

## Syria Christian refugees in Lebanon fear Islamist rebels

*Christians, a minority in Syria, have in general tried to stay out of the conflict, but they fear Islamist rebels will target them, refugees in Lebanon say.*

August 22, 2012 | By Alexandra Sandels and Patrick J. McDonnell, Los Angeles Times

ZAHLE, Lebanon — For most of the refugees streaming across the border into Lebanon, Syrian President Bashar Assad is to blame for the violence back home and the rebel effort to oust him is laudable. For the traumatized Christians among them, it's often the opposite.

The rebellion, led by Syria's Sunni Muslim majority, has stirred profound concern among Christians, who make up about 10% of Syria's population. Some say they detect an increasingly radicalized Islamist strain among the rebels that makes them fear for their future.

Although many young Christians sympathize with the rebellion, most Christians are believed to still support the embattled government, viewing it as a guarantor of minority rights, even as it represses free speech and crushes any form of political opposition.

Among those who have fled into neighboring Lebanon are Christians from the town of Qusair, just across the border in war-ravaged Homs province. They say they were tired of threats and public taunts of being "unbelievers" and "dogs of Assad."

They recount being forced to attend rallies against Assad, an adherent of the minority Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam.

"If the [government opponents] had acted peacefully, maybe we would have sided with them," one woman says. "But they were terrible. They looted and robbed."

Christian refugees constitute a fraction of the tens of thousands of Syrians, mostly Sunnis, who have crossed the border. Many taking refuge here said they fled as a result of a sense of antipathy, even hatred, from Islamist rebels, some of them militants from outside Syria.

Like much of what is happening in Syria, the stories recounted by Christian refugees in this Bekaa Valley town and other enclaves in Lebanon are difficult to confirm. No Christian refugees interviewed here wanted even their first names used. All hope to return home someday and fear reprisal.

Many have lost homes and loved ones, a fate shared by their former Sunni neighbors. But for some, that's where the common ground ends.

Mindful of the persecution of Christians and the rise of Islamist extremists in neighboring Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein, a secular autocrat like Assad, some Christians here fear that their community will become a similar target, especially as the conflict engulfs Syria's

two major cities, Aleppo and Damascus, each with large Christian populations. The cities were relatively insulated from the rebellion until fierce fighting broke out last month.

Christian groups around the world have expressed concern about the plight of the minority in Syria. Pope Benedict XVI has called repeatedly for an end to violence that threatens Christians as well as Muslims in Syria and may destabilize the broader Middle East. He plans to visit neighboring Lebanon in mid-September despite concern that the violence has begun to spill across the border.

"We hope we will not have the same situation as in Homs," Aleppo's Chaldean Christian bishop, Antoine Audo, said by telephone from the northern city, where rebels and government forces are fighting for control. "That could be a disaster for us."

Christians have generally tried to stay out of the conflict, with mixed success. Various reports have surfaced of attempts by Assad's regime to arm Christian communities against the rebels, allegations denied by the government and the Christian hierarchy.

It seems clear from interviews with Christian refugees here that Qusair — once a thriving provincial city of 40,000, now a largely depopulated battleground for rebels and government troops — became a sectarian-tinged battle front.

In what appears to be an exception, some Christians in Qusair took up arms on behalf of the government, according to various accounts, including those of two priests who have been in the area. Christian families called the move self-defense. But the arming invited retribution from rebels, who are accused of abducting and executing Christians suspected of being informers and government sympathizers in Qusair.

"In Qusair, there was a real Christian-Islamic clash," said Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, an Italian Jesuit who worked for decades in Syria. "There were some Christians who created a kind of active resistance."

The Jesuit called the sectarian elements within the armed opposition a small group.

"Inside the revolution, there has been a penetration of clandestine jihadists, extremist groups with a cultural background that allowed them to practice confessional hate," Dall'Oglio said in an interview in Beirut last month.

Other Christian clerics view sectarian motivations as ever more prominent among the many armed factions fighting to topple Assad. The uprising has stoked Sunni-Alawite tension, which has allegedly contributed to massacres by both sides.

"The nightmare for Christians is when the revolution took an Islamist face," said Mother Agnes Mariam, a Catholic nun and mother superior of a monastery in Homs province. "It is not the moderate Islam we know in Syria. We are talking about a kind of aggressive and impulsive Islam."

The nun, now in exile in Europe, has been an outspoken critic of what she calls abuses by rebel forces. Her views drew death threats that forced her to flee, she says. She denies opposition charges that she is an apologist and even an operative for the Assad government.

"I am against protecting death squads, fundamentalist factions coming to destabilize a country," she said in a telephone interview from Belgium. "No one knows where this change will take us."

Many opposition leaders have declared publicly that their goal is a secular, democratic Syria where the rights of all minorities are protected. They call voices like those of the nun's exaggerated and inflammatory

The uprising "is not against Christians or any minority," said George Sabra, a Christian opposition activist affiliated with the Syrian National Council, an umbrella group with close links to the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist organization that has emerged as a major player in post-revolutionary Egypt and Tunisia and seeks a similar role in Syria, where it has been banned for decades. "The Islamist current in Syria is a moderate one."

In battered Homs city, several hundred Christian families still live in various districts, said a Catholic priest who had been in the area last month. Outside the city, reports indicate, a string of Christian towns and villages remains largely untouched by the war, though populations have in some cases swelled with coreligionists fleeing violence elsewhere.

Christians in exile are waiting to see what happens, trying to eke out a living with odd jobs, dwindling savings and charity from church groups. If Assad falls, many see a bleak future.

"If we go back, we will live by ourselves and they by themselves," said one Christian laborer who fled Qusair last summer. "There will be a separation."

*patrick.mcdonnell@latimes.com*

*Sandels is a special correspondent. Special correspondent Rima Marrouch in Beirut contributed to this report.*