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Targeted for elimination

Fewer than half of Syria's Christians remain there, after years of war. Among those who have fled to Australia, there are divisions over a much-criticised Abbott government pledge to favour 'persecuted minorities' in the refugee intake. Why should any such group receive special attention?

By Chris Ray

A taxi exits the shattered city of Aleppo just before dawn. Moving in convoy for protection, it carries a young widow, her twin daughters and elderly parents on the most

momentous journey of their lives. They have prayed for safe travel at the Melkite Catholic church of St George, lighting candles beneath a painting of the Madonna and Child. Now they abandon their home in hope of finding refuge in Australia.

Aleen Baliozian's daughters Vany and Varty were infants when their father Shiraz died of a brain haemorrhage. By the time the girls turned eight, in 2014, their mostly Christian neighbourhood in west Aleppo had been under siege by Islamist militias for two years. Streets were cratered by mortar fire, hospitals begged for blood and death notices littered the walls. Aleen resolved to escape the city and the war when the twins witnessed "hell cannons" – modified gas bottles packed with shrapnel – tear up a roadway and strike their school. "We are not going to die. We will survive," she reassured the terrified girls.

"God be with you," say the soldiers.

Aleen is the niece of the late Archbishop Aghan Baliozian, Sydney-based Primate of the Armenian Apostolic Church. If the family can get to Australia, they will be among relatives and a diaspora bound by a tradition of mutual aid stemming from the Armenian Genocide a century ago. But first they must reach Beirut to begin the uncertain process of applying for visas to Australia.

Jihadist fighters have cut the highway to the Lebanese border, forcing the convoy to take a long backroads detour. They risk ambush as they cross territory that frequently changes hands. "God be with you," say the soldiers who wave them through the sandbagged checkpoints, but a wrong turn could lead them away from government lines. Aleen removes her crucifix necklace and produces headscarves for herself and her mother, Wehanouch. Aleen knows rebels will be hostile to any uncovered woman they encounter.



A burnt-out Syrian church displays a memorial banner to civilians killed in an attack.

It takes 18 hours to reach Beirut. That night a thunderstorm wakes Vany and Varty. "Mum, they are here, they are bombing," they scream. Aleen takes the girls to the balcony. "Look, it's only a storm. We are not in Syria, we are safe now."

In Beirut the family gets lucky; they are granted visas in just four months and are soon on a flight to Sydney. Today, at their comfortable home in Sydney's northwest, the family sketch out their new lives. Wehanouch, a former school principal, and her husband Boghas, previously a veterinarian, are both in their sixties and volunteer with the Armenian Relief Society.

Vany misses her old bedroom. Varty misses the dolls she left behind.

Wehanouch tells how fighting left her isolated in her Aleppo apartment, within range of jihadist snipers. "I could hear them shouting Allahu Akbar (God is greatest)," she says. She opened a window one morning to see the severed head of a pro-government sheikh hanging from the minaret of a mosque across the street.

Wehanouch calmly relates such horrors, but wipes away tears when the discussion turns to her “beautiful life” before the war. “We were so sad to leave,” she says.

Aleen – a school supervisor in Aleppo – now works as a receptionist at an Armenian school, Galstaun College. It has waived tuition fees for about 40 Syrian refugee children including Vany and Varty. They are bright girls who appear to share their mother’s confidence. “It took time to get them out of their fear; it was hard,” Aleen says.

Muslims and Christians have lived together in Syria for 14 centuries.

In Aleppo, weeks-long power and water cuts forced the family to draw tainted water from a disused churchyard well. The girls shared Aleen’s bed to stay warm through freezing winters. Even so, Vany misses her old bedroom. Varty misses the dolls she left behind.

The battle for Aleppo, once Syria’s biggest city, tilted in the government’s favour in the months since the Baliozians left. The army of President Bashar al-Assad controls all roads into the city. During the week of our interview, it is the jihadist-occupied eastern sector that’s under siege and intense bombardment, with hundreds of civilian casualties reported. Anti-government militia still inflict losses on loyalist districts; Aleen is shocked to learn of the slaughter of three of her former students in a mortar strike while out shopping.



Clockwise from top left: A defaced icon in a church in Syria; Aleen Baliozian with daughters Vany and Varty in Sydney; a memorial to civilians on a burnt-out Syrian church; Vany and Varty celebrate Christmas in Sydney; the Armenian Apostolic Church in Chatswood, Sydney.

"Christians are better off in Syria than anywhere else in the Middle East. Other than Lebanon, this is the only country in the region where a Christian can really feel the equal of a Muslim." So said Yohanna Ibrahim, Syrian Orthodox Archbishop of Aleppo, before he was abducted by unidentified armed men in April 2013, the third year of the war. There is still no indication whether Archbishop Yohanna and Greek Orthodox Archbishop Boulos Yazigi, abducted at the same time, are alive or dead.

Muslims and Christians have lived together in Syria for 14 centuries. It's a rare example of a Middle Eastern country that does not recognise Islam as the state religion. The nation offers a model that goes beyond religious co-existence. Syria's Grand Mufti, a Sunni, preaches in the Christian cathedrals of Damascus and invites bishops to speak at his mosque. State television headlines government leaders of diverse faiths attending Christmas and Easter mass.

“This is a country that is heterogeneous culturally – not just ethnically or religiously.... It’s actually a country that has somehow invented the notion of multiculturalism, and lived with it for a very long time,” writes Nasser Rabbat, director of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

“A civilisation that predates Islam is in the process of being rubbed out.”

Consider the interlocked jumble of creeds and ethnicities at risk of being torn apart in Syria. Sunni Muslim Arabs account for more than 60 per cent of the population. They live alongside Sunni Kurds, Kurdish-speaking Yazidis and syncretic offshoots of Shiite Islam such as the Druze, Ismailis and Alawites.

Christians, an estimated 8 to 10 per cent of the pre-war population, are divided into four streams of Orthodoxy (Greek, Armenian, Syrian and Chaldean) plus Catholic versions of each. Maronites and Protestant denominations add to the mix. Furthermore, Christianity is ethnically mixed with services in Arabic, Armenian and dialects of Aramaic, the language of Jesus.



A burnt-out church in Maloula, Syria.

Such diversity challenges simplistic, sectarian-based analysis of the conflict. Certainly the fractured armed insurgency is entirely Sunni and pledged to impose versions of sharia law. The president it strives to overthrow, Bashar al-Assad, is an Alawite at the head of what is often labelled an “Alawite regime”. Yet some of Assad’s top ministers and security chiefs are Sunnis and his army is mostly Sunni – while being the only Arab military with several Christians serving as generals.

Since war broke out in 2011 the Christian population has suffered catastrophic collapse: from 1.25 million to less than 500,000, according to ADF International, a religious freedom advocacy group. In neighbouring Iraq only 200,000 Christians remain from a population of 1.4 million in the 1980s, says Australian theologian Elizabeth Kendal, director of advocacy for Canberra-based Christian Faith and Freedom. “A civilisation that predates Islam is in the process of being rubbed out. They are being targeted for elimination under the cover of conflict,” she warns.

“At Christmas they would say to me, ‘Merry Christmas’ and at Eid I would wish them ‘Eid Mubarak’.”

The Baliozian family joined the exodus not only to escape violence and privation; they also feared persecution by Sunni Muslim extremists responsible for a wave of kidnappings and executions, along with the destruction of churches.

“Before the war there was no discrimination between Muslims and Christians, between Armenians and Arabs,” says Boghas, who worked in a veterinary laboratory in Aleppo. “We all worked together.”

“At Christmas they would say to me, ‘Merry Christmas’ and at Eid I would wish them ‘Eid Mubarak’ (Blessed Eid).” But when rebels moved into the area they told him, “You are the only Christian left here. If you don’t leave, we will kill you.”

In districts outside government control, Christians not killed or forced to convert to Islam have been stripped of their rights and property and forced to pay a ‘jizya’ (poll tax) in return for ‘protection’. In opposition-controlled Idlib province, bordering Aleppo, “Schools have been segregated, women forced to wear veils, and posters of Osama bin Laden hung on the walls... No religious minorities remain in rebel-held Syria,” writes US academic Joshua Landis, a leading expert on Syria.

Aleen says bluntly: “If the government loses this war, the Christians in Syria have no future.”



Aleen Baliozian, with daughters Vany and Varty, fled a mostly Christian neighbourhood in west Aleppo.

In September 2015, then Prime Minister Tony Abbott announced Australia would resettle 12,000 Syrian and Iraqi refugees in addition to the regular humanitarian intake of almost 14,000 that year.

“Our focus will be on families and women and children, especially of persecuted minorities,” Abbott said. That brought immediate condemnation from Islamic community leaders such as Ahmed Kilani, founder of the website Muslim Village.

Prioritising minority groups amounted to “bigoted fear-mongering” and “a betrayal of the true Australian spirit,” Kilani said.

The extra 12,000 refugees are arriving under a Special Humanitarian Program, which allows family members in Australia to nominate relatives for a visa without registering with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). That’s a departure from the regular humanitarian intake based on UNHCR referrals.

“They said you must bring everyone who is suffering from this war regardless of their religion.”

UNHCR officials seeking to keep control over the process have criticised the government for wanting to preference minority groups. Resistance to government policy has reportedly also come from Immigration Department

bureaucrats.

The Abbott policy opened up differences among Christians, too. Days after the former PM’s announcement, Abbott and Immigration Minister Peter Dutton met with resettlement service providers and religious and ethnic leaders in Canberra. They included Rahal Dergham, chaplain to the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney’s Syrian and Iraqi community. He was dismayed to hear Christian leaders speak against preference for minorities.

“We from the eastern churches were shocked,” Syria-born Dergham says. “I don’t really care if I speak bluntly. It’s been a wound to all of us since we left that meeting.”

Dergham says a representative of Iraqi Shi’a Muslims spoke in favour of recognising “the unique suffering of Christians and Yazidis” but the Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne, Archbishop Philip Freier, and a representative of the (Catholic) St Vincent de Paul Society, opposed the plan. “They said you must bring everyone who is suffering from this war regardless of their religion,” Dergham says.

Archbishop Freier did not reply to questions on the issue. However he co-signed a National Council of Churches letter to Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull in October lamenting the “slow progress” in resettling refugees from the Middle East and expressing “particular concern” for persecuted Christians. Sydney’s Catholic Archbishop Anthony Fisher has explicitly called for Christians and other minority groups to be given priority.

Elizabeth Kendal works with faith groups such as the Australian Christian Lobby to urge the government to take more Christian refugees. She’s critical of the ‘low-key’ response from most Australian churches to persecution of Middle Eastern Christians.

“My parents’ house was hit three times by rockets and only my sister in law is left there.”

“The whole culture of Australian churches in relation to the persecuted church generally borders on disinterest. There can even be a hostile response to anyone who challenges their comfortable attitude,” Kendal says.

The Syriac Catholic church sent Rahal Dergham to Australia eight years ago, when Syria was still peaceful. He’s quietly spoken and outwardly calm, but cannot hide his frustration at his inability to help fellow believers – including family members uprooted by massacre and exile.

“Most of my village (near Hama in central Syria) were Christians,” he says. “They fled abroad after rebels butchered 500 people, mostly Alawites, in the neighbouring village. My parents’ house was hit three times by rockets and only my sister in law is left there.”

Dergham’s five brothers are scattered across four continents. One has been waiting with his invalid mother in Beirut since they applied for refugee visas in February 2015. His father, a local government official, joined them in October after escaping a suicide-bomber attack on his office in Hama. “When I ask Australian Immigration for news on their application they say, ‘Please don’t contact us because you are only delaying the process.’”

Dergham agrees the war has brought suffering to Syrians of all religions including the Sunni majority. But, he argues, “Sunnis can hope to survive in rebel-held areas if they keep a low profile and obey sharia law. That’s not an option for Christians or Alawis or Druze.”

“I can’t be safe and happy over there when this holy place is in danger.”

By early November 2016, Australia had issued visas to 9,513 of the additional 12,000 refugees the government committed to resettle a year earlier. The Department of Immigration has not made public a breakdown of visa numbers by religion

and did not provide one on request from SBS. However, Peter Dutton insists the Cabinet decision taken in the dying days of the Abbott government still stands: “My sense is there will be a very high proportion of persecuted minorities including Christians in the 12,000,” he said in September.

Relying on the UNHCR to refer refugee applicants has caused controversy in the US and Britain, too. In March 2016, US Secretary of State John Kerry declared that Islamic State was carrying out genocide against Christians and other minorities. Yet in the following nine months, Christians accounted for just 0.58 per cent of Syrian refugees resettled in the US. Yazidis made up only 0.18 per cent. “They (the UNHCR) appear to be filtering Christians out,” complained one congressman. Legislation before Congress would allow Syrians from religious minorities to circumvent the UN process and apply directly to the US government to be fast-tracked as victims of genocide. The Barnabas Aid church group in Britain has called that country’s similarly low minority intake “a scandal of historic proportions”.



Rahal Dergham, chaplain to the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney's Syrian and Iraqi community.

Before war intervened, the Monastery of the Cherubim on a mountain peak north of Damascus was the scene of a nightly pilgrimage. As the supposed burial place of Abel, slain brother of Cain, the site drew Muslims as well as Christians to evening services conducted by Greek Orthodox priests. Once home to a dozen monks, the monastery near the town of Saidnaya was almost deserted when I stopped there in the winter of 2015. A monk, father Dahdal Nektarios, fetched coffee and explained the monastery had been attacked by rebels who blew down its iron gates before the army drove them off.

“Optimism is not like the stock market – up today and down tomorrow.”

Though the immediate danger had passed, three soldiers remained on watch near a giant statue of Jesus – a gift from the Russian Orthodox Church. Abdul Karim Mohammed was a farmer from Homs and a Sunni. Mahmoud Shaaban, an Alawite from Tartous, had been a Pepsi-Cola salesman. The third guard, Dia Abu Sitteh, a Saidnaya Christian, quit his job as a truck driver in Dubai and rushed home when he heard the town was threatened. “I can’t be safe and happy over there when this holy place is in danger,” he said. “A lot of us came home from the Emirates when the fighting got close to Saidnaya.”



Baptist pastor Samir Yacco (right, and below) in Dweila, Syria.



Another stay-put Christian I met in Syria has an Australian connection. Baptist pastor Samir Yacco studied at Sydney Bible Baptist College in the eighties and befriended Melbourne Anglican priest Andrew Lake when he served as a missionary in Syria. Lake’s congregation, in the Melbourne suburb of Mentone, has sent funds to assist Yacco’s charity work in Dweila, a Damascus suburb declared by the Catholic church to be the site of the conversion of the Apostle Paul.

Speaking via Skype, Yacco says an influx of destitute refugees from Aleppo is straining the resources of his poor parish. “We hand out food and medicine parcels and we’re building a bigger church hall to accommodate a new wave of Christians,” he says. “In their minds we are not their final destination, just a stepping stone to another place, like Australia. I’m sad they want to leave Syria, but I don’t have any alternative for them. I can’t guarantee their safety or a future for their children.”

He is not encouraged by recent military gains over the jihadists. “Optimism is not like the stock market – up today and down tomorrow. Optimism will come when people honestly and diligently work for coexistence and I don’t see that.” Yacco’s wife and children live in the United States, but he intends to stay in Syria. “Like Noah, I’ll be the last to enter the ark.”

Andrew Lake wants Australian churches to do more to help Christians who choose to remain in the Middle East. “It’s an Australian trait to think that the best thing you can do for someone is to bring them to Australia. But Middle Eastern churches have a long view of history and a strong sense of identity. We need to pay more attention to what Christian leaders in the Middle East are saying because we don’t always know best.”

“They believed the so-called Christian West would help them.”

At the end of August, the three Christian Patriarchs of Damascus – John X, Ignatius Aphrem II, and Gregorius III – appealed to Western governments to lift economic sanctions which had “deepened the suffering of the Syrian people”. A recently leaked United Nations report reveals that sanctions

block access to medicines and medical devices, food, fuel, water pumps, spare parts for power plants, and more. The US and EU embargo supported by Australia imposes “some of the most complicated and far-reaching sanctions regimes ever imposed” and is exceptionally harsh “regarding provision of humanitarian aid,” the report says.

Rahal Dergham agrees that “sanctions have killed a lot of Syrians” – including by preventing pharmaceutical manufacturers from buying materials and equipment. “In Syria medical treatment is free, but medicines for heart disease, diabetes and cancer are not available unless you can afford to pay dearly for smuggled products.”

Sanctions are a major cause of the population outflow from Syria, according to the Christian-focused Australian Syrian Charity which helps newly arrived refugees. Its treasurer, Sydney doctor Antoine Barich, claims the West sanctions food and medicine for ordinary Syrians in order to turn the population against the government.

“It’s stupid, because more people will flee and head for Europe and Australia,” Barich says. “And the sanctions are not working as intended because most people would still prefer to live under the government rather than the opposition.”

The head of the Syriac Catholic Church, Ignatius Joseph III, has accused Western governments of betraying Middle Eastern Christians via multi-billion-dollar support for Syrian rebels and allied foreign jihadists. Western actions toward Syria have shocked Christians across the region, says Elizabeth Kendall. “They believed the so-called Christian West would help them, or at least would never harm them by arming, training and funding Islamic militants,” she says.

“The shock and heartache of Middle Eastern Christians, as it dawns on them the extent to which the West has betrayed and abandoned them, has been for me the most painful thing.”

Photography by Tim Bauer (Baliozian family, Rahal Dergham).

Additional photographs from Syria by Chris Ray.
