

Syria in Crisis

By Harry Morin



One cannot read today's headlines without realizing that the country of Syria is in the throes of revolution. As of this writing (9/13/2012), reports continue to mount regarding atrocities committed by the ruling government. Arguments abound as to where blame should be cast. UN intervention attempts have been futile. The United States currently ponders options regarding some type of intervention to avoid further bloodshed. Most parties in this battle profess to be Muslims, but how is it that they are killing one another? What started this conflict in the first place? Why is it important to know Syria's President Assad is an Alawi Muslim and represents the minority community of Alawi people? Out of a Syrian population of 22 million, Alawis number 1.2 million — yet they control disproportionate numbers of key military

posts and large numbers of non-military government positions. Sunnis make up 74 percent of Syrian Muslims — and most of them view Alawis as heretics.

To understand the background of Syria's minority Alawi people, it will first be helpful to understand the origin of the two major sects in Islam, the Sunni and the Shia. When Islam's prophet, Muhammad, died in AD 632, he had no living sons. That created a problem for the fledgling Muslim community at Medina — who would succeed? The majority opinion opted for tribal tradition, to elect someone from among the highly respected elders. A minority opinion insisted, however, that Ali, Muhammad's close cousin and son-in-law, be appointed, not only because he was of Muhammad's

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Until All Have Heard

How then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? – Romans 10:14

Jim Bennett
Global Initiative:
Reaching Muslim Peoples



Our lead story will help you understand the complicated nature of the current Syrian tragedy. We pray that by the time you read this, the horror and killing will have stopped. As of this writing, 6,000 have already died and no solution appears imminent.


Few places are as central as Syria to the long history of Christianity. Saul of Tarsus had his “heavenly vision” on



the road to Damascus. A highlight from my trips to Syria was visiting the Street Called Straight, where Ananias prayed for Paul to receive back his sight. Some of the most genuine Christians I have ever met are Syrians — both inside and outside the country. Syria still hosts vibrant, but dwindling communities of various ancient sects: Syrian Orthodox, Syrian Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics and Armenian Orthodox, along with a strong Anglican presence and other small groups of Protestants. Christians in Syria constitute 5 percent of a population of 22 million.

An *Agence-France* article entitled “Can Syria's Christians Survive?” provides some clarity on the Syrian Christian predicament: “Syria's Christian communities are being severely tested by the uprising that has racked the country for more than a year. They think back to 636, when the Christian Byzantine emperor Heraclius saw his army defeated by Muslim forces south of present-day Damascus. ‘Peace be with you Syria. What a beautiful land you will be for our enemies,’ he lamented before fleeing north to Antioch. In the 8th century, a famed Damascus church was razed to make way for the Umayyad Mosque — today one of Islam's holiest sites.”

“Not a few Christians in modern-day Syria worry that the current crisis could end the same way for them if Bashar al-Assad and his regime are defeated by the rebel insurgency. Many fear that any government that replaces the Assad regime might be dominated by groups like the Muslim Brotherhood that could relegate them back to second-class status. They also worry their communities could be devastated in the crossfire between Syria's largely Sunni Muslim insurgency and the well-armed Alawite regime. As the conflict inside the country takes on ever-stronger sectarian overtones, Christians largely side with the regime or at least decline to actively oppose it.”

Join us in praying for the sovereign hand of almighty God to bring peace and justice to all the people of Syria. We especially pray for protection on God's Church — and that it will be a source of hope and light in the midst of the horrors of war. 

Muslim World News



Kazakhstan

Uzbek pastor faces extradition

A former Uzbek house church pastor is in a Kazakhstan jail, awaiting a ruling on whether he will be returned to his native country, even as Kazakhstan's Supreme Court considers whether to declare him a refugee from almost-certain persecution.

Makset Djabbarbergenov was arrested Sept. 5 in Almaty. Uzbekistan wants him back to face charges that he practiced religion outside state regulation. Even as Djabbarbergenov's refugee status hangs in the balance, prosecutors have moved ahead in response to Uzbekistan's request to return him to face charges.

The two charges awaiting Djabbarbergenov in Uzbekistan each carry a maximum penalty of three years in prison. Uzbekistan is ranked No. 7 on the World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.

"Christians are fined or given short-term prison sentences. When brought to court, fair treatment is not ensured," according to the World Watch List. — *Compass*

Iran

Pastor freed after facing death

An Iranian pastor who faced a death sentence because of accusations he abandoned Islam for Christianity walked out of jail a free man.

After two years and 11 months behind bars, Yousef Nadarkhani emerged from jail to rejoin his wife, Fatemeh Pasandideh, and their two sons, reported *Middle East Concern*, citing unnamed sources.

In September 2010 Nadarkhani was sentenced to death after a court of appeals in Rasht, 243 kilometers (151 miles) northwest of Tehran, found him guilty of leaving Islam. Nadarkhani had been in prison since October 2009.

At an appeal hearing in June, the Supreme Court of Iran upheld Nadarkhani's sentence, but asked the court in Rasht to determine if Nadarkhani was a practicing Muslim before his conversion.

The court declared that Nadarkhani was not a practicing Muslim before his conversion, but that he was still guilty of apostasy due to his Muslim ancestry. — *Compass*

Pakistan

Turn in Masih blasphemy case

An unexpected twist in the Rimsha Masih blasphemy case appears to have paved the way for her freedom from apparently false charges of desecrating the Quran.

Khalid Jadoon Chishti, the imam who supported her accuser was himself arrested and appeared in court on the same charge as the girl, that of desecrating the Quran, which he's alleged to have done in tampering with evidence presented against her.

Rimsha's lawyer Tahir Naveed Chaudry said the case against his client had completely collapsed. "There's nothing left in the case ... the prosecution has completely failed." Naveed said he was hopeful that Rimsha would be freed on bail. The case has triggered a debate on how Pakistan's blasphemy laws are being used to settle personal scores.

Naveed said the incident had become a test case for the government in particular. "The case has prompted everyone of us to ponder how innocent people are made to suffer by their enemies." — *Compass*



family, but his sons would be of Muhammad's bloodline. Those who supported Ali became known as the Shias (the separatists), and those who opted for tradition, the Sunnis (those of the “right” way).

The first three successors of Muhammad were elected from the Sunni community. When the time came for the fourth successor, the dissenting Shias finally had their way. Due to in-house rivalries among the Sunnis, the door opened for a non-Sunni leader, and that was Ali. The elevation of Ali was a major milestone for the Shias, who esteemed him as their first legitimate ruler, crowning him with the special title of Imam, meaning guide. Some of the majority Sunni leaders rebelled and instigated an all-out civil war between Sunnis and Shias. The feelings of bitterness over that war still reverberate among Muslims. Of today's 1.5 billion Muslims, 85 percent to 90 percent are Sunni, and 10 percent to 15 percent are Shia. The largest and most influential Shia country is Iran.

From the time of Ali, 11 of his blood descendants ruled consecutively over the separatist Shia community, each bearing the title Imam. According to Shia tradition, the twelfth descendant, the Twelfth Imam, was mysteri-

ously whisked away in the 10th century by God to a hidden place to protect him from the Sunni threat of extermination. Shias refer to the Twelfth Imam as the Hidden Imam and believe that not only is he still alive, but will return to the world in the end-time to establish true Islam and global peace.

In view of this background, Alawi Muslims consider themselves Shia Muslims, but espouse unorthodox beliefs, especially as they relate to Ali, the First Imam, from whom they derive their name. Most Alawis trace their origins to the followers of the Eleventh Imam, Hassan al-Askari, and his pupil Ibn Nusayr. A later disciple, al-Tabarani, helped to perfect the Alawi faith through his numerous writings. He and his followers converted the rural population of the Syrian Coastal Mountain Range and the plain of Cilicia to the Alawi faith.

At the same time, Syria was under the rule of the Christian Byzantine Empire. Certain beliefs and practices among the Alawis were syncretized into their religion from the Christian influence, such as the belief that Ali is God incarnate; the use of bread and wine as a religious sacrament; and the observance of both Christmas

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and Easter. For this reason, Sunnis regard Alawis as outright infidels and mainline Shias regard them as somewhat heterodox.

When the Islamic Ottoman Empire of the Sunnis defeated the Byzantine Empire in 1453, the Alawis fell under the brunt of Sunni persecution. Their plight became one of peasantry and marginalization. They were forced to live for centuries in isolation in the coastal mountainous regions of Syria. This condition changed, however, with the demise of the Ottoman Empire following World War I and the League of Nations' mandate which brought Syria under French control. Sunni Muslims fiercely resisted the French takeover, but their counterparts, the Alawis, eventually complied, seeing the French as an ally. Many Alawi men enlisted in the special forces of the French where they not only secured an education, but attained high ranks in the military. By the time France granted Syria full independence in 1946, the Alawis had a strong foothold in the Syrian military. One of the leading Alawi officers was the young air force general Hafez al-Assad.

After years of military administration and maneuvering within the political Ba'ath (Renaissance) Party, Hafez al-Assad was able to secure full power and declare himself president in 1971. The Alawis, already occupying a disproportionate number of influential military posts, were able to assert rulership over the country — and more significantly, over the Sunni majority.

With control of key Alawi military commanders, al-Assad ruled Syria with an iron fist. Gradually he placed Alawi compatriots in influential non-military positions. In order to accommodate Syria's diversity of religious communities, he established a secular government that proved to be ruthless against political dissidents, but tolerant toward minority communities, including the Christians. Hafez al-Assad died in 2000 and was succeeded by his son, Bashar al-Assad. The new Assad basically continued the policies of his father — with the exception that he has made some effort to promote an Islam that is more conventional in order to appease his Sunni countrymen.

The present Syrian rebellion bears some of the marks of the 7th century Sunni/Shia civil war — fought over “the succession problem.” The smoldering resentment that has been harbored over the centuries is unleashing its fury. The momentum of the Arab Spring uprising all over the Middle East and North Africa is now surfacing in Syria. Sunni resistance groups are agitating for a complete overthrow of the Assad regime. They wish to be free from what they consider brutal and oppressive measures, and no longer want to be subject to a Shia Muslim, especially an Alawi. Like his father before him, Bashar al-Assad retains control of the military and thus is able to respond with heavy reprisals. Alawis fought long and hard for their status and will not easily relinquish control. To further complicate the picture, Iran, the bastion of Shia

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A political poster hangs on a restaurant wall in central Damascus. Against the backdrop of Syrian and Hezbollah flags are portraits of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iranian president, left; Bashar Al-Assad, Syrian president, center; and Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Islam, has readily provided means and manpower to assist their Shia/Alawi compatriots. Russia and China have huge financial and strategic reasons in abetting the Assad regime. Meanwhile, thousands of innocent civilians are paying a heavy toll as the battle in Syria rages.

In the ongoing turmoil, the plight of the Christian community is full of uncertainty. If the Assad regime falls, the Sunni fundamentalists will most likely unleash their vengeance not only on the Alawis, but on the Christians as well. Prayer is urgent at this time — but what do we pray for? Do we pray that the regime falls so that Assad's repressive rule comes to an end, or do we pray that Assad's countermeasures against the rebellion succeed so that no greater bloodbath ensues? There are no easy answers. We can only pray for God's divine intervention — believing that He knows what outcome is best for the sake of Syria, and for the sake of His Kingdom.

What we do know is this: It is unlikely that the intervention of the United Nations or the West will solve this catastrophe. Already, thousands of refugees have fled to Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq. Pray that Christians — both inside and outside Syria — will see this as a divine opportunity to minister the compassion of Christ.

Among the hurting are thousands of Muslims who have become broken and disillusioned. They need tender mercies to be delivered to them in Jesus' name. Indeed, war is a dreadful curse upon the human race. Let us pray that in the midst of Syria's unbearable pain, hearts will be turned to the Prince of Peace. 🕊

Prayer Profile: *Northern Yemenis*

The 12 million northern Yemenis are Arabic speakers. Yemen is not easily accessible to outsiders, and not open to Christianity.

Pray for:

The few believers among the Sanaani Arabs, that they would be united around the truth of Scripture, growing in holiness and love.

Protection for Christian workers in Yemen who live in difficult circumstances.

Christian Arabs to feel a burden to reach the Muslims of Yemen.

The northern tribes of Yemen, that they will increasingly hunger for truth.

For information: www.joshuaproject.org.





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Friday, November 2, 2012. Please pray

...for the people of Syria. Pray that the bloodshed and unrest would end. Pray that violence won't spill over into neighboring countries.

...for an end to clashes in Assam, India between Bodo tribesmen and immigrant Muslims. Approximately 400,000 people have already been displaced.

...for God to work a miracle in the lives of Thailand's 4 million Muslims.

Friday, November 9, 2012. Please pray

...for the Muslims of Iran. Pray they might receive Christian witness and testimony through social media and Internet outlets. There are 65 million mobile phone users in Iran.

...for Muslims in Kenya. Violent Islam continues to gain traction.

...for Asia Bibi in Pakistan. Bibi was arrested on blasphemy charges three years ago; she remains in prison.

Friday, November 16, 2012. Please pray

...for Muslims living in Western countries. Pray that through conversions and testimonies, the Gospel of Jesus Christ will spread into the Muslim world.

...for the Maldives where there is a growing move to implement full *sharia* law.

...for Christian witness to the Muslims of Ghana. Many cities in north Ghana are up to 95 percent Muslim.

Friday, November 23, 2012. Please pray

...for a 16-year-old Afghan girl recently given 100 lashes for an "illicit" relationship with a boy.

...for expatriate Christian workers in the Muslim world to gain opportunities to witness to neighbors.

...for the people of Mali. Religious violence and terrorism threaten to overrun the country.

Friday, November 30, 2012. Please pray

...for the emir of Kuwait. He recently blocked a *sharia*-driven bill that would punish blasphemy with death or long-term imprisonment.

...for Muslims in Turkmenistan, which is currently the most closed country in Central Asia.

...for Bangladesh. In the last 15 years, terrorists have detonated hundreds of bombs and killed thousands of people. Bangladesh has the fourth largest Muslim population in the world.



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Friday, December 7, 2012. Please pray

...for the Muslims of Mali. Militants have taken over in the north and a political/humanitarian crisis is growing.
...for children in the Islamic world. More than a quarter of the world's 2 billion children live in Muslim countries.
...for MBBs (Muslim Background Believers). Pray they would continue to grow in Christ, despite many not having access to Christian literature or Christian fellowship.

Friday, December 14, 2012. Please pray

...for God's protection over the Church in Egypt.
...for India's 178 million Muslims to freely hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
...for Muslim areas of the Philippines. The past 40 years of violence have seen thousands of deaths.

Friday, December 21, 2012. Please pray

...for millions of Muslims attending mosques today. Pray that the Lord would reveal His love to them in miraculous ways.
...for Sudanese Muslims to have opportunity to learn about Jesus.
...for Libya's Muslims during a time of extreme upheaval and uncertainty.

Friday, December 28, 2012. Please pray

...for God to work a miracle in the lives of Nigeria's 75 million Muslims.
...for Muslims living in the United States. Pray that through their conversions and testimonies, the gospel of Jesus Christ will be spread into the Islamic world.
...for refugees across the globe. Approximately 80 percent of the world's refugees are Muslim.

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P. O. Box 2730, Springfield, MO 65801-2730
1-866-816-0824 (toll free)
www.globalinitiativeinfo.com
www.jumaaprayers.org