

## Violence comes to Seydnaya

By [Barbara Law](#)

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Fadia is Syrian, 25 and very very lucky: she managed to escape the country and the war.

Fadia and I met in 2006—during the year my children and I lived in Syria—and have remained friends over the intervening years. We kept in touch as she graduated from the university, as she commuted the long bus ride to Damascus every day for a job, as she took classes in Chinese and French and Spanish to try to make herself marketable in the economic stagnation under Assad. Fadia's brothers Nicholas and Fadi emigrated to France to find better prospects for work, and Fadia tried repeatedly to get a visa to follow them, to no avail.

Fadia is a Christian from Seydnaya, a lovely mountain town about 20 miles north of Damascus. The predominantly Christian town is known for its monasteries, convents and churches, including the Convent of the Lady of Seydnaya, a pilgrimage site revered by both Muslims and Christians. Over the centuries, because of its location and its place in the religious tradition of both religions, Seydnaya has been spared from violence.

Not anymore.

When the peaceful protests turned violent and the country descended into war, food and electricity became scarce. The foreign embassies closed, so no visas were issued. Finally, Nicholas managed to complete all the necessary paperwork for a family visa. In November, with fighting raging in and around Damascus, Fadia made the dangerous trip into the city and over the mountains to the French embassy in Beirut. Late that month, she and her mother arrived in Paris.

Christians have traditionally supported Assad. Perhaps due to his own minority status as an Alawite, he and his father before him promoted religious tolerance. Now, even in the midst of the conflict, Christians have tended to back Assad because of the alternative: the prospect of a fundamentalist religious government that imposes sharia law and persecutes Christians is all too real.

Now it appears that Muslims are turning against Christians. Recently Fadia wrote me that the Syrian army came to Seydnaya, claiming that Assad is protecting the region from Muslims. The surrounding villages are Muslim, and because the army proclaimed that the Christian Seydnayans support the regime, the Muslim villagers began bombing the town.

Fadia tells me that Christians are being kidnapped. No one dares leave their homes. There is no food or fuel. The roads to Damascus are blocked or in ruins, so there is no hope of escape to France or anywhere else.

Fadia's father and brother who remain in Seydnaya live on money sent by her brother Nicholas. Her father shut down his bakery to ration fuel for heat and enough supplies to make bread for themselves.

Fadia's visa expires this week, but it appears that she and her mother can stay without one. She tells me that "the government is not taking actions against Syrians who don't leave here because if they deported us, thus they are causing us death."

One of the hallmarks of Syrian society has been the fact that it never seemed to matter if you were Christian or Muslim, only that you were Syrian. If what Fadia tells me is true, Assad is pursuing his insidious agenda yet: dividing and conquering by pitting one religion against the other. People who lived in peace for hundreds of years are now enemies. Any Christian who *can* leave is fleeing.

The bitterness and hatred Assad is sowing today may be one of the war's chief legacies. If so, the world will lose one of its purest testaments to the ability of adherents of different religions to see each other for what they are: people.

"All the aid for refugees has been stolen," Fadia writes. "No help is coming." Christians on this side of the world stand and watch. Is there nothing we can do?