

Armenia struggles to absorb Christian refugees from Syria

by [Diana Markosian](#) in the [April 3, 2013](#) issue

Sarkiss Rshdouni escaped the fighting in the besieged Syrian city of Aleppo months ago but cannot shake memories of what he witnessed.

“I was with a friend when I heard gunshots,” said Rshdouni, who is among hundreds of thousands of people who have fled the war in his homeland. “It was fast—second by second, the sound was getting closer. I saw mass shooting, people running.”

Aleppo is home to more than 80 percent of Syria’s Armenian community, and those who are still there remain at the center of the battle for control of the country.

Syrian rebels recently pushed back army defenses and moved closer to the country’s second-largest airport just outside Aleppo. The airport stopped commercial flights weeks ago because of the fighting, but it is used by Syrian president Bashar Assad’s military to resupply troops and launch airstrikes against rebel positions.

The uprising against Assad, which erupted nearly two years ago, has left more than 2 million people internally displaced and pushed 650,000 more to seek refuge abroad in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan.

Aleppo, Syria’s largest city, has been engulfed in fighting for months between government forces and opposition militias, including al-Qaeda-allied extremists. People there are dealing with shortages of food, medicine and electricity during the coldest winter in the Middle East in two decades.

The Christian-Armenian community in Syria is relatively small—between 60,000 and 100,000 people, according to estimates—but its history has added to its unease. Armenians in Syria are descendants of people who fled to Syria after escaping a genocide against Armenians in Ottoman Turkey during World War I.

Many worry that the same can happen in Syria, where the Christian Armenians are again at the mercy of Muslim factions at war, and they are desperate to get out.

“Syrian Air has rerouted all flights because of the conflict in Aleppo,” said Gevorg Abrahamyan, press secretary of Zvartnots International Airport in Armenia. “There’s a flight arriving once a week now from Latakia [in Syria] to Yerevan.”

Upon arrival in the capital city of Yerevan, the refugees still face a struggle. Armenia is a former Soviet republic that’s landlocked by Turkey, Georgia and Iran. Unemployment is estimated at 20 percent, according to the International Monetary Fund. —*USA Today*

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