

The Camp

Turkey is building a tent city for thousands of Syrian Christians. Why?

By Nuri Kino

Hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing the violence in Syria live in camps just inside Turkey. So the April 10 news item from Reuters, announcing the creation of two more camps in Turkish town of Midyat, just beyond Syria's northeastern border, didn't seem like much. But something caught my eye: A camp specifically for Syrian Christians? This was new. Of all the Syrian refugees in Turkey, only a few hundred are Christian. Now they need a camp?

I'm calling clergy and others in Midyat. They can't agree about the number of refugees it is supposed to shelter. One is saying 10,000 Christians, another 1,000. Reuters says 2,500.

Nowhere in the Islamic world has a refugee camp for the Christians of one country been built across the border in a neighbouring country. Now Turkey is building a camp that will hold between 3 and 30 times the number of Syrian Christians currently taking refuge in the country. Why? Why is Turkey creating a small city to handle a flood of Syrian Christians?

The news reports – what few there were – didn't say. The only way to get answers is to go to Midyat.

"We'll be on the same plane, great!" A dentist, previously deeply involved in the Assyrian movement, interrupts me as I am taking notes. He is also on his way to Midyat. He is behind many of the new buildings in southeastern Turkey and has of course heard about the camp. "It was Syriac Orthodox leaders who requested the establishment of a camp; tourist season is about to start and they want to empty the monasteries of refugees. Otherwise, they may lose donations from visitors, from Sweden, for example." So, the dentist believes it is about money. "What they hadn't counted on was that the Turkish government would take the opportunity to build a Muslim camp next to the Christian one. Christian leaders were shocked – but too late, the construction was already underway."

On the flight from Ankara to Mardin, a town about 70 kilometres west of Midyat, I'm sitting next to the well-known columnist Yavuz Donat of the Turkish daily Sabah. Together with the Turkish Minister of the Interior, Muamer Güler, he has visited some refugee camps. "We have a tradition of hospitality in Turkey, and our refugee camps are of very high international

standard. In Midyat, it will be the same.” A doctor friend of Donat shakes his head. “The number of Christian refugees from Syria is grossly exaggerated. Right now there is no need for a camp.”

An hour later, I’m drinking tea from a traditional oval Turkish glass in Deyr ul-Zahfaran, one of the world’s oldest monasteries. Here, Syriac Orthodox believers have practiced their faith for more than 1,500 years. Now the monastery serves three purposes: as a church, a tourist attraction, and on this day, a home for about 50 refugees.

I’m here trying to find out why a Christian refugee camp is being built. In the courtyard drinking tea, I find Syrian Christians arguing the same question.

Jamil Diarbakerli, a local representative of the Assyrian Democratic Organisation, maintains that the persecution of Christians in Syria is exaggerated. “They are just looking for an excuse to leave Syria and escape to Europe,” he says. “As soon as there is a bit of a stir in the Arab world, the Christians seize the opportunity to leave their native countries.” This is upsetting Sargon, a Christian from the Syrian town of Qamishly, a town about 50 kilometres to the south, just across the Turkey border. “What are you talking about? The body of my cousin Alexi Skandar has been lying on a street in Aleppo for more than two weeks. His lacerated corpse has rotted. No one dares to go and get him; if you do you’ll be killed. And he is not alone; many other bodies of Christians are rotting on the streets because Islamists threaten to kill people who want to bury them.”

Diarbakerli won’t give up; he continues to maintain that Christians are not persecuted for the fact they belong to another religion. More Syrian refugees have gathered around by now. They sit quietly listening to Sargon, who has become very irritated. “You are saying this because your party belongs to the opposition; you people don’t want to admit your mistake. You entered this with the idea of helping your people, Assyrians and other Syrian Christians, but fundamentalists and Islamists have taken over the revolution and the opposition. Why do you refuse to see the truth? A group of Islamists entered a Christian home, raped and assaulted a mother and her daughters. When they left, the mother set fire to herself, her daughters and the house.” Diarbakerli replies that this is an isolated case, that there are some Islamists among the opposition but that on the whole it is made up of people who want democracy in Syria. Sargon sighs. The other refugees also sigh. Everyone is quiet.

Suddenly, it’s pouring. We run into one of the two common rooms of the monastery. The refugees go up to the second floor where they have been given sanctuary.

“It’s not time for a camp yet, not for Christians,” Diarbakerli continues. “There are only around 300 of them in all of Turkey. If the situation becomes acute, you can always pitch tents, it’d only take a few hours. I don’t understand why they are taking these drastic steps, why they are building a camp for thousands of people. They should wait.”

But Sargon is more concerned with what’s actually happening in Syria than what might happen in Turkey. “It’s not the henchmen of the regime who persecute us; it’s the Free Syrian Army and their Islamist supporters who want to purge Syria of Christians. There’s no way you can say different.”

Diarbakerli meets Sargon halfway. “Of course there are fundamentalists in Syria; they are everywhere. What we are hoping and working for is that Syria won’t be heading for the same fate as Iraq where over half of the Christians fled. We will, of course, provide shelter to Assyrians and other Christians — not in a Turkish camp, however, but in a humanitarian zone within Syria. Christians have armed and organized themselves in small groupings keeping watch, and to be able to defend themselves if needed. But it is far from sufficient; many more armed men would be needed.”

Sargon takes me to see some of the other refugees on the second floor, two young families with three children each. They affirm that Christian men in northern Syria have armed themselves, guarding Christian enclaves. At most, they are a few hundred.

Later that afternoon, I am summoned to Metropolitan Saliba Özmen’s monastery office. Representatives of three Christian religious denominations have gathered to discuss what kind of help Christian refugees from Syria would need. A Jesuit priest says it upsets him that the small number of refugees in Turkey should be banished to a camp. Christian organizations should be able to provide food and shelter for them. Özmen defends the idea: “We have been taking care of them for a year and a half. They have lived and eaten for free in the monastery. We fear that they will arrive in large numbers; we can’t possibly help them here in Mardin. That is why we turned to the Turkish government and asked for help. Moreover, it’s the tourist season; besides being a historical holy site and a convent school, it is also a tourist attraction.”

The Jesuit rolls his eyes. “It’s a good thing if the tourists can see that the monastery is helping refugees, isn’t it?” No one speaks for a while; the only thing you can hear is the rattle of the rain against the window pane. The Jesuit and the representatives of the various churches get up and take their leave.

When they are gone, Özmen asks for more tea for us. He confesses that things have not gone as planned. “We asked the government for barracks, not tents,” he tells me. “The whole thing has turned out so wrong. Anyway, the refugees that are here, and are coming to Mardin, will live in apartments. A Syriac Orthodox organization from Sweden, Youth Initiative, is helping with rents for four apartments. So the people living in the monastery can be moved.”

Eliye Kirilmaz, chairman of the local church board, says the monastery cannot continue to bear the strain of the displaced Syrians. “We have 30 employees, teachers, caretakers, gardeners and kitchen staff, among others. Moreover, we owe a large sum to the local electricity company; we have not been able to pay for electricity over the winter. Of course we are not throwing out any refugees, but we simply can’t afford it anymore. We are grateful to Youth Initiative who understood the need to rent apartments for the refugees.”

The next day, at lunch in the monastery refectory, I sit down next to five young Syrian men. They are all in their twenties. Some have deserted the Syrian army; others have fled not to be conscripted into the war. “We have tried to find jobs, but no one wants to employ us,” says one of the men, who gives the name Sano. “We only have temporary permits, you see. This means that we can’t work, as we don’t have work permits. It’s very hard to have nothing to do all day long. The transfer into apartments brings us closer to the centre of Mardin and we won’t be isolated as we are now in the monastery.” Another young man says he wants to go back; most people are trying to get to Europe with the help of smugglers, but he and a few others have decided to stay in Turkey until the situation in Syria has improved.

When we go out, the courtyard is full of enthusiastic tourists brandishing cameras, unaware of the Syrian refugees living upstairs. The young men walk discreetly past the tourists and slip up the steps. I follow them. The sun peeps out from behind the clouds. We sit outside; you can almost feel the tide of history. We are in northern Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization according to archaeologists. “First my grandparents fled from Turkey to get away from the genocide of Christians during WWI. Now we, their grandchildren, are fleeing back here to get away from new persecutions”, Sano says with a lump in his throat. “We were doing fine under Bashar’s regime, before the so-called revolution. Certainly, everything wasn’t okay, but at least we weren’t oppressed because of our religion. It was much better before. Now, al Qaeda and Salafists have taken over certain parts of Syria and are about to occupy more territory. It is really scary.”

When Sano first came to Turkey he stayed with a Muslim Kurdish family in the city of Nusaybin, right at the Syrian border. His paternal grandmother and the Kurdish man’s maternal grandmother were sisters; the Kurdish man’s grandmother had been kidnapped and forcibly

converted to Islam during the genocide in 1914, but the families have been in touch with each other for several years now. "After six months it felt as if I was in the way," he says. "There were young unmarried daughters in the house, and rumours can start very quickly. Leaving them was better for me. That's how I came to the monastery."

The refugees say they each have received 150 Turkish Liras, about 80 US dollars, from the Turkish government. It's the first time any of them has received government support. Most of all they'd like to have work permits and to be integrated in Mardin, which is one place in the country where Turkish is not the predominant language. "Luckily, we have come to a place in Turkey where almost everyone speaks Arabic," Sano says.

My photographer and I leave the Deyr-ul Zahfaran monastery, and drive the farm roads through sheep herds to Midyat, where the refugee camp is to be built. We are met by a committee formed by the Board of the Churches, with the task to help refugees. Around 40 of them are staying at the monastery; others are living in apartments in the centre of Midyat, at the premises of an association, in a Catholic church, and in villages around the city. The board is eager to get the camp built.

"They have to move to the camp as soon as it is ready, whether they like to or not. They can't stay at this monastery anymore, it simply doesn't work," says the board vice president, Yusuf Türker. He can't understand why Christian refugees would have a problem moving out of monasteries and into tents. Besides, he says, the camp is an economic opportunity for local Turks. "Many Christians in Midyat will be able to find work; we are going to need interpreters and people with other professional skills in the camp," he says.

The members of the refugee committee are pleased that many other Christian associations have assured them that they, too, are going to pitch in with what is needed. Türker says proudly that the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs has promised that it's going to be a state-of-the-art refugee camp with sports grounds, food stores, health care and many other facilities lacking in other camps.

"Of course we are going to see to that they get all possible help from the Church," says Ergün, the priest. "I mean, the religious leaders will be there for the Syrian refugees in the camp at all times."

"We hope and pray that there will be peace in Syria and the situation for Christians will improve," Türker says. "The camp will be there if the situation gets worse, in other words, *just in case.*"

A little later that evening we meet a Turkish journalist, who asks to be anonymous. She and her husband are well-known human-rights activists. They have just returned from Syria where they have investigated the situation for Christians. She isn't as pleased as the church leaders about the camp.

"They are going to build not one but two camps, one for 6,000 Muslims and one for 4,000 Christians," she says. "What will happen if Christians can't flee from Syria, if they don't need to flee from Syria? Then both camps will be used for Muslims. Then 10,000 Syrian Muslims will be located in close vicinity to one of the world's oldest monasteries."

She lights a cigarette. "I mean, I am a Muslim myself, this is not what I'm talking about. This is a gorgeous part of Turkey, a tourist attraction, a culturally and historically important site without counterpart. Assyrians/Syriacs have lived here for thousands of years. It's inconceivable that they want to ruin Tur Abdin (a historically important part of Turkey's southeast region) with these two enormous camps. There are many other locations for refugee camps that are not a few hundred metres from the centre of Midyat. Nothing good will come of this. Should there be problems or crimes, the Christians will point out the Muslims and vice versa. The citizens of Midyat should have had their say. Instead, everything happened practically overnight. The Foreign Minister and a few Bishops was all it took, as I see it, to ruin Midyat. Just look at the media reports in the past few days about fighting between locals and Syrian refugees in Jordan. And yet both groups belong to the same religion!"

The next morning, we accompany Yusuf Türker to the refugee camp under construction. He isn't buying the journalist's complaint. "Our agreement with the government is that no others than Christians will be allowed to stay in the camp located in close vicinity to the monastery. We will not accept any other use of the camp."

Besides, he says, "Should anyone commit a crime or create problems of some kind, that person will immediately be sent back to Syria. Moreover, the Jandarma, Turkish Military Police, will guard the camp."

The construction is in full swing. The ground is being levelled and water and electricity connected. Türker points out that Midyat companies have been engaged for the work. "I'm convinced that letting land for the camp was the right thing to do; it's indeed needed for the Christian refugees that are already in Turkey. And it could be needed for many more."

Türker leaves us and we decide it is time for lunch.

At the restaurant we are informed that one of the dishwashers is a Christian refugee from Syria. His father was killed by Islamists. We ask to see him. His name is Gabriel Staifo Malke, 18 years old and originally from Hassake, in northern Syria. He is handsome and proud. Yet for the next several minutes he speaks like a robot, his eyes holding back tears.

“My father was found shot, killed in his car,” the young man says. “The only reason for his killing was that he had a crucifix hanging from his rear mirror. It was on 17 July, 2012, a day I will never forget. My two brothers and I were sleeping. Dad and our uncle were going to Qamishly; it was about nine o’clock in the morning, I believe. My eldest brother’s cell phone woke us up. I heard him confirm that it was him speaking. He, my other brother and my mother went to the hospital, because Dad had had an accident. I went to my uncle’s house close by. There were many adults, my relatives, there. They were all crying and screaming. Suddenly I was in a car. We went to the state hospital. The cell phone of one my aunts rang, the other aunt wanted to know what it was about. Everyone was crying out their anger, fear and sorrow. My dad wasn’t hurt any more, he was dead. My mind went completely blank. I didn’t understand. I couldn’t take it in. When we got to the hospital I wasn’t allowed to see Dad; only my mother and one of my older brothers were allowed in. All other members of the family stood outside beating their chests and crying. I was still numb. Like paralysed. Dad was loved by all; he was a popular veterinary. No one would want to kill him.

“Three hours later he was brought home. They carried him in on a gurney; there was blood everywhere. He was still bleeding. With him came a bag with his belongings; what he had in the car and his pockets. All the money was there; but covered with blood. It hadn’t been thieves, common criminals that had killed him. My mother sat on the stairs, she refused to come in, her brother and sisters practically had to drag her into the house. There were three visible bullet holes, one in his neck, one in his right side and one in his shoulder. Mum cried and cried. She kept repeating that she had asked him to remove the cross, but he had refused. He had replied in a proud voice that he, as a Christian, had as much right to Syria as anyone else. Besides, the country is named after us Assyrians/Syriacs. Syria is our country, too.

“In Hassake, terrorists had warned Christians that they would be killed if they didn’t leave town; there was no room left for us. Most of the others hid their religion, didn’t show openly that they were non-Muslims. But not Dad. After the funeral the threats against our family and other Christians increased. The terrorists called us and said that it was time to disappear; we had that choice, or we would be killed. My brothers fled with the help of smugglers. Their destination was Germany, but on the Bulgarian border they were apprehended by Turkish border police. For five days we heard nothing from them; we had no idea what had happened to them. It

wasn't possible to speak with Mum; she thought they were gone, too. Something awful must have happened to them. When my eldest brother finally called and said that they were okay, they were in prison but were going to be released soon, Mum lost it altogether and fell down. A few days later it was our turn, Mum's and mine. The smuggler brought us into Turkey by way of an opening cut in the barbed wire. The Free Syrian Army guided us out, as if they wanted us to leave the country."

Two other Syrian refugees have heard that we are interested in their stories and have come to find us.

"It's important that you tell the truth, that you get the whole picture," the first one says. "If you're interested in covering the camp, we want you to know that none of us will be staying in the camp. They didn't even ask us before they started building. Personally, I think that women and children should be brought out from Syria, to the camp, and that the men should be given heavier weapons so that they can defend their areas from al-Qaeda and Salafists."

The other one follows up: "We don't want food; we don't want to hide in refugee camps in Turkey! We want shelter for our families and weapons for ourselves. Syria must not be purged of non-Muslims. We want to fight for the future of the Christians in Syria."

The refugees and their stories have made us forget the time. We have to hurry to get to a meeting with Metropolitan Samuel Aktas at the monastery in Mor Gabriel, about 10 minutes away.

He isn't happy and doesn't beat around the bush. "This camp is definitely not what we asked for. This is only negative; there is nothing positive in it. We are digging our own grave; this way they would be able to purge Syria of its Christian population. If cities like Qamishly, Kbor l'bit and Derek, that used to be almost entirely Christian, are purged, we will be finished all over this part of the world, because it was here that the majority of Christians were."

In the monastery courtyard, a Syrian refugee stops me. He wants us to write that in many parts of Syria you have to pay a fee not to be kidnapped or killed. "For months my uncle and my brother-in-law have been paying money to terrorists; or else they would have been killed," he says. "Please, you have to write about it!"

In the evening we pay a visit to Gabriel Staifo Malke's mother and brothers. They're renting a worn down apartment in the centre of Midyat; her brother-in-law is visiting from Germany in order to help them. Each time she starts talking, she starts crying. Finally she plucks up courage.

Basically, she repeats the story told by her youngest son. After a while, she asks her middle son to fetch a Bible. She opens it and takes out a banknote, a Syrian one. You can hardly see what it is because of the stains. She says that it's her husband's blood and she is going to keep it forever.

At around 10 p.m., we are sitting in the hotel lobby with a man named Bashar. He fled Syria after having been robbed, beaten up and had his life threatened because he refused to convert to Islam. Two women in niqab, a black cloth that Shiite women use to cover their face, had entered the shop, closed the door, took off the cloth so that no one could see that they were men, and beat up Bashar.

The cell phone rings. It's a friend from Mardin, with news that two Syrian bishops have been kidnapped, and their driver killed. We turn on the TV, zapping between channels to get updates.

"It's starting now, just like in Iraq," Bashar says. "They kidnap and kill priests to scare people so that they will run away. People will think, if a Bishop can't protect himself then how can ordinary Christians?" He shakes his head, lights a cigarette and leaves to call friends in Syria.

That night, sleep didn't come easily.

In the morning we are received by the city's local governor, Öguzhan Bingöl. "In the beginning we were supposed to help Assyrians/Syriacs in Tur Abdin so that they in turn could help Assyrian/Syriac refugees," he says. "But we have had signals that the number of refugees could increase dramatically, that there could be thousands of them in the near future. There are many internal refugees in Syria who need somewhere to go. Getting them out won't be a problem; the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs will see to that they are moved in a safe and secure way."

Hearing about the criticism, he smiles. "We are going to build a refugee camp that will be an exemplary example for the rest of the world. The refugees won't even feel that they are in a camp. I am personally going to stay with them in the camp; I will be sharing their food and drink. I'm also going to sleep there to make sure that they will be treated properly and feel alright."

We tell him that many of the refugees already in Tur Abdin refuse to move to the camp, that we have spoken to internal Christian refugees in Syria, and that they prefer to live in monasteries

or apartments. They fear that if they are all in one place they would be an easy target for terrorists.

Bingöl is unmoved. "I am convinced that Syrian Christians are going to come when the camp is ready." He says worries about tourism and fears about crime are unfounded. "I don't think it will have a negative effect on tourism, and even if it did, it doesn't matter. To help people in need is more important than tourism. I definitely don't think that crime rates will increase; there will be rigorous security in the camp. And if the Assyrian/Syriacs will not move in to it then we can use it for other purposes, like earthquakes."

We remind him that Assyrian/Syriac leaders in Turabdin say they have been promised the camp will be for Christians only, that no others will be able to stay in the camp closest to the monastery.

Fifteen minutes later, just before we leave, Bingöl changes his mind and says he has thought about one thing: The camp won't be used for any other purpose than sheltering Syrian Christians until the war is over. That's the way it's going to be, he says.

Kuryakus Ergün, the director of Mor Gabriel monastery, is waiting for us in a car. He is very disappointed with the developments. "The entire thing has gone completely out of hand. I participated in the meeting with the Turkish Foreign Minister. He said that Turkey is willing to help our people in Syria, but that one country can't interfere in the internal affairs of another country. So our Bishops suggested a camp. The idea first came from Ablahad Staifo from the European branch of the Assyrian Democratic Organisation. That is why we were invited. We can't blame anyone but ourselves, not the Turkish government, or anyone else. It's our own fault that it came to this, the Bishops' fault. This could lead to a devastating demographic change."

Ergün drives us to the mayor, Sehmus Nasiroglu, who is waiting in a restaurant. We don't even have time to sit down before Nasiroglu starts.

"They never even consulted us, the people of Midyat. From one day to another the government had decided that two camps were to be built in Midyat. No one asked us for our opinion about where to construct them, for instance. Having them so close to the centre will lead to increased crime rates, I guarantee you. Judging from other camps crime rates will go up by at least 30 per cent. It's a huge number for such a small city as ours."

Midyat has a population of 55,000. The mayor insists there are other ways to help Syrian refugees besides building two enormous camps. "Someone should follow the money; millions of dollars will be invested in the project," he says. "A few people in Midyat will make a lot of money on this, while the rest of Midyat will suffer."

I tell him the local governor claims there will be rigorous security in the camp and the Jandarma will keep crime at bay. The mayor scoffs.

"Let me be clear: the PKK (the Kurdistan Workers' Party) closed down a school the other day, teachers and students had to leave. If the local governor is so strong that he can guarantee the security, I am wondering why he hasn't succeeded in opening the school again. He can't guarantee anything! I maintain that the negative aspects of these two camps outweigh the positive ones. A few people in Midyat will make a lot of money on this, I'm sure. The money must be followed; there is a lot of corruption here."

Leaving Nasiroglu and approaching an area with a strong signal again, both Kuryakus Ergün and I receive the same email: The Dutch branch of the Assyrian Democratic Organisation has issued a press release calling for a humanitarian zone for Assyrians and others in northeastern Syria. It's an idea that, if adopted, could keep Syrian Christians home and leave the Midyat camp, built to house thousands, mostly empty.

I've come to the camp, and have taken its measure. Along the way I've encountered Christian leaders in the region who are split about the whole idea. I've met some Syrian Christians who think the camp is needed, and some who dread it will become a Christian ghetto and a sitting duck for terrorists.

And in the end, I have as many questions about the future of Christianity in northeastern Syria as I had when I began.