

Christians Squeezed Out by Violent Struggle in North Syria

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By SUSANNE GÜSTEN

MIDYAT, TURKEY — The bright voices of children at play echoed off the ancient walls of Mor Hanonyo last week, breaking centuries of stillness in this 1,600-year-old Syriac Orthodox monastery outside Mardin in southeastern Turkey. Little boys skipped around the monastery courtyard zipped up in quilted winter jackets, while their elders huddled indoors and lamented the violence and mayhem that have forced them to flee their homes in Syria.

One mother told of the abduction of a neighbor's child, held for ransom by rebel fighters in her hometown of Al-Hasakah, which prompted her family to seek safety for their three young sons across the border in Turkey. A young man demonstrated how he was hung by his arms, robbed and beaten by rebels, "just for being a Christian."

Violence against Christians is escalating in the governorate of Al-Hasakah in northeastern Syria, which is home to tens of thousands of Syriac Christians, the refugees said.

The region, known locally as the Jazeera, encompasses the districts of Ras al-Ain, Qamishli and Malikiyah. With government forces, Arab rebels of the Free Syrian Army and Kurdish fighters locked in a three-way struggle for control, the area's Christian population has found itself caught in the middle.

While fighting is sporadic, the region has succumbed to lawlessness, and Christians have become the target of armed rebel gangs, Father Gabriel Akyuz, the metropolitan vicar of Mardin, said in an interview in Mardin last week.

"The gangs are kidnapping people and holding them to ransom. They are perpetrating great injustices. That is why Syriacs are fleeing," he said.

Several hundred Christian refugees have arrived in Turkey in recent weeks, with tens of thousands poised to follow if the region, currently held by the Kurdish, should fall to Arab militias, according to refugees, church officials and representatives of Syriac organizations interviewed in southeastern Turkey last week.

Bypassing Turkish refugee camps on the border, fleeing Christians have headed for the monasteries and towns of Mardin and Midyat in Tur Abdin, an ancient region in southeastern Turkey, less than 50 kilometers, or 30 miles, from the Syrian border that is the historical heartland of the Syriac Orthodox Church.

"They are afraid to stay in the camps. They feel safer with their own people," said Father Joseph, a Syriac monk looking after four families and several single refugees in Mor Hanonyo.

“We are fleeing from the rebels, and the camps are full of rebels,” said the mother of the three little boys, a schoolteacher who did not want to be named for fear of rebel reprisals against relatives at home.

Many of the Christian refugees are young men who have fled conscription in the army and now fear being drafted into rebel ranks if they enter the Turkish camps, Evgil Turker, the president of the Federation of Syriac Associations in Turkey, said in an interview.

Al Nusra Front “and other rebel groups are entrenched in the refugee camps,” Mr. Turker said. “They round up young men in the camps, sometimes 20 or 30 a day, and send them through the border fence back into Syria.”

Mr. Turker’s organization has retrieved dozens of Syrians from the camps, where some of them are sent by Turkish security forces when caught crossing into Turkey illegally. “We vouch for them and they are released to us on our recognizance,” Mr. Turker said.

The Syriac community of Turkey, itself greatly diminished by persecution and emigration over the last century, has rallied to come to the aid of fleeing kin and coreligionists from Syria. Besides rescuing refugees from the camps, the Syriac community shelters them in monasteries and in dozens of church properties and privately owned vacant houses in Tur Abdin. Donations from local Syrians and from the large Syriac diaspora in Europe keep the refugees fed and clothed.

“We can handle it so far,” said Ayhan Gurkan, deacon of the Mor Barsomo church in Midyat and vice president of the Syriac Culture Association, who runs aid distribution in Midyat. “But God help us if the insurgents take the Jazeera from the Kurds. Then we will be overwhelmed.”

That is an imminent danger, according to refugees sheltering in the Mor Hobil-Mor Abrohom monastery outside of Midyat. While the Kurds remained in control of the Jazeera, most Syrians would stay put, said one young man, who gave his name only as Gabriel. But if the region should fall to Islamist Arab rebels, “then not any Christian people will stay there,” he said.

Yusuf Turker, the administrator of the monastery, said Syrians on both sides of the border were anxiously following the struggle between Kurds and Arab militias over the region.

“If Ras al-Ain falls and the militias overrun the region, God forbid, then 40,000 or 50,000 Christians will come over the border in one rush,” he said.

To prepare for such a contingency, Turkish Syrians have solicited and obtained the support of the Turkish authorities, said Evgil Turker of the Federation of Syriac Associations. In addition to allowing Syriac refugees to be privately sheltered outside the camps and providing aid for their support, the prime minister’s office in Ankara had pledged to establish a separate refugee camp for Syrians if necessary, he added.

Some Turkish officials confirmed this. Syriac Christians fleeing Syria had asked for help from the Turkish authorities “and we will be happy to help them,” a high-ranking Turkish official, who commented on condition that he not be identified, wrote in an e-mail.

“Upon their request, they will be placed with or near the Turkish Syriac Christian communities in Mardin,” he said.

Another Turkish official, who also would not be named, said Turkey was prepared to build a separate camp for Christian refugees. Such a camp would include facilities to meet their “religious requirements,” he added.

Many Syriac refugees, including those interviewed in Mardin and Midyat, would prefer a European visa to a place in a Turkish refugee camp or a cell in a Tur Abdin monastery. “Most want to move on and leave the region,” Mr. Turker admitted. “But we won’t help them to do that.”

In fact, the Syriac federation has asked European embassies in Ankara and the U.S. Consulate in Adana not to provide the refugees with visas, but rather to help them stay in the region, Syriac activists said.

“We are strictly opposed to an exodus of Syriacs from our homeland,” said Aziz Demir, the mayor of Kafro, a Syriac village in Tur Abdin that was recently rebuilt and resettled by Syriacs returning from the European diaspora; he is also president of a Syriac association affiliated with the federation.

“We tell every refugee who comes that he must not emigrate to Europe or America, but hold out in Turkey, Lebanon or Jordan, because emigration means that we will lose our homeland and our roots,” Mr. Demir said.

Syriacs see the Jazeera region of Syria as their last toehold in the Middle East, Mr. Turker said. In the Tur Abdin region of Turkey, their number has dwindled from 200,000 a century ago to fewer than 5,000 today. Hundreds of thousands of Christians, meanwhile, have fled Iraq in the past decade.

“If we Syriacs keep on running, where will we end up?” Mr. Turker said. “It is time for us to make a stand.”

The Syriac federation hopes that it can persuade Turkey to grant citizenship to Christian refugees from Syria, enabling them to settle in Tur Abdin.

It says the road to naturalization in Turkey should be easy for Syriac Syrians, most of whom are descended from earlier generations of refugees from Tur Abdin who fled Turkish persecution and a local famine in the first half of the 20th century. They settled in what was then the French mandate of Syria, leading to the establishment of the Syriac Orthodox Archdiocese of Jazeera and Euphrates in Al-Hasakah, where it remains to this day.

“Most of the refugees’ ancestors are still on record here in Turkey, so they could be naturalized on those grounds: That is what they told us,” Mr. Turker said, referring to comments by officials at the Turkish prime minister’s office and at the governorate of Mardin Province.

In the monastery outside Midyat, a refugee named Hannibal sighed at that thought. His family, he said, had fled Midyat for Al-Hasakah in the 1940s to avoid the labor camps that non-Muslims in Turkey were sent to in lieu of military service during World War II. “Now the same thing is happening to me and my friends. I guess in 40 or 50 years we will go back to Syria.”

Hannibal, a 36-year-old pathologist who fled Syria when his life was threatened by rebels, was not smiling as he talked: “As Christians in the Middle East, we live in misery and suffer many difficulties. We want nothing more than to emigrate to other places.”

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