In northeast Syria, a Christian community struggles to survive

Before the start of Syria’s crisis in 2011, Christians made up 10–12 percent of the country’s 18 million people.

by Dominique Soguel in the May 22, 2019 issue

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) In the village of Tell Tamer in a remote area of northeast Syria, dozens of elderly Assyrian Christians gather in the local church to bid farewell to yet another member of their dwindling community. They sit quietly along two rows of wooden chairs, exchanging the occasional whisper.

“Christians have no future in Syria,” said Marlen Kalo, a middle-aged woman who attended the service. “The majority have been displaced. Those who stayed are a tiny minority. We hope that those living abroad consider coming back here and help us rebuild our country so that it is better than before. If the Christians come back, we will have a future. Otherwise we won’t. I don’t think they will come back.”

Before the start of Syria’s crisis in 2011, Christians made up 10–12 percent of the country’s 18 million people. Assyrian Christians—an ethnic as well as a religious community that traces its roots to the Assyrian Empire of ancient Mesopotamia—numbered about 30,000, concentrated in the northeast, primarily in Tell Tamer and Qamishli.

What remains today in the region is a small core of dedicated but mostly older Christians who have stayed put or returned to ensure the community’s survival. While the immediate threat of militants from the self-described Islamic State has diminished, other challenges remain: lack of youth, an exodus of thousands to foreign countries, and the regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, which directly or indirectly is a catalyst to Sunni fundamentalism that has targeted Christians in Syria and Iraq.

[Two archbishops of Aleppo—Boulos Yazigi, a metropolitan from the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East, and Gregorios Youhanna Ibrahim, a

metropolitan from the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East—have been missing since April 2013, their whereabouts and condition unknown, the World Council of Churches wrote.]

In Tell Tamer, Boghos Ichaya said his parish has fewer than 400 people, mostly natives of the villages flanking the Khabur River, where Assyrians have long raised livestock and tilled the land.

“After the ISIS attacks, almost everybody left,” he said. “Some of those who stayed in Syria have returned. Of those who went abroad, no one is back.”

In 2015, ISIS attacked multiple Christian villages, taking some 257 women hostage and destroying several churches in their path. The captives were later released in exchange for hefty ransoms—to the tune of “millions” according to several accounts—to which the expat community contributed.

Among those kidnapped by ISIS was Somo Suleiman. While others recall the deafening gunfire of the militants’ arrival, she remembers making tea in her native village of Tel Shamiran when she “stumbled upon” three bearded militants in her courtyard.

First they searched her house, unconvinced that she was living alone. Then they ushered her to another house, from which she was taken with other captives southward to al-Shaddadah.

“We were all women,” she recalled. Multiple times ISIS asked her to convert. Multiple times she declined.

“We spent eight months in al-Shaddadah,” she continued. “They dealt with us honorably, always knocking on the door and telling us to cover up.”

The day of their release came as a complete surprise, marked by acute disbelief followed by tears of joy and prayers of gratitude. Like many others, including her cousin Yuniya Sulaka, she settled in Tell Tamer, determined to keep the community alive on its ancestral land.

Assyrians are an original people of Syria, the cousins stress. Yet with most of their relatives now living in Australia, Sulaka second-guesses their decision to stay put.

“There is nothing for Christians here,” she said. “We are not even living in our own homes.”

Many of the Christian youth have fled this part of Syria, unwilling to risk conscription into the Syrian army or the Kurdish military factions that have fought ISIS and who have the upper hand in the region. Some have joined Christian forces such as the Sutoro, which is aligned with US-allied Kurdish forces, and the Sootoro, which has a foothold in the city of Qamishli and is allied with the Syrian regime. Others are self-organized as village watchmen.

Shadiya Maroghe fled the area in 2013 when Jabhat al-Nusra—a group inspired by al-Qaeda which laid the foundations for the rise of ISIS in Syria—kidnapped Assyrian girls. The abductions sparked an exodus to Germany and Sweden as well as to Kurdish-held cities such as Hasakah and Qamishli. Maroghe lived with her in-laws in a suburb of Homs that was regime-controlled and predominantly Christian. Five months ago, she decided to return.

“There we had better services,” she said, drinking tea in her kitchen, where there were Christian motifs on her wall and a porcelain Virgin Mary on the shelf. “But no matter how tough it is, your land will always be the prettiest. Every day we hold prayers at the church, and every Sunday we observe mass. The problem is that Christians have nothing to come back to here.”

She works as a cleaner to provide for her sick husband—a former driver who has suffered three heart attacks in the course of the war—her blind sister-in-law, and her five children who are still too young to work.

“I have no adult boys who could help move this family forward,” Maroghe said.

While ISIS sleeper cells are likely to remain a problem in Syria for a long time, Maroghe now feels relatively secure in the region. “No one has bothered us after ISIS,” she said.

Gabriel Gawrieh, a prominent Assyrian Christian based in the nearby city of Qamishli, believes the safety of his community—and of all ethnic and religious components of Syrian society—can be guaranteed only through secular governance. He was an early backer of pro-democracy movements and nonviolent protests against the authoritarian regime of President Bashar al-Assad in 2011.

“We were asking for a new Syria, but the regime and its allies consider all opposition to be terrorists,” he said, sitting in the same office from which he was arrested in 2013, along with a brother and a colleague. He credits pressure from the international community for his release. “We were terrorized by ISIS but have also been terrorized by the regime.”

The Syrian regime, he noted, has long presented itself as a protector of Christian and other minorities, securing the loyalty of parts of the community by preying on their fears of ISIS and other militants or co-opting them into formal institutions to give them a semblance of religious freedom in exchange for staying out of politics.

The reality, he said, is that the minority has had little room to maneuver, aware that the price of dissent is disappearance, detention, and death. While some Christians might welcome the regime and its army, he believes forces loyal to Damascus are just one militia among many.

“I sincerely believe that most Christians are not with the continuation of a dictatorial regime,” he said. “But there is fear of an even more negative alternative. If the regime stays in place, you will see even more radical groups rise, especially in the absence of reconstruction.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “In northeast Syria, a Christian community struggles to survive.”