

Christians in Syria struggle amid violent clashes

Tom Gallagher | Mar. 29, 2012



A girl lights a candle at the church of St. Tecla in Maalula, the last remaining village in Syria where Aramaic is still spoken. The majority of Maalula's population are Christians who enjoy the convent and shrine of St. Tecla in their midst. (CNEWA/Sean Sprague)

As the Arab Spring made its way to Syria a little more than a year ago, Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian president, and his government were prepared for the peaceful protestors. Assad unleashed his military to break up the protestors and sparked violent clashes. The U.N. estimates that the current death toll is 9,000. A U.N.-led diplomatic solution is being pressed by special U.N. envoy Kofi Annan. As the conflict between Assad's government forces and the protestors continues, the issue of religious persecution of Christians is a major concern for church leaders in the region.

This week, *NCR* interviewed Issam Bishara, the Catholic Near East Welfare Association's (CNEWA) regional director for Lebanon, Syria and Egypt, about the current conditions affecting Christians in Syria. Bishara is based in Beirut, Lebanon, and has been with CNEWA since 1987.

Bishara has guided CNEWA's Lebanon program through civil war and, most recently, war involving Israel and Hezbollah. He has developed effective emergency relief programs; launched a nationwide village resettlement and revitalization program that was eventually adapted and funded by the United States Agency for International Development; developed major infrastructure plans throughout the country in lieu of any government sponsorship; and coordinated Catholic reconstruction efforts, as directed by the Holy See's Congregation for the Eastern Churches, after the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war. In 1999, Bishara was named a

Knight of St. Gregory by Pope John Paul II.

Given the current conditions in the region, Bishara was interviewed via email. Some editing was done for clarity and brevity. See the editor's note at the end of the interview concerning Christian casualties in Homs.

NCR: What is the current situation at this time for Christians in Syria, who make up about 10 percent of the 2.5 million population?

Bishara: The majority of Christians in Syria are not concentrated in one specific geographical area, but are rather dispersed all over the country, which makes their security situation more critical. However, at present and with only the exception of the Christians of Homs, the majority of Christians remained in their communities and in their homes. But as we knew from different sources related to the church, the Christian families started looking for a contingency plan consisting of finding a safer place for their families in case the uprising and the military events escalated all over Syria, with the same scenario as Homs.

Christians in Syria are in a difficult spot because if they support the protestors, they could be targeted by Assad's government forces, and if they support Assad, and his regime falls, they could be retaliated against by a new Islamist regime. So what are Christians currently doing during this conflict?

During this conflict, the majority of church leaders from different confessions and rites expressed their concern toward the escalation and violence and the repercussions on the minorities, and called their communities to remain calm and to avoid taking sides in this conflict, whether against the regime or against the protestors.

But the general feeling among the Christian communities is a deep concern based on the reality that where the Arab Spring has flourished, political life has become more fanatic and less tolerant of recognizing equal rights for Christians. Even Tunisia, where the former regime was based on a complete secular approach and tradition for more than 50 years, turned into an Islamic-dominated government, and just yesterday, large demonstrations there were calling for the establishment of a full Islamic state.

Have Christians been specifically targeted by Assad and his government forces?

No. On the contrary, the regime is still providing protection to the Christian communities in almost all places where the regime is still controlling the ground. But the problem occurred especially in Homs after the protestors and the Islamic groups had controlled a part of the city (Bab Amro Quarter) where around 200 Christians were killed. The other concern is related to terrorism, which can target anyone and any place and especially Christian military officers and their communities.

The city of Damascus is important historically and has religious significance for Christians. The city has also been a city tolerant of religious minorities. Is this still the case or have things changed for the worse for Christians during this conflict?

Damascus and Aleppo, the two largest cities of Syria, remained relatively well-secured and controlled by the Syrian regular forces, and all Christians in those cities are still enjoying their freedom and practicing their faith as regular.

On Feb. 24-25, the ancient St. Virgin Mary Church was damaged in the fighting in Homs. Can you tell us more about that?

St. Mary Church of the Holy Belt is located in the downtown of Homs, or what is so-called "the Old City," and is considered the siege of the Syrian Orthodox Archdiocese of Homs. The majority of churches and Archbishoprics of other confessions are also concentrated in the same surrounding (Hamidiya , Boustan el

Diwan, etc.), and this quarter was subject to military confrontations between the militias and the government forces, and most of the time militiamen were using the churches and the Christians as shields to protect themselves from shelling. It is also important to mention that some icons inside the churches were damaged on purpose by the militias.

[Editor's note: For more on this see: [Church fears 'ethnic cleansing' of Christians in Homs, Syria](#) [1]]

With so much fighting going on, many people are leaving their homes in order to find refuge in safer areas. Is this the case with Christians, especially those Christians in and around Homs? If so, where are Christians going to seek refuge?

Despite the difficulties of getting accurate statistics from the field, our updated information estimates that before the military escalations in Homs, the Christians used to number around 1,500 families (all rites). At present and after two weeks of the withdrawal of the militias from Bab Amro, the security situation is still very critical, especially with all the sniper fire on the civilians and the army on one hand and the acts of pillage on the other hand.

A religious sister told us this morning that the 500 families who left their houses during the battle and found shelter in Tartous and Damascus found their houses and properties completely stolen or even confiscated.

The families who decided to remain are in danger, are living in fear and poverty. Most of them cannot go outside their dwellings because of sniper fire, and of course none of them have any kind of income; the only reason they stay in Homs is to preserve their properties and because they have no other place to go to.

Are Christians able to practice their faith and receive the sacraments during this period of severe conflict?

In the old city quarter of Homs, none of the churches is celebrating Mass anymore. The majority of Christians have left the area, and for the small number who remain, it is a great challenge to go outdoors to get even bread or medication. Accordingly, these families are not practicing their faith for the time being for security and military reasons, but in other parts of the city and the rest of the country, people are practicing their faith as usual.

Describe the work of priests and nuns currently taking place in Syria.

During such time of crisis, Christians find refuge in their own churches, and the priests and nuns are a huge role to play: They have to keep providing pastoral work, in addition to social work, in terms of identifying the neediest and finding the necessary means and sources to provide them with the basics to survive this period of crisis. Even more, they have to play the role of the Good Shepherd, who should safely make his cattle cross through this dangerous period.

Given that the economy is under great strain and the severe weather conditions, what are the current needs of Christians in Syria, and for those who are displaced?

The worsening political and security situation for more than one year has left a huge negative impact on the lives of all Syrians in general and the Christians in particular.

The devaluation of the local currency on the black market (around 97 Syrian pounds for \$1 compared to Syrian pounds 52 for \$1 as the official rate), the slowdown or even the complete shutdown of the majority of institutions working in the tourism sector. Finally, the economic sanctions that forbid any exports from Syria and any transfer of hard currencies to Syria have left their scars clearly on the struggle of the poor citizen to gain his daily bread.

The majority of Christians in Syria used to belong to the middle-class society who depended largely on their daily work to provide the basic needs for their families. Now they live in need as they have lost their jobs. Moreover, the situation of families who lost their homes and were forced to find refuge in other areas is even worse.

How much money do you estimate it will cost to financially support Christians in Syria?

Our target is to help the neediest 1,000 families with an average of \$100 monthly per family for a period of six months. The total amount needed is around \$600,000. The help should cover the following:

- Distribution of 6,000 food packages with an estimated cost of \$40 per package.
- Distribution of baby milk and diapers for at least 150 babies.
- Distribution of medications and emergency hospitalization fees.

There have been a number of reports that aid agencies are not being allowed into Syria to bring humanitarian aid. Many displaced Muslims are receiving aid from Muslim organizations, as well as from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. What can be done on the ground in Syria to deliver aid to Christians?

Following our inquiries, we have found that the majority of items that should be distributed are still available on the local market. If the funds are available in Beirut, we can make all purchases and packaging can be done locally.

What role will CNEWA play in delivering aid to Syrian Christians?

The proposed program suggests that CNEWA/Pontifical Mission plays the role of the coordinator among different communities and churches for the following reasons:

- Because of the international economic sanctions imposed on the Syrian regime, Lebanon remains the only possibility to transfer any emergency aid to Syria.
- The excellent relations between CNEWA-Beirut and all oriental churches working in Syria (Catholic and Orthodox) in addition to the trust gained through 15 years of mutual coordination with all churches enables CNEWA-Beirut to play a positive and unbiased role in order to better help the needy suffering families fairly and without distinction or duplication.
- The CNEWA staff in Beirut can supervise, monitor the program and prepare follow-up and final reports. Despite the escalation of violence in Syria, the majority of border passages are open, and at least two passages are still safe: the coastal road that leads to the city of Tartous, where the majority of the population are Alawites and no military action has been registered so far, and the main passage leading to Damascus.

Will you describe the mechanics of how aid from U.S. donors will be safely delivered to Christians in need?

The CNEWA-Beirut office will receive all donations and all lists and requests submitted by the local church in Syria. CNEWA will reconcile all the names in order to avoid any duplication and then will disburse funds fairly to each community in Beirut. All the purchasing of items will be done locally in Syria and the distribution will take place within the churches. CNEWA will be responsible for the handling of all documents and bills and will prepare follow-up and final reports.

If we can take a moment to look to the future, do you believe the current Assad government will fall, as we have seen in other countries?

I agree with the analysis of Dr. Joshua Landis, the director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma (see [syriacomment.com](http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/syrian-uprising-2011-why- Assad-regime-likely-survive-2013) [2]), which make us believe that the Assad regime is likely to survive at least until 2013.

If the Assad regime does eventually fall, who will fill the void and assume leadership of Syria? How will this change in government affect Christians in Syria?

The regime's own strength: The Assads have been planning for this day of popular insurrection all their lives. The former deceased president, Hafez al-Assad did not make the mistake of Hosni Mubarak, allowing his sons to go up more than 80 percent of the Syrian population and the general trend of all Arab Spring movements where the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis were the only organized political forces capable and ready to fill the void and seize the power in a democratic way, we strongly believe that the same pattern will continue in Syria as well.

of Syria's officer corps is Alawi. This underscores the sectarian safety measures the regime has taken. The main strike forces, such as the Republican Guard led by Bashar's brother, are overwhelmingly Alawi.

Moreover, the broader Alawi community is also likely to remain loyal to the regime, even as the economy deteriorates. Almost all Alawi families have at least one member in the security forces as well as additional members working in Fides ministries such as education or agriculture.

Editor's note:

On Monday, the Vatican news agency for missionaries, Fides, issued a report quoting Jesuit priests in Homs that said Christians living in the city of Homs have left the area and fled on their own initiative because of fear and the violence, but they were not forced to leave their homes because of threats on behalf of Islamist militia.

The [Fides report](#) [4] notes that some sources in the Orthodox Christian community have recently told some Christian families in the two offensives capabilities that are restricted by their lack of heavy weapons and reported militant Islamic extremists from Libya, Iraq and other nations trying to infiltrate the Syrian military.

But the Jesuits of Homs told Fides that as far as we know, the Christian opposition remains divided. The Syrian National Council (SNC) claims to speak for the entire opposition but has been struggling to contain divisions within its own ranks as well as to the Christians competing about 160,000 in Homs, but that number has been reduced to about 1,000 today.

Fides also reports that a year ago the international community's unwillingness to intervene: Europe is sidetracked by its financial crisis, and President Obama is touting his success in withdrawing U.S. troops from the Middle East as part of his reelection campaign. He will not want to step on his own message of withdrawal by launching another U.S. military intervention. Both NATO and the United States have stated in no uncertain terms that they will not intervene in Syria. What is more, Russia and China have vetoed efforts in the Security Council to condemn Syria.

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