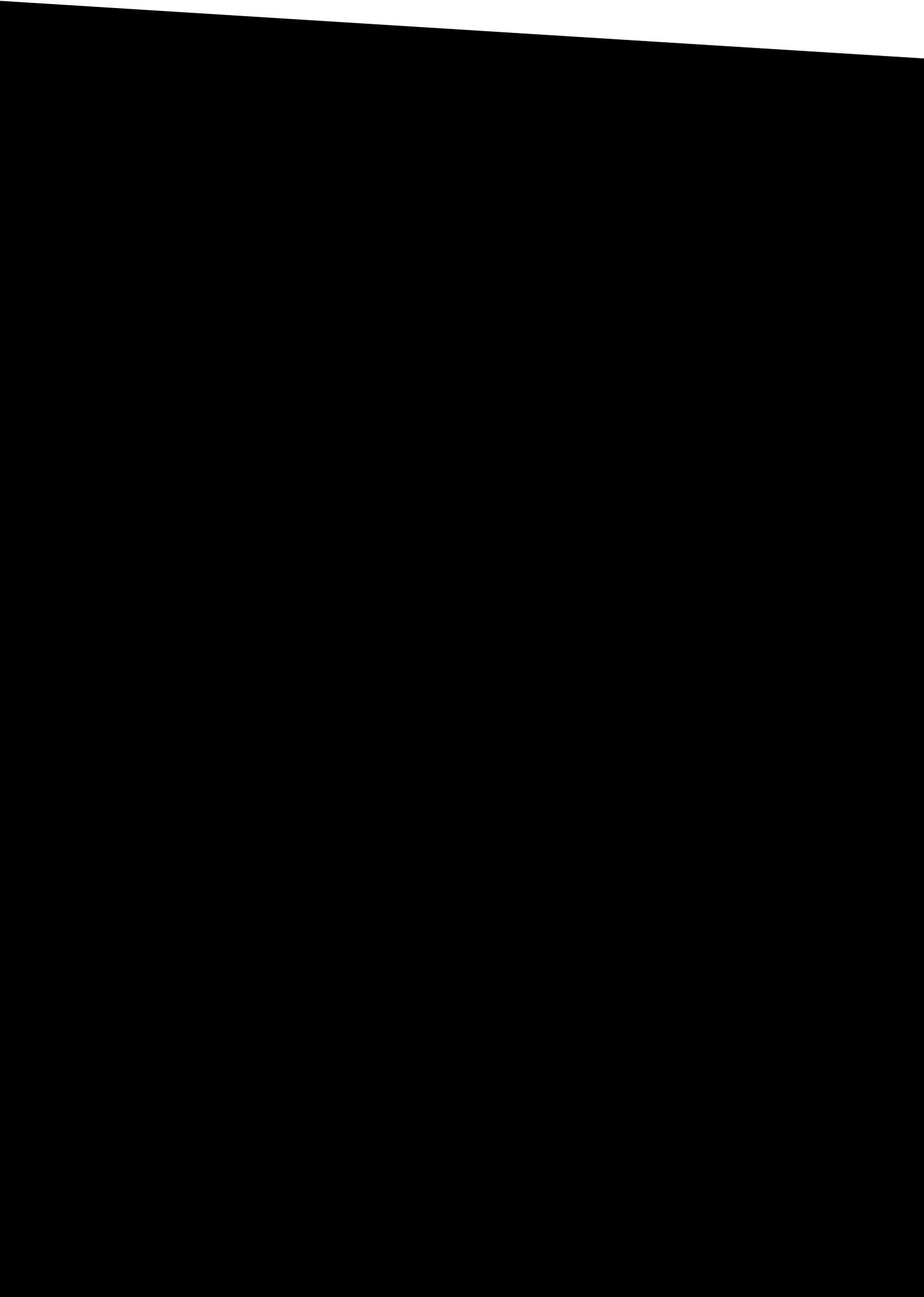
# CHRISTIANS IN SYRIA:

## SEPARATING FACT FROM FICTION

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BY AYMENN JAWAD AL-TAMIMI





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This paper is written in the author's personal capacity and the views expressed are his alone.

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**THE CHRISTIAN  
COMMUNITY OF  
SYRIA HAS BEEN  
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BASHAR AL-ASSAD  
IN MARCH 2011.**

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Thought to comprise approximately 10 per cent of Syria's population – with a variety of sects, including Greek Orthodox, Melkite Greek Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, Armenians, Maronites, Chaldeans, and Assyrians – the Christian community of Syria has been the subject of considerable media attention ever since unrest arose against the regime of Bashar al-Assad in March 2011.

However, rather than looking at claims of incidents of anti-Christian violence and trying to verify them, articles have generally repeated the obvious point that there are concerns that the same fate could befall Syrian Christians, as with the numerous incidents of persecution of Iraqi Christians by Islamic militants and, further, as with the outflow of hundreds of thousands of Christians from the country since 2003.

So, what are the main stories of the persecution of Christians in Syria? And, further to this, how can they be verified?

## Homs

This year, in March, a story circulated that 90 per cent of the Christians in the city of Homs had been ethnically cleansed by Islamic militants. The story was traced back to a report published by *Agenzia Fides* – the Vatican news agency – on 21<sup>st</sup> March.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, the claims go back to a report put out on 13<sup>th</sup> March by the website Syria Truth (in Arabic, 'al-Haqiqa'), which is run by Nizar Nayouf, who was once imprisoned by the regime but who, since 2002, has been living in exile in Europe.<sup>2</sup>

Nayouf's background notwithstanding, Syria Truth, despite claiming to oppose the regime, routinely recycles regime propaganda. In this case, Syria Truth blamed the supposed mass ethnic cleansing on the 'Wahhabi' Farouq Battalion and the aid of Libyan and Iraqi mercenaries.

However, the Farouq Battalion does not have such a hard-line Islamic orientation. On the contrary, it is distinctly aligned

with the Muslim Brotherhood, promoting a nationalist outlook rather than a Takfiri-jihadist worldview, which would entail, first, imposing jizya on Christians, and then, of attacking and ethnically cleansing them if they failed to pay the extortionist tax. If anything, the evidence suggests that the Farouq Battalion is at odds with these hard-line jihadist types.<sup>3</sup> *Agenzia Fides* had made no independent effort to try to verify Syria Truth's story, but rather simply reproduced what had been written on Syria Truth without the proper attribution.<sup>4</sup> In fairness, though, the news agency did subsequently publish a report from Jesuits in Homs, who denied that there had been a campaign of mass ethnic cleansing, alleging, instead, that the Christians had had left voluntarily.<sup>5</sup>

Later to this, David Enders (for *McClatchy*) interviewed Christian refugees in Lebanon, who denied that the Farouq Battalion had

1. 'Abuse of the opposition forces, "ethnic cleansing" of Christians in Homs, where Jesuits remains', *Agenzia Fides*, 21<sup>st</sup> March, 2012. Available at: <http://www.fides.org/aree/news/newsdet.php?idnews=31228&lan=eng> (Accessed on 4th November, 2012).

2. *Al-Haqiqa*, 13<sup>th</sup> March, 2012. Available at: <http://www.syriatruth.org/news/tabid/93/Article/6923/Default.aspx> (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).

3. Enders, David, 'Syria Rebels Say They Killed Leader of Extremist Group That Kidnapped 2 Journalists', *McClatchy*, 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2012. Available at: <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2012/09/07/167674/syria-rebels-say-they-killed-leader.html> (Accessed 5th November, 2012).

4. Al-Tamimi, Aymenn Jawad, Smyth, Phillip & Svadkovsky, Oskar, 'Syrian disinformation about Christian persecution', *Ha'aretz*, 6th April, 2012. Available at: <http://www.meforum.org/3208/syria-christian-persecution> (Accessed on 3rd November, 2012).

5. 'The Jesuits: Christians have fled from Homs, thrown out by the Islamists', *Agenzia Fides*, 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2012. Available at: <http://www.fides.org/aree/news/newsdet.php?idnews=31262&lan=eng> (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).

forced them out in a campaign of mass persecution.<sup>6</sup> The reality is that Christians, like other segments of Homs' population (such as the Alawites and Sunnis), had simply fled in large numbers owing to the intense fighting between regime forces and rebels. Indeed, multiple outlets have reported on the phenomenon of Homs being turned into a virtual 'ghost town'.<sup>7</sup>

In an article I wrote with two co-authors for *Ha'aretz*, I criticized the Syria Truth report for making no reference to the impositions of jizya. In response, Syria Truth – just days later – issued another report claiming that the Farouq Battalion has been imposing jizya on Christians in the rural areas around Homs. The same site then put out an exposé of me and my co-authors, purporting to expose me as an Israeli spy operating under a pseudonym in Iraqi Kurdistan, using my profile picture on Facebook as evidence alongside the supposed testimonies of other Iraqis.<sup>8</sup>

Marco Tosatti of the *Vatican Insider*, which is a sub-outlet of the prominent Italian newspaper *La Stampa*, plagiarized the story of the alleged imposition of jizya in the Homs area, from Jihad Watch,<sup>9</sup> which, in turn, had reprinted the original story from Syria Truth.<sup>10</sup> Tosatti claimed that the story had been verified by AsiaNews.it, although without offering any evidence for this. A Google search will, likewise, reveal that AsiaNews.it has not verified the story

at all.

More recently, multiple opinion pieces – including two by journalist Kapil Komereddi in *The New York Times* and *Ha'aretz*<sup>11</sup> – have claimed that up to 80,000 Christians have been ethnically cleansed from within the Homs area. The claim goes back to one source: Mother Agnes Mariam, who was interviewed back in spring on this very subject by Sky News.<sup>12</sup> Though claiming to be neutral in the conflict, Mother Agnes is most notable for being among the first to push the conspiracy theory that the Houla massacre, which UN investigators have established to be the work of pro-Assad militiamen, was carried out by the rebels. Her claims, however, are based merely on vague anecdotes.<sup>13</sup> As such, given her record of pushing dubious claims, she can hardly be taken as a reliable source, and it is hardly surprising that Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, who, having resided in Syria for more than 30 years, was subsequently expelled for his criticism of the regime, has accused Mother Agnes of peddling regime propaganda.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the one reliable source for anti-Christian violence in Homs comes from a resident Syrian Christian, who, in a BBC Radio interview, said (without specifying when exactly) that in the neighborhood of Hamidiya, fighters (not thought to be from the area itself) forced some families out of their homes.<sup>15</sup> The interviewee, however,

6. Enders, David, 'Rare inside view of Syria's rebels finds a force vowing to fight on', *McClatchy*, 23rd, April, 2012. Available at: <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2012/04/23/146425/rare-inside-view-of-syrias-rebels.html> (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).

7. For example, 'Inside Homs: Syrian 'ghost town' divided and destroyed', BBC News, 9th, May, 2012. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-18013789> (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).

8. Al-Tamimi, Aymenn Jawad, 'Nizar Nayouf: al-Haqiqa and Syrian Christians', *American Spectator*, 23<sup>rd</sup> April, 2012. Available at: <http://spectator.org/archives/2012/04/23/nizar-nayouf-al-haqiqa-and-syr> (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).

9. 'Syrian opposition army imposes jizya on Christians in Homs', Jihad Watch, 10<sup>th</sup> April, 2012. Available at: <http://www.jihadwatch.org/2012/04/syrian-opposition-army-imposes-jizya-on-christians-in-homs.html> (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).

10. Tosatti, Marco, 'Christians oppressed by rebels in Syria', *Vatican Insider*, 21<sup>st</sup> April, 2012. Available at: [http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/index.php?id=45&L=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=14488&cHash=756f5fb312](http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/index.php?id=45&L=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=14488&cHash=756f5fb312) (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).

11. Komireddi, Kapil 'Syria's Crumbling Pluralism', *The New York Times*, 4<sup>th</sup> August, 2012. Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/04/opinion/syrias-crumbling-pluralism.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/04/opinion/syrias-crumbling-pluralism.html?_r=0) (Accessed on 5th November, 2012); Komireddi, 'Rebels with an Anti-Semitic Cause', *Ha'aretz*, 21<sup>st</sup> September, 2012. Available at: <http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/weekend-opinions/rebels-with-an-anti-semitic-cause-1.465997> (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).

12. '80000 Christian Refugees from the Zionist War on Syria', Liveleak, 16<sup>th</sup> June, 2012. Available at: [http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=fb9\\_1339867674](http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=fb9_1339867674) (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).

13. 'Syrian rebels took bodies from hospital to stage massacre', YouTube, 16<sup>th</sup> June, 2012. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JvAzyhieSnc> (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).

14. Fitzgerald, Mary, 'Nun on Irish visit accused of peddling 'regime lies' about crisis in Syria', *The Irish Times*, 18<sup>th</sup> August, 2012. Available at: <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/world/2012/08/18/1224322385595.html> (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).

15. 'Syrian Christians 'targeted' by rebels', BBC News, 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2012. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/today/9749000/9749608.stm> (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).

did not speak of mass ethnic cleansing, and did not blame the Farouq Battalion. In turn, the testimony recorded at BBC may be corroborated by a recent report in *The Independent*, in which Kim Sengupta interviewed Syrian Christian refugees in Lebanon. Notably, Sengupta describes the case of the Haddad family, who claim to have fled from Homs to Zahle in Lebanon amid death threats.<sup>16</sup> The picture that can be composed, therefore, is as follows: the majority of Christians in Homs, like other residents of the city, fled in the face of intense fighting between rebels and the regime, but at some point, certain families may have been forced out by extremists. In any case, the claim that the Farouq Battalion, supposedly with the help of Libyan and Iraqi fighters, was responsible for ethnically cleansing 90 per cent of Homs' Christian population is plainly false.

## Qusayr

Modeled on the story of the ethnic cleansing of 90 per cent of Homs' Christian population, stories began to circulate that 9,000 out-of-a-supposed population of 10,000 Christians had left the city of Qusayr on the basis of an ultimatum issued by a rebel battalion.<sup>17</sup> However, the rebels in Qusayr denied this story. The truth about what happened, most likely, lies in the account given by a couple of reports in the Wall Street Journal: some Christians (namely from the Kasouha clan) were allegedly acting as informants for the regime's security forces in the town. On the basis of these allegations, "several men from a prominent Christian family

have been shot dead, more than a dozen residents have gone unaccounted for and the majority of Christians have fled town, said residents on both sides of the conflict."<sup>18</sup> The case of the Kasouha family is also referenced by a Christian refugee interviewed in Sengupta's report for *The Independent*.<sup>19</sup> That these killings might provoke a large-scale exodus should come as no surprise in an atmosphere of fear in the midst of a civil war.

## Rableh

A small village situated on the Orontes River, Rableh, which is located outside of the Wadi al-Nasara area, was the subject of reports which surfaced in August claiming that rebels had besieged the town and cut-off all of its food and water supplies. Later, however, it was said that the Syrian Army had liberated the town from the rebel siege, beginning with reports on the matter by the pro-Syrian Lebanese news channel, al-Mayadeen, which ran footage of Syrian Army troops in the town and residents expressing delight at their presence.<sup>20</sup> The figure of beleaguered Greek Catholics was put at more than 12,000 by a number of outlets;<sup>21</sup> however, the problem with this figure is that census statistics show that Rableh does not have a population anywhere near 12,000, with the 2004 census charting the total population at only 5,328.<sup>22</sup>

16. Sengupta, Kim 'The plight of Syria's Christians,' *The Independent*, 2<sup>nd</sup> November, 2012. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/the-plight-of-syrias-christians-we-left-homs-because-they-were-trying-to-kill-us-8274710.html> (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).

17. 'Syria: At least 9,000 Christians flee their homes after persecution from Islamic supremacist rebels', Jihad Watch, 18<sup>th</sup> June, 2012. Available at: <http://www.jihadwatch.org/2012/06/syria-at-least-9000-christians-flee-their-homes-after-persecution-from-islamic-supremacist-rebels.html> (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).

18. Dagher, Sam 'Syrian Conflict Draws in Christians', *The Wall Street Journal*, 23<sup>rd</sup> July, 2012. Available at: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303644004577524653025270434.html> (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).

19. Sengupta, *Ibid*.

20. *Al-Mayadeen*, 25<sup>th</sup> August, 2012. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HmKtbfee9t0> (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).

21. For example, Kevin Jones, 'Thousands of Christians trapped in village', *Catholic News Agency*, 25<sup>th</sup> August, 2012. Available at: <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/thousands-of-christians-trapped-in-syrian-village/> (Accessed on 5th November, 2012);

cf. 'Over 12,000 Christian faithful 'starving' in the village of Rableh: humanitarian law is invoked', *Agenzia Fides*, 22<sup>nd</sup> August, 2012. Available at: <http://www.fides.org/aree/news/newsdet.php?idnews=32078&lan=eng> (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).

22. Syria Census 2004, DATE ACCESSED?, accessed via [http://www.cbssyr.org/new%20web%20site/General\\_census/census\\_2004/NH/TAB04-13-2004.ht](http://www.cbssyr.org/new%20web%20site/General_census/census_2004/NH/TAB04-13-2004.ht)

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**WHILST ONE CAN ALLOW FOR THE PLAUSIBLE SCENARIO THAT THE TOWN MAY HAVE COME UNDER REBEL FIRE DURING FIGHTING BETWEEN REGIME FORCES AND REBEL BATTALIONS, AND THAT THE LATTER WERE DRIVEN BACK BY THE END OF AUGUST, IT IS HIGHLY UNLIKELY THAT THE REBELS COULD HAVE THEN LAUNCHED AN INCURSION INTO THE VILLAGE AREA THE FOLLOWING MONTH (ESPECIALLY WHILST STILL UNDER ARMY CONTROL) AND HAVE TAKEN 280 HOSTAGES IN MASS-KIDNAPPINGS.**

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Marco Tosatti purported to account for the figure of 12,000, claiming that the village has an established population of 7000 and, further, that the population was bolstered by 5000 recent refugees from Qusayr. However, Tosatti provides demographic divisions that conflict with the established notion of 12,000 Greek Catholics: he claims, instead, that the town has a 50-50 division between Maronites and Greek Catholics.<sup>23</sup> The uncorroborated statistic of 5000 refugees from Qusayr is explained by another outlet: "Some 5,000 Christians from the nearby town of Kusayr [sic] sought refuge in the entirely Christian village after armed opposition leaders ordered them to leave Kusayr."<sup>24</sup> However, as already mentioned above, the claim that Christians fled Qusayr en masse because of a supposed rebel ultimatum is unlikely to be true. In any case, Tosatti has proven he is not a trustworthy source, especially when we consider his plagiarisms and

false claims of verification with the AsiaNews.it-jizya story. Furthermore, the fact that the reports on Rableh cannot get their figures straight with regards to the demographics of the village, throws serious doubt on their credibility.

Whilst one can allow for the plausible scenario that the town may have come under rebel fire during fighting between regime forces and rebel battalions, and that the latter were driven back by the end of August, it is highly unlikely that the rebels could have then launched an incursion into the village area the following month (especially whilst still under army control) and have taken 280 hostages in mass-kidnappings.<sup>25</sup> On the following day (26<sup>th</sup> September), *Agenzia Fides* reported a mass release of 240 hostages with a joyous reconciliation ceremony.<sup>26</sup>

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23. Marco Tosatti, 'Christian humanitarian disaster' impending in Syria', Vatican Insider, October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2012, <http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/en/world-news/detail/articolo/siria-siria-syria-19055/>

24. 'Christians trapped in Rableh', CNEWA, September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2012, <http://www.cnewa.org/default.aspx?ID=1959&pagetypeID=6&sitecode=HQ&pageno=1>

25. 'Rableh: 280 Christians held hostage', *Agenzia Fides*, 25<sup>th</sup> September, 2012. Available at: <http://www.fides.org/aree/news/newsdet.php?idnews=32291&lan=eng> (Accessed on 3rd November, 2012).

26. 'Reconciliation ceremony for the release of hostages', *Agenzia Fides*, 26<sup>th</sup> September, 2012. Available at: <http://www.fides.org/aree/news/newsdet.php?idnews=32299&lan=eng> (Accessed on 3rd November, 2012).

Contradictory statistics exist as to the number of hostages supposedly taken anyway: *The Daily Star* in Lebanon, quoting an unspecified ‘Lebanese security source’, stated that 218 Syrian and Lebanese citizens were taken hostage, only to be released the next day.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, Syria Truth claimed that 170 hostages were taken and that some were immediately released, so that there were a remaining 120 hostages as of 25<sup>th</sup> September. As usual, the outlet pinned the blame on the ‘Wahhabi’ Farouq Battalion (which it also held responsible for the siege of Rableh in August<sup>28</sup>), and also, on the ‘Khalid bin Walid’ Battalion.<sup>29</sup> A further account comes from a report in the *Spectator*, in which a Christian refugee in Lebanon, who fled from Rableh in May, claimed that 250 residents were taken hostage in the fields.<sup>30</sup> Yet another discrepancy undermining the credibility of the whole story, in all the various accounts, is where exactly these hostages were taken. While Agenzia Fides cites ‘local sources’ to claim that the hostages were crammed into a school in the village of Gousseh, Syria Truth says that the hostages were taken to an unknown location. At best, the story of mass hostage taking and starving appears to be based in uncorroborated rumor, even as it is clear that there has been fighting between regime forces and rebels in the area.

## Aleppo

The foreign jihadist element in Syria is a localized phenomenon: that is, rather than being spread in significant numbers all over Syria, it is primarily concentrated in Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor.<sup>31</sup> In this context, the claims by the Syriac Orthodox bishop of Aleppo on the kidnappings of Christians in the city (along with other residents, of course) make sense.<sup>32</sup> The same goes for the reports on the formation of Christian defense militias in the city,<sup>33</sup> as well as for ones reporting the flight of many Christians from the city to Tartous.<sup>34</sup> That said, there is no evidence, as of yet, of the destruction of churches as targeted operations conducted by rebels, foreign jihadists, or otherwise.<sup>35</sup>

The evidence, rather, points to heavy damage being sustained from indiscriminate mortar-fire by the rebels, a common complaint among residents of all stripes in the city. Specifically, vis-à-vis the Christians, this observation can be corroborated by a recent article in *The Daily Beast*, where a Christian opposition activist in Aleppo – identifying himself only by the name ‘George’ – was interviewed. He noted an incident he had witnessed whereby rebels indiscriminately fired mortars into a Christian district in the city, ostensibly targeting the security building,

27. ‘Over 200 Lebanese, Syrians released by rebel group’, *The Daily Star*, 25<sup>th</sup> September, 2012. Available at: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2012/Sep-25/189164-over-200-lebanese-syrians-released-by-rebel-group.ashx#axzz2AEXs36J3> (Accessed on 5th November, 2012). The motivation given comes across as rather odd too. It is claimed that the hostages were taken to teach them to be neutral in the conflict, but surely a much more plausible situation would be to take hostages for ransom money, since Rableh is apparently the site of wealthy agricultural land.
28. *Al-Haqiqa*, 24<sup>th</sup> August, 2012. Available at: <http://www.syriatruth.org/العسكريينالمتاح/البلدغالب/tabid/93/Article/8106/Default.aspx> (Accessed on 4th November, 2012).
29. *Al-Haqiqa*, 25<sup>th</sup> September, 2012. Available at: <http://www.syriatruth.org/العسكريينالمتاح/البلدغالب/tabid/93/Article/8335/170.aspx> (Accessed on 4th November, 2012).
30. Wakefield, Mary, ‘Die slowly, Christian dog’, *Spectator*, 27<sup>th</sup> October, 2012. Available at: <http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/8708121/die-slowly-christian-dog/> (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).
31. Al-Tamimi, Aymenn Jawad, ‘Analyzing Aleppo’, *The American Spectator*, 8<sup>th</sup> October, 2012. Available at: <http://spectator.org/archives/2012/10/08/analyzing-aleppo> (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).
32. Jansen, Michael, ‘Rebels claimed to have killed 18 soldiers in car bomb’, *Irish Times*, 13<sup>th</sup> September 2012. Available at: <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/world/2012/09/13/1224323960276.html> (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).
33. Sherlock, Ruth and Malouf, Carol, ‘Syria: Christians take up arms for first time’, *The Telegraph*, 12<sup>th</sup> September, 2012. Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9539244/Syria-Christians-take-up-arms-for-first-time.html> (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).
34. Landis, Joshua, ‘Many Christians Head for Tartus’, Syria Comment, 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2012. Available at: <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=16069> (Accessed on 5th November 2012).
35. cf. ‘Syrian Archbishop of Aleppo appeals for dialogue, peace’, Vatican Radio, 16<sup>th</sup> August, 2012. Available at: <http://www.news.va/en/news/syrian-archbishop-of-aleppo-appeals-for-dialogue-p> (Accessed on 5th November 2012).

though actually hitting several Christian homes.<sup>36</sup>

One should also note the targeting of the Armenian community by rebels in Aleppo. Notably, the St. Gevorg Church in the Nor Kyugh district was recently desecrated.<sup>37</sup> In a similar vein, a bus carrying several Armenian Christians on the way to Aleppo was stopped by unidentified anti-Assad forces, and the passengers were taken hostage, but it is not clear if all those on board the bus were Christian.<sup>38</sup>

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36. Gillis, Clare Morgana, 'Syria's Christians Wary of Both Rebels and Assad Regime', *The Daily Beast*, 17<sup>th</sup> October, 2012. Available at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/10/17/syria-s-christians-wary-of-both-rebels-and-assad-regime.html> (Accessed on 5th November 2012).

37. "Armenian Church reportedly burnt down in Aleppo," Armenia Now. Available at: [http://armenianow.com/news/40665/armenian\\_st\\_gevorg\\_church\\_aleppo](http://armenianow.com/news/40665/armenian_st_gevorg_church_aleppo) (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).

38. "Armenians kidnapped near Aleppo," Armenia Now, 31<sup>st</sup> October, 2012. Available at: [http://armenianow.com/news/40685/syria\\_armenians\\_bus\\_kidnapped\\_rebels\\_reisian](http://armenianow.com/news/40685/syria_armenians_bus_kidnapped_rebels_reisian) (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).

## Qastal al-Burj

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Qastal al-Burj is a small village in the Hama area. It was reported by UPI's Clare Morgana Gillis, in May, that militants had evicted 10 Christian families.<sup>39</sup> This story appears to have been corroborated by AsiaNews.it, whose sources at the same time denied that there was an organized campaign of anti-Christian persecution in Syria, stating that the main sectarian dynamic at play was rather the Sunni-Alawite dichotomy.<sup>40</sup>

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39. UPI.com, May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2012, <http://arabic.upi.com/News/2012/05/10/UPI-36561336658991>

40. 'Syria's war is between Alawis and Sunnis, not against Christians', AsiaNews.it, May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Syria's-war-is-between-Alawis-and-Sunnis,-not-against-Christians-24764.html>

# Conclusion

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The evidence surveyed here does not, as of yet, suggest the existence of an organized campaign of militant Islamic persecution of Christians throughout Syria, especially along the lines of what has happened in Iraq since 2003. Indeed, one should not overlook the fact that Christians have been playing active roles in the opposition.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, disinformation exists about this phenomenon too.<sup>42</sup> Have

there been incidents of anti-Christian violence in Syria? Undoubtedly, but one should always be alert to those pro-Assad propaganda outlets which are willing to exploit, for their own ends, what they see as Western concerns about the status of Christians in the country. In addition, analysts should be more nuanced, looking at which Christians might be more inclined to support the regime, and examining the reasons for such support.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, one must avoid complacency: the ever-growing infiltration of Syria by foreign jihadists (e.g. from Jordan to the south) poses an increasing threat to the survival of the various Christian communities of Syria.

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41. For example, the Assyrian Democratic Movement has thrown its weight behind the opposition. c.f. on the role of Christians in protests against the regime in the town of Zabadani: 'Syria's uprising: Try to stay peaceful', *The Economist*, 5<sup>th</sup> May, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21554224>
42. Most notably, the story of the formation of a Christian rebel battalion using the Islamic moniker 'Ansar Allah', YouTube, 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2012. Available at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2A8i3lf7ZAK&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2A8i3lf7ZAK&feature=player_embedded) (Accessed on 5th November, 2012).  
In fact, as Ammar Abdulhamid notes, Christians who become active rebel fighters join secular units: Abdulhamid, Ammar, 'The Shredded Tapestry: The State of Syria Today', *Syrian Revolution Digest*, 1<sup>st</sup> September, 2012. Available at: <http://www.syrianrevolutiondigest.com/p/the-shredded-tapestry-state-of-syria.html> (Accessed on 3rd November, 2012).

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43. See my paper published on Syrian Christians: [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2124743](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2124743) It provides an overview of the various Christian sects in the country and reasons why members of particular Christian communities might support the regime.







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