



German plane crash lands, disrupts traffic

Baltimore: A city stalked by violence, poverty and scandal

Page 8

Page 8



DAMASCUS: A toddler in angel costume pinches a man as Catholic believers gather outside Zaiton Church in Bab Sharki, Old Damascus. — AFP

Christianity growing in Syria town

Experience of IS onslaught pushed Syrians towards new faith

KOBANI: A community of Syrians who converted to Christianity from Islam is growing in Kobani, a town besieged by Islamic State for months, and where the tide turned against the militants four years ago. The converts say the experience of war and the onslaught of a group claiming to fight for Islam pushed them towards their new faith. After a number of families converted, the Syrian-Turkish border town's first evangelical church opened last year.

Islamic State militants were beaten back by US air strikes and Kurdish fighters at Kobani in early 2015, in a reversal of fortune after taking over swaths of Iraq and Syria. After years of fighting, US-backed forces fully ended the group's control over populated territory last month. Though Islamic State's ultra radical interpretation of Sunni Islam has been repudiated by the Islamic mainstream, the legacy of its violence has affected perceptions of faith.

Many in the mostly Kurdish areas of northern Syria, whose urban centers are often secular, say agnosticism has strengthened and in the case of Kobani, Christianity. Christianity is one of the region's minority faiths that was persecuted by Islamic State. Critics view the new converts with suspicion, accusing them of seeking personal gain such as financial help from Christian organizations working in the region, jobs and enhanced prospects of emigration to European countries.

The newly-converted Christians of Kobani deny those accusations. They say their conversion was a matter of

faith. "After the war with Islamic State people were looking for the right path, and distancing themselves from Islam," said Omar Firas, the founder of Kobani's evangelical church. "People were scared and felt lost." Firas works for a Christian aid group at a nearby camp for displaced people that helped set up the church.

He said around 20 families, or around 80 to 100 people, in Kobani now worship there. They have not changed their names. "We meet on Tuesdays and hold a service on Fridays. It is open to anyone who wants to join," he said. The church's current pastor, Zani Bakr, 34, arrived last year from Afrin, a town in northern Syria. He converted in 2007. "This was painted by IS as a religious conflict, using religious slogans. Because of this a lot of Kurds lost trust in religion generally, not just Islam," he said. Many became atheist or agnostic. "But many others became Christian. Scores here and more in Afrin."

Missionaries and critics

One man, who lost an arm in an explosion in Kobani and fled to Turkey for medical treatment, said he met Kurdish and Turkish converts there and eventually decided to join them. "They seemed happy and all talked about love. That's when I decided to follow Jesus's teachings," Maxim Ahmed, 22, said, adding that several friends and family were now interested in coming to the new church.

Some in Kobani reject the growing Christian presence. They say Western Christian aid groups and missionaries have exploited the chaos and trauma of war to convert



DAMASCUS: Catholic believers gather outside Zaiton Church in Bab Sharki, Old Damascus. —AFP

people and that local newcomers to the religion see an opportunity for personal gain. "Many people think that they are somehow benefitting from this, maybe for material gain or because of the perception that Christians who seek asylum abroad get preferential treatment," said Salih Naasan, a real estate worker and former Arabic teacher.

Thousands of Christians have fled the region over decades of sectarian strife. From Syria they have often headed for Lebanon and European countries. US President Donald Trump pledged to help minorities fleeing the region when he imposed a travel ban on Muslims in 2016, but many Christians were denied asylum. "It might be a reaction to Daesh (Islamic State) but I don't see the

positives. It just adds another religious and sectarian dimension which in a community like this will lead to tension," said Naasan, a practicing Muslim.

Naasan like the vast majority of Muslims rejects Islamic State's narrow and brutal interpretation of Islam. The group enslaved and killed thousands of people from all faiths, reserving particular brutality for minorities such as the Yazidis of northern Iraq. Most Christians preferred not to give their names or be interviewed, saying they fear reaction from conservative sectors of society. The population of Kobani and its surroundings has neared its original 200,000 after people returned, although only 40,000 live in the town itself, much of which lies in ruins. — Reuters

Flowers bloom in war-torn Syria's battered cities

ALEPPO: A mantle of gold smothers Aleppo's ruins, hiding the rubble and filling the craters with wild flowers that for a moment seem to transform a landscape scarred by war, destruction and death. After an unusually wet winter, the warm days of spring have suddenly brought an abundance of color and life to a weary Syria, blooming in city and desert.

But they blanket a scene of war. The hummocks and dells are piles of debris, barricades, craters and trenches. The flowers grow where people once lived, fought, died. Eight years of conflict have killed perhaps half a million people, destroyed whole towns and city districts and made half of all Syrians homeless.

In most parts of the country, the fighting is now over - at least for now. President Bashar al-Assad holds most of Syria, including the city of Aleppo, taken after months of bitter fighting in 2016.

However, Kurdish-led groups hold northeast Syria, and, in the northwest near Aleppo is the frontline with the last big rebel stronghold,

where there has been bombardment in recent weeks. The war destroyed much of Aleppo's beautiful Old City and many poor eastern districts, leaving neighborhoods of rubble and fallen stone. In the remains of the Attariyeh section of the souk, where the stone roof collapsed, a young couple sat on a pile of stones courting in the warm evening air, the sun illuminating the yellow flowers and picking out the woman's red headscarf.

The steep sides of the ancient citadel's round hill in the centre of the city are thick with blooms and families gather at sunset to stroll or sit. "It's God's message to make everything beautiful after mankind destroyed everything," said Majd Kanaa, 35, standing at the end of a souk alleyway where he was repairing his late father's shop, ready to reopen.

Butterflies, swallows, frogs, storks

Clouds of butterflies, russet, black and white, flutter from the undergrowth and bees hum round the flowers. Flocks of swallows flit from the sky to roost in the ruins. At night, in the fields and olive groves just outside the city, a cacophonous croaking of frogs drowns out the noise of cars from a road lined with cypress and pine trees. Along the road from the south, precariously held for years by the army with rebels on one side and Islamic State on the other, the fighting left a chain of fortifications. The war has moved far from here and these are

now mostly deserted. Grass and flowers grow thick between the oil drums, sandbags and stacked tyres guarding the old gun emplacements and concrete boxes.

Yellow broom, purple thistles and fat red poppies spring from the desert floor and paint it a psychedelic swirl of color. In one place, a huge patch of ground seems to bleed with thousands of poppies springing from the softly undulating earth. "In Syria we believe that poppies are the blood of the martyrs," said Aleppo lawyer and historian Alaa al-Sayed, explaining that their Arabic name comes from a dead king. "There are so many martyrs," he added. In the hills beyond the poppies are the pretty pointed mud domes of traditional "beehive" villages and young shepherds watching flocks of sheep and goats.

When the strong west wind ruffles the ground in the late afternoon, it makes the grass shimmer. Flocks of small birds suddenly rise from the ground and bob in the air. Migrating storks beat their wings in the distance. Little electricity means little light, and at night the heavens are lit by a sharp crescent moon and brilliant constellations of stars. A fox slinks across the desert road in the light of car headlights. But from time to time they also illuminate the burnt-out wrecks by the roadside, the remains of battles past, while two heavy trucks bear tanks onwards to today's front line. — Reuters

US teenage girls at risk in dating violence

NEW YORK: One in four US teenage girls killed in a homicide is slain by her dating partner, research showed on Monday, exposing details about the "taboo" issue of dating violence among young people. Teen and adolescent girls are often embarrassed or reluctant to talk about violence, while some schools and parents resist teaching about violent relationships, experts said.

Nine out of 10 teens and adolescents killed by a dating partner are girls, and nine out of 10 of the killers are boys and men, said researchers at the University of Washington. Their report was published in the JAMA Pediatrics medical journal. "When they are experiencing things they recognize as unhealthy, they're not likely to disclose to adults in their lives," said lead author Avanti Adhia, a senior fellow at the university's medical school. "By the

time kids get to college, it's too late to start teaching about this," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

The research studied more than 2,000 US homicides of children ages 11 to 18. It found one-quarter of slain girls were killed by an intimate partner. A previous study in 2017 by the National Institute of Justice, a US government research agency, found more than two thirds of teens said they had been in a violent intimate relationship in the previous year. "There's something so taboo about the topic," said Bersheva Delgado, a community liaison at The Healing Center, a New York non-profit group that works with abuse survivors.

While some US states allow minors to file legal orders of protection designed to keep abusers away, others require an adult to be present or parental notification that can deter teens from reporting violence, Adhia said. Most of the female victims were 17 or 18 and their partners typically four years older, the research found. About two-thirds of the deaths involved guns. More than one in four deaths were fueled by jealousy, a break-up or resisting a relationship, Adhia said. — Reuters