Christians in exile: Syrians take refuge in Lebanon

by Melissa Tabeek in the July 10, 2013 issue

A Syrian boy at a refugee camp in Lebanon. Some rights reserved by EU Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection

Tony Yousef has a heart problem. The former government worker pulled open his shirt to show the long, faded scar on his chest from bypass surgery. He talked vehemently about the Syrian rebels who destroyed his way of life in Syria's northeastern Hassakeh Province, forcing him to leave the country six months ago.

"We had no water, no electricity, everything was bombed," said Yousef, 62. "The rebels were taking all the supplies being brought in by the government. They routed the trucks to sell in Turkey. I saw it with my own eyes," he said. He tugged at his dark leather jacket. "I came to Lebanon only with this."

Yousef is joined by his sister-in-law, Sara Hanna, a thin, nervous-looking woman who expressed her fear of kidnappings by the Free Syrian Army, a major rebel group. Syrian president Bashar Assad "was good to the Christians. We had freedom, and he

protected us," she stated. "The FSA are the bad people, and the 'revolution' is a conspiracy."

Tony and Sara are Syrian Christians. Christians make up about 10 percent of Syria's population of 24 million. Since Syria's civil war began in March 2011, an estimated 300,000 Christians have fled the country. While they may not agree on political affiliation or on who is responsible for the conflict, most of them report that much of Syria has become too dangerous and too unstable for them.

Today about 460,000 Syrian refugees live in Lebanon—more than a million if one adds those who were there before the war began. Syrians now make up a quarter of Lebanon's population.

The exact number of Christian refugees is difficult to determine because Christians are afraid of retribution and don't always register with organizations such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Most Syrian Christian refugees avoid the press and refuse to give their names or allow their photos to be taken. They are difficult to find too, because they blend in with the host community. In some respects they assimilate easily, as they can often join family members who are already in Lebanon or can afford to rent a small place.

Lebanon is an appealing refuge for Syrian Christians because it has a significant Christian population. They can practice their religion in Lebanon without fear of political repercussions. They can also receive support and aid from churches and the local Christian community, at least for now.

"These communities are well integrated into the other minority groups in Lebanon, so up until now they've been self-sufficient. But with time this will cause strain on these communities, and they'll have to ask for aid from UNHCR," said UNHCR public information officer Joelle Eid.

The refugee situation threatens to overwhelm Lebanon, which is already struggling to maintain a delicate peace among its own sects. This country, the smallest in the region, hosts the highest number of the region's refugees. Its population has increased by 10 percent.

The influx puts Lebanon under an enormous strain in every sector—economy, infrastructure, housing, medical facilities and public schools, not to mention the aid organizations.

A Lebanese official said that the government was stretched even before the influx. Areas where sewage and water systems were built to accommodate 10,000 people now have to accommodate twice as many. Public schools that already were running short of essential utilities face twice the number of students. Hospitals are overstretched and prisons can’t handle additional inmates. “We can’t provide for Lebanese, let alone Syrians.”

Eid sees a growing resentment among the Lebanese. She said that two years ago Lebanese families would drive up to the border to meet Syrians and host them in their homes. At the beginning, more than half of the refugees were living with host families. That isn’t happening anymore, she said. Most Syrians rent, live in collective shelters or share an apartment with three or four other families because they can’t afford to rent on their own.

An already difficult job market in Lebanon has been flooded with Syrians who will work for less than a Lebanese person demands. Rents are rising and the housing market is saturated. Criminality is on the rise. This feeds a Lebanese stereotype that categorizes Syrians as low-income, uneducated, menial workers or criminals and blames them for problems in Lebanon.

“When the security situation is unstable and you have disturbances like armed clashes in the North, this will . . . destabilize the country, and therefore affect the political situation and the economic situation,” said Farid el Khazen, a professor of political science at the American University of Beirut and a member of parliament.

“If there is no political settlement, Syria will be in a state of total chaos . . . that is the worst scenario for Syria and the worst scenario for Lebanon and neighboring countries,” Khazen said.

Christians in Syria have a special connection to their country. As they see it, Greater Syria encompasses the birthplace of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem and the site of the apostle Paul’s conversion in Damascus. Some Syrians still speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus. Syria is home to some of the most ancient churches in the world, and it includes Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Assyrian, Chaldean and Syriac Christians.

Syrian Christians, along with other minorities in the country, have traditionally been loyal supporters of Assad’s regime, which belongs to the Alawite branch of Shi‘a Islam. As a result of this support, Christians have generally enjoyed relative

freedom, protection and opportunities to make a living.

But since the uprising started more than two years ago, the conflict has dissolved into a brutal civil war that increasingly pits citizen against citizen. Activists estimate that more than 80,000 people have been killed in the conflict. The number of the displaced, both within and outside of Syria, is much higher. More than 1.5 million are registered, or have appointments for registration, with UNHCR outside of the country. An additional 2.5 million are displaced within Syria.

Though in recent history Christians and Muslims have lived together with little violence, that era may be over. Isaam John Darwish, the Melkite Greek Catholic archbishop of Zahlé in eastern Lebanon, said that Christians won't go back to Syria. "They are really afraid of the extremists."

Citing the recent kidnappings of Yohanna Ibrahim, Syrian Orthodox bishop of the diocese of Aleppo, and Boulos Yazigi, archbishop of the Greek Orthodox diocese of Aleppo, Darwish said that he no longer ventures outside Zahlé except to go to Beirut, and he rarely goes out after dark.

Simon Faddoul is president of Caritas Lebanon, an organization that has 36 regional offices throughout Lebanon and over 4,000 volunteers. Though staff members work with everyone regardless of religious affiliation, he says there are special programs to reach out to Syrian Christians.

Faddoul describes Syrian Christians in Lebanon as being between a rock and a hard place. "Their main fear is on the inside. Many are neither with the regime nor with the rebels," he said. "They say, 'We cannot side with either—otherwise, we'll be hit by this or that. If we take the no stand, we're done by both.' They have no other option [but] to hide or to leave Syria."

Many Christians decided not to participate in the uprising, choosing to stay neutral or to support the regime. Even if they don't side with Assad, they fear a takeover by an Islamist extremist group.

"You cannot rule out the option that there are Christians being massacred in Syria. But I believe they probably are not being massacred," says Riad al Khouri of Development Equity Associates Inc. Al Khouri, who has spent many years studying and working in Syria, compares what is happening here to a child dropping a bottle on a Muslim in a Christian neighborhood. The child has no idea that he may hurt the

Muslim, but the Muslim will think that he is being targeted. The same holds true for a Christian in a Muslim neighborhood.

But one Syrian Christian family believes that its members were targeted specifically because of their family name and their beliefs. Raheda comes from al-Qusayr in the Homs Governorate. She has two boys, age 16 and 13, and two girls, six and eight. The girls attend school and the boys are at work in local bakeries. She and her family, along with her sister Hanna and her brother-in-law Yassar, left al-Qusayr early in 2012.

Yassar recounted that they heard an announcement over the mosque loudspeakers saying that people with their family name would be “kidnapped or killed.” That same day “terrorists attacked our house, climbed the walls and knocked at the door demanding that the men come out of the house.” Yassar and his brother escaped out a back door while Raheda and Hanna argued with the armed men at their front door. Raheda related how she challenged them: “Why are you coming for us? Our men are in Zahlé. We are peaceful people.” This encounter with the rebel forces led them to leave the country.

When asked why he supported Assad, Yassar blamed his country’s problems on Saudi Arabia and Qatar. “Conspiracy, conspiracy,” Yassar said repeatedly. “There is no revolution. It’s a conspiracy.”

Swedish journalist Nuri Kino, who has conducted over 100 interviews with Syrian Christian refugees, believes that Syrian Christians are being targeted, mostly in areas where there are fundamentalists—and that it will continue. “No one knows how many have fled,” said Kino, “but after the kidnapping of the bishops, the trend will only increase.”

Khazen agrees that Christians are the easiest target for Sunni radical groups. “With a jihadist, it doesn’t take much for them to come up with a fatwa to simply allow for the killing of other Muslims and non-Muslims,” he said. And unlike the Kurds, “Christians have no ability to defend themselves.”

The UNHCR and other groups are trying to prepare for even more refugees. “I think more than a million people could come,” said Darwish. He pointed out that Damascus is only 50 kilometers from Zahlé.

A university teacher who came with her family to Beirut in September 2012 said her Christian family had felt relatively untouched by the war until mortars began “falling from the sky like rain” in Aleppo. Ten days later they packed up and made the 13-hour bus ride to Beirut.

The slight, pretty woman reminisced about life before the uprising began. “We didn’t feel discriminated against. We had our schools, our language, our religion,” she said. “Now we feel threatened, not only because we are Christian but because everyone is being targeted by all sects. Bad things aren’t happening just to Christians.”

During mass at the Mar Ephrem Assyrian Church in Beirut, people bowed their heads in prayer. Photographs of the two kidnapped Aleppo bishops were attached to the door, and the worshipers inside wore stickers with the bishops’ faces and the words “Let’s pray for them” written in Arabic.

The bishop asked God for the two missing bishops’ safe return. Women wept. A young girl sat on her dad’s shoulders. “We pray that God rescues them and gets them back. We pray for the kidnappers. . . . God protect them, for they don’t know what they do.”