



Syria



In this Syrian Christian village
a version of Aramaic,
the language of Jesus and His
disciples,
is still spoken by the older
generation

Syria's destructive civil war has now been raging for more than 18 months, and millions of helpless Christians are caught in its crossfire with no-one to defend them.

Syria used to be one of the easiest places in the Arab world to be a Christian. The Church has existed there since Biblical times. In the book of Acts it was on the road to Damascus, capital of today's Syria, that Saul was stopped short in his mission to destroy the early Church. The risen Christ asked him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4). It was in Damascus that Saul regained his sight after being struck blind, and it was here that he was filled with the Holy Spirit, was baptised and began his ministry as an apostle.

Until early 2011, Syria's churches were large (about 10% of the population), and Christians were respected by the Muslim majority. They were allowed to worship and practise their faith without much official interference. But all this has changed dramatically for the worse since hostilities between the government and opposition forces broke out.

Tens of thousands of Christians have been displaced from their homes by threats and violence, as mainly Christian areas have been invaded or attacked. The city of Homs was almost completely cleared of its population of 50-60,000 Christians. Houses have been ransacked, and believers kidnapped for ransom or gruesomely murdered. Some Christians have even asked the kidnappers to kill their loved ones outright rather than have them hideously tortured. Many churches and other Christian buildings have been bombed.

Some desperate Christians are now fleeing to Lebanon or are attempting to cross over to Europe to escape the dangers. Syrian Christian leaders are concerned that the Church in their country may be wiped out altogether, despite its long history. "I am not very optimistic that our Christian community will survive," said one.

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