Christians in Syria Being Targeted for Kidnapping By Islamic Extremists

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In a poor gypsy neighborhood of Istanbul, a Syrian Orthodox refugee from Syria says he worked as a dentist in Aleppo as long as he could after fighting broke out in 2011; he finally fled when lack of food, electricity, water, and constant fear of sniper-fire and kidnapping of Christians made life too dangerous. "Some people would come to my dental office and threaten me with kidnapping," he says. "I finally had to close my practice."

Living in an unheated house and keeping their voices down for fear of attracting police attention, 20 Syrian Orthodox Christians bundle up in winter jackets, drink Turkish coffee, and discuss the dangers of fleeing war-torn Syria and illegally crossing the border into Turkey. The middle-aged dentist, identified only as Ilyas, says in fluent English that friends and relatives were kidnapped by criminal groups operating freely due to the removal of central government control. The refugee says he paid $6,000 to a smuggler to help him leave and crossed the border while under gunfire from an unknown group. He cannot get legal employment here but works occasionally translating Arabic to Turkish. Another refugee from northern Syria, identified only as 35-year-old Ibrahim, fled when his aunt was kidnapped by a local criminal group.

He said criminal group members were colluding with foreign Muslim extremists who have been flooding into the country to fight President Bashar al-Assad and set up an Islamic state. His aunt was eventually ransomed for $6,000. Having crossed into Turkey after paying bribes at the border, Ibrahim worries about his future since Syria is no longer safe for Christians, while local charity groups in Turkey have ignored Syrian Orthodox refugees, he said. "How can we stay in Turkey?" he said. "Nobody gives me a job because they don't like Arabs, and it would be worse if they knew I were a Christian. Even charity organizations in Turkey don't assist me when they find out I am a Christian." These refugees are among the thousands of Syrian Orthodox fleeing to nearby Middle East countries and Europe. Those that flee to Europe face dangers by entrusting themselves to smugglers, who have created a multimillion dollar human trafficking business in the fallout of the war. Christians who stay in Syria risk attacks and executions by extremists. Either way, church leaders and activists fear Syria will soon lose its Christian population.

"There is a silent exodus of Christians from Syria," Nuri Kino, a Swedish journalist of Assyrian background, told Morning Star News. "Unfortunately there are signs that what happened in Iraq is happening here -- there are kidnappings, rapes, and YouTube videos put up of people being forcibly converted to Islam." Before the war, 1.4 million Christians lived in Syria, or 6.3 percent of the population of the Muslim-majority nation, according to Operation World. It is unclear how many remain now. "It's hell out there in Syria," Kino said. "The Christians have a lack of faith and hope and are massively fleeing the country. They don't believe someone is speaking out for them." Christians in Syria dwell among many other ethnic and religious groups, including Arabs, Kurds, Alawites and Druze. Assyrians are the largest Christian ethnic group. They speak Syriac, a Semitic dialect similar to the spoken language of Jesus, and have been established in the country since Christianity's beginning. Christians have been vulnerable since the beginning of the civil war that has left 60,000 dead. Unlike ethnic groups, they do not have armed militias to protect themselves and are scattered across the country. As a result, kidnappings of Christians have accelerated due to the perception that they are wealthy and lack armed security. In the city of Hassak