

Why some Christians in northern Iraq are choosing to stand and fight

by [Kristen Chick](#)

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) On the outside, the house is fortified with sandbags and machine guns. On the inside hang pictures of Jesus and Mary.

The house, in the last village before the territory of the self-described Islamic State begins in northern Iraq, is a base for Dwekh Nawsha, one of the Assyrian Christian militias participating in the battle against IS.

Last year, the jihadists' lightning advance across northern Iraq captured part of the Nineveh Plain, historic homeland of Iraq's Assyrian minority, forcing thousands of Christians to flee. Now some of them are on the front lines, fighting for their homeland.

Samir Nwa Oraha, the local militia commander and a former special forces soldier in the Iraqi Army, said it wasn't a difficult decision to pick up a weapon once again to protect the land of his people.

"My heart is here; I want to be fighting," he said. "Outsiders are protecting us and we can't sit and watch. We have to share the responsibility with them."

The outsiders he referred to are the peshmerga, the armed forces of the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region of Iraq, who are leading the fight against IS in the region. But they retreated from many Christian villages without a fight last summer, declining to protect them from the IS advance.

Christians have taken up arms because they want to protect their own land, and many no longer trust the Kurds to do it for them. Even as thousands of Christians are fleeing Iraq, convinced they can no longer find safety, or a future, in their homeland, these men are hoping to preserve a future for them, even if they're not sure they'll succeed.

“After 15 years, you’ll come back here and you won’t find any Christians,” said Marcus, a young Dwekh Nawsha fighter who gave only his first name.

Then why is he fighting when others are fleeing?

“Because our children, one day they will ask us: ‘Why did you give up? Why didn’t you fight?’ ” he said. “So we will tell them: ‘We fought.’ ”

Assyrian Christians have formed at least four armed groups to fight IS, with three operating in this area north of Mosul. Dwekh Nawsha is the smallest. Oraha said there are about 50 fighters in the unit, with 25 on duty at a time. They protect the village of Baqufa, which was retaken from IS last year, but their fighters also join the peshmerga at the front line, a little more than half a mile away.

In the living room of their base, a mounted machine gun lies on the floor, its rounds piled on the sofa. In the room where the fighters sleep, a small crucifix and a large picture of Jesus carrying a shepherd’s staff hang above a bed. On the nightstand is a semi-automatic rifle.

The fighters, who carry Kalashnikov rifles, said they bought their weapons themselves. They are meant to receive a salary of \$500 a month from the political party that started the unit, the Assyrian Patriotic Party, but Marcus said he hasn’t received his in four months. He wears camouflage trousers and a black sweatshirt with “I’m here to ... fight!” printed on the back.

The Nineveh Plain Forces is based in nearby Tal Asqaf. It was founded by two Assyrian political parties, but is close to the ruling party in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Democratic Party. The commander, Safaa Khamro, says the unit has about 350 fighters who were trained by the peshmerga, and they cooperate closely with the Kurdish force.

### **Looking to Baghdad for support**

A few miles north, away from the front line, a third militia is based in the town of Sharafya. The Nineveh Plain Protection Units has 570 trained fighters according to local commander Fouad Masaoud Gorgees, though only 20 are on duty at a time.

The NPU has resisted coming under peshmerga control, so the Kurdish force doesn’t allow the group to participate in the fighting, though the Kurdish government did

give the group approval to build a base nearby and Gorgees said the NPU's relationship with the peshmerga has recently improved.

The NPU wants to gain recognition—as well as arms and funding—from the central government in Baghdad under a proposed law to create a national guard to fight the IS insurgency. Until then, the fighters have little to do. But they say they will protect Christian villages in case of another peshmerga withdrawal.

“We will stay here, and Christians will protect Christians,” Gorgees said. “Not Arabs or Kurds protecting us, but Christians.”

The NPU members do not earn a salary. Jone Isho, a wiry middle-aged fighter with blue eyes, said his wife emigrated to Australia, but he chose to stay and fight instead.

“All the people are fleeing to other lands, so we stay here to show them that they shouldn't leave,” he said. “But they won't come back if there is not international protection or someone they can trust.”

### **An uncertain future**

Khamro, the NPF commander, said most of the displaced people will return if IS is driven out, services restored, and villages rebuilt. Yet many of the displaced say they will never feel safe in Iraq again, and even the militias experience the drain of people leaving. Some of Khamro's fresh-faced fighters are not sure if their efforts will encourage people to return.

Zayd George Zaya, a young NPF fighter with a stylish haircut and digital-patterned camouflage fatigues, is from Tel Kayf, an IS-occupied town just eight miles down the road.

“I can't tell you there's a future for Christians here because I don't know exactly,” he said. “But I need my land. I need to go back there.”