

## Market Drayton Churches Together: Prayer for Persecuted Christians - 20 Nov. 2019

### Syria, Iraq & Kurdistan

#### **18 Oct: Interview: Pastor George, northern Syria - Open Doors UK**

[www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/syria-191018](http://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/syria-191018)

Pastor George is one of Open Doors' partners in northern Syria, close to the recent emergency caused by the invasion of Turkish armed forces. Since 2010, he has led a church in Qamishli, one of the affected cities, and is now supporting the most vulnerable members of his congregation as they face the ramifications of this new crisis. We were recently able to talk to him about the current situation (we spoke with him shortly before the ceasefire was announced). You can still give to the Open Doors Syria Emergency Appeal. Thank you so much to those who have already prayed and given.

*Could you tell us what happened in Qamishli on the day the Turkish army attacked?*

Qamishli is on the border between Syria and Turkey. There's less than one kilometre between Qamishli and Turkey. A massive attack was launched at about 3pm against the Kurdish centres and neighbourhoods. It lasted for almost twelve hours, till about 3-4am the next day. They restarted the attack the next day at 4pm. That was more vicious, and more bombshells fell on the civil neighbourhoods such as the local market, a groceries market and the bakery. It was terrifying.

The next day Qamishli was empty, life stopped, everyone stayed at their homes. We are deep in the city, which wasn't as affected, but we received several families who left their homes and came to the city. We asked them to come and stay in the church guest houses, and provided the needed supplies for them. All who asked our help, we helped in the best possible way we could.

The first three days were horrifying. Everyone felt threatened, especially when rumours spread that the Turkish militias might enter the city, or that groups linked to so-called Islamic State (IS) might attack our city. It was terrifying.

*How did you and your family feel when the attack started?*

We were shocked. It was out of the blue. My family and I were safe, thankfully, and we had faith in the Lord – so I felt peace considering my family, but afraid for those people who I know live close to the border. I started thinking: how can we get them out?

When we contacted some people nearer the border, I told them to leave immediately and brought them to my house. Then I bought lots of basic supplies like rice, sugar, canned food, bread, cheese, etc. I tried to provide for the people who left without anything. We prayed together, asking the Lord for peace. Of course the children were afraid, especially my youngest son, but by praying we had a sense of safety.

*How did your church respond?*

The people in my church had different reactions. People with kids were afraid and wanted to get their children out. The older people and those with no children were calmer. Everyone was praying.

The next day, I met with the people of the church. We prayed and worshipped God, and listened to everyone's opinion. I encouraged those who wanted to stay and tried to strengthen those who were scared. There was a suggestion that we would provide a bus to take people out of the city. I contacted a priest

from Marmarita, near Homs – he has a monastery there and was very happy to welcome people from our church.

To be honest, I felt like I wanted to split myself in half, so one half could leave with those who wanted to leave and one half could stay with those who were staying. Eventually, I decided those who were leaving were so scared that I should go with them. Most of them were women and children. The journey took 14 hours, and having me with them, as a pastor, made it easier to get past army checkpoints. After two days, I returned to Qamishli.

*How is Qamishli now?*

There is a sense of relief that the crisis has passed. Of course, Qamishli isn't completely as it was. The markets are not crowded like before. You can sense fear that something more will happen to the city. The effects of the attacks are still felt in the hearts of the people, wounds are not healed yet and some homes are destroyed. Schools are closed but about 80 per cent of the shops re-opened.

Today, I visited Fadi [a Christian injured in the attack, pictured right], and his mother said to his daughter: "Soon we'll be back home." The girl said: "Grandma, we don't have a home, what are we going back to?" Fear is still there.

*Cont/...*

#### **13 Nov: Uncertainty continues as two priests killed in shooting and bombs detonated in Qamishli - Open Doors UK**

[www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/syria-191113](http://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/syria-191113)

Christians living in Qamishli in northeast Syria continue to face violence and uncertainty. On Monday 11 November, beloved priest Hovsep Petoyan of the Armenian Catholic Church, and his father Abraham Petoyan, who was the former priest of the same church, were shot dead by terrorists. On the same day, three bombs were also detonated in the city.

The priests were killed on their way to inspect a church in the Deir Ez Zor province. Deacon Fadi Sano from Al Hasakah was with them in the car when they were shot; Fadi was wounded in the attack. So-called Islamic State has declared themselves responsible. The priests were buried the next day in the grounds of the church in Qamishli.

Open Doors partner Pastor George, who leads the Alliance Church in Qamishli, said, "[Hovsep] was a peaceful man who had problems with no one; he wasn't even political. His death shocked all Christians, as he was the head of the Catholic church in Qamishli. His death affects most Christian families. We are praying for no more ramifications of this event."

Hovsep leaves behind a widow, Caron Lahdo, and three children: a son, Hovig, and two daughters, Anna and Cayana. Please pray for them as they grieve.

*'People Live In Fear'*

Pastor George says that the killing has had a big impact on Christians and sends the message that no one is safe: "Men of God were killed. This made the people frightened, especially when on the same day we had these explosions also. People started calling us and saying, 'Why are you still there in that area?' It made people start thinking about immigration again due to the fear of unsafety. All this affects the stability and impacts the existence of Christians in this area."

**Dates of next meetings: 11 December 2019, 15 January & 19 February 2020**

He says that the explosions were clearly aiming to 'disturb the peace and safety of the people, especially those who decided to stay'. "These bombings might make some people leave the country. People live in fear. Some live in isolation because they are never leaving their houses out of fear. All of this creates a psychological pressure on people and especially those who have children; it creates fear and unsafety. This hit was hideous, strong, harmful and hard on all citizens. Three explosions inside the city on one day, this was a terrorist and criminal act."

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### **13 Nov: Priest from Northeastern Syria Killed as Christians Suffer in Turkish Offensive - Morningstar News** [morningstarnews.org/2019/11/priest-from-northeastern-syria-killed-as-christians-suffer-in-turkish-offensive](http://morningstarnews.org/2019/11/priest-from-northeastern-syria-killed-as-christians-suffer-in-turkish-offensive)

Islamic State (IS) militants claimed responsibility for killing an Armenian Catholic priest and his father on Monday (Nov. 11) in eastern Syria, where they had traveled from their home in a northeastern town hit by Turkish air strikes and terrorist bombs.

In the wake of a Turkish military operation into Syrian territory that hit civilian border areas in the priest's base in Qamishli, the Rev. Hovsep Bedoyan and his father, Abraham Bedoyan, were killed by gunmen in Deir ez-Zor, according to media reports.

The priest made regular pastoral visits to Deir ez-Zor, an IS stronghold in eastern Syria until Syrian Democratic Forces retook it over the past two years, and he was overseeing reconstruction of a church building in the city.

He and his father were in a car with two others, including deacon Fadi Sano, who was wounded by the gunfire, according to reports. They were attacked in their vehicle as they were nearing the Armenian Catholic church in Deir ez-Zour.

On the same day in Qamishli, bombings near a Chaldean church killed at least six civilians. IS also claimed responsibility for those attacks.

The killings come at a time when Christians in Syria's border areas with Turkey are caught in Turkish President Erdogan's military offensive to drive Kurds from an area roughly 20 miles into Syrian territory along Turkey's border. On a premise that Syrian Kurdish soldiers have ties with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a terrorist separatist group in Turkey, Erdogan launched an offensive on Oct. 9.

Rights organizations and others say the incursion has included war crimes, and that it amounts to ethnic cleansing of Kurds with aims to repopulate the area with Syrian refugees from Turkey. Christians have said the offensive has a secondary religious motivation of driving out Christians and re-asserting an "Ottoman Empire."

"The Turks are the other coin face of ISIS," a relief worker in Iraq serving Kurds who have fled to Iraq from the area told Morning Star News. "All the pictures and scenes that we receive from the actions of the Turkish army and groups supported by Turkey are terrorist scenes, slaughter and cutting off heads of the Kurds, which is no different from ISIS."

At least 200 civilians have been killed in the offensive by Turkey and Turkish-backed forces, leading to a humanitarian crisis as more than 250,000 have reportedly fled the border areas.

"They [Turkish and Turkish-backed troops] are war criminals, and the Turkish president is a radical Islamist in modern clothes," said the aid worker, whose name is undisclosed for security reasons.

According to a memo from the U.S. deputy special envoy to the anti-ISIS Coalition leaked to The New York Times, Turkish-backed Syrian rebel groups "de-populating Kurdish areas,"

some of them formerly allied with IS or Al-Qaeda, were committing "well-publicized, fear-inducing atrocities." In the memo for internal use at the State Department, the envoy, William Roebuck, noted that some Turkish-backed groups chanted "God is great," the jihadist slogan "Allahu Akbar," as they shot prisoners and kidnapped women and vowed to "slaughter the infidels."

At an Armenian church in Tel Abyad, a statue of Mary was reportedly smashed among other desecrations. Turkish air forces on Oct. 11 struck the Syrian Orthodox Church of the Virgin Mary in Tal Jihan, according to media reports.

In a speech after the Friday sermon at the Çamlica Mosque in Istanbul on Oct. 25, Erdogan was quoted in Turkish media as invoking the violence of the prophet of Islam, Muhammad, to support the military mission, according to the Middle East Media Research Institute.

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### **11 Nov: Turks Describe Invasion Of Northeast Syria In Religious Terms - The Middle East Media Research Institute** [www.memri.org/reports/turkish-government-twitter-users-describe-invasion-northeast-syria-religious-terms-lord](http://www.memri.org/reports/turkish-government-twitter-users-describe-invasion-northeast-syria-religious-terms-lord)

On October 9, 2019, the Turkish military began bombarding northeast Syria ahead of its invasion of the region. Its campaign has continued since then as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan pursues his stated goal of a "safe zone" 32 kilometers deep inside Syrian territory along the Turkey-Syria border. Since the invasion began, the Turkish government, including the Ministry of Religious Affairs and President Erdoğan himself, have described the invasion in religious terms, as have members of the Turkish press. Members of the Turkish public have voiced their support for the invasion in religious terms on Twitter.

*Invasion Framed In Religious Terms By Turkish President, Ministry Of Religious Affairs, And Press: 'The Lord Commands Us To Be Violent Against The Unbelievers'*

In the evening on October 9, hours after the invasion began, Turkey's Ministry Of Religious Affairs announced that Chapter 48 of the Quran, titled Al-Fath ("The Conquest"), would be recited and prayers would be offered for the success of the invasion at morning prayer the following day at 90,000 mosques across Turkey. A video uploaded to the Internet on October 9 shows Turkish soldiers riding a bus reportedly heading to the Turkey-Syria border listening to a recitation of the same chapter of the Quran.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs issued on October 11 its weekly Friday sermon, which cited Quran 9:20: "Those who have faith and migrate and who make jihad in the path of Allah with their property and their lives are greater in rank in the sight of Allah. And it is those who are the attainers." The sermon, delivered at 90,000 mosques across Turkey, also cited a hadith compiled by both Sahih Al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim: "Oh people! Do not wish to meet your enemy [in battle]. Ask Allah [that you] stay far from curses and calamities, but when you do meet your enemy, be patient, and know that paradise is under the shade of swords." The sermon warned the congregations that "those who wish to erase us from the stage of history have never given up their labors. But those who are eyeing our homeland, which is watered with the sacred blood of our martyrs, who want to divide up our nation, are condemned to lose today just as they did yesterday."

On October 25, in a speech after the Friday sermon at the Çamlica Mosque in Istanbul, President Erdoğan said: "The Lord commands us to be violent against the unbelievers. Who is that 'we'? Muhammad's ummah. But he commands us to be merciful

among ourselves. We will be merciful among ourselves, and we will be violent against the unbelievers, as happened in Syria." In an October 11 column on Akittv.com.tr, Turkish columnist Abdurrahman Dilipak wrote of the invasion: "We are not demons throwing the people's bodies into hell as wood, we are the soldiers of salvation trying to save them from the fire of hell. In our tradition, the prestige and magnitude of our victory will be measured not by how much blood is spilled, but by how little. The soldiers of jihad going on the path to martyrdom show fastidiousness in their duties to Allah."

*Erdoğan Praises Jihadis Who Two Days Earlier Were Filmed Mutilating Corpses Of Kurdish Fighters: "They Are People Who Frighten Death... Who Pursue Death"*

Fourteen thousand fighters from the Syrian National Army, also known as the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army, have been fighting alongside the Turkish Armed Forces in its invasion of northeast Syria. On October 22, a video of members of the Syrian National Army's Faylaq Al-Majd mutilating the corpses of Kurdish soldiers near Kobani, Syria was uploaded to the Internet. The man filming the video said: "The corpses of the PKK and YPG pigs are under the feet of the mujahideen of Faylaq Al-Majd." Pointing at one of the slain women, he said: "This is one of the whores you sent to us." The men in the group chanted: "Allah akbar!" The following day, at a U.S. House of Representatives hearing, U.S. President Donald Trump's special representative for Syria James Jeffrey said of the Syrian National Army that "many people fled because they're very concerned about these Turkish-supported Syrian opposition forces, as we are. We've seen several incidents which we consider war crimes."

In an 80-minute interview broadcast on October 24 on Turkey's state-run TRT news network, President Erdoğan answered questions regarding the invasion. In that interview, he said of the Syrian National Army: "In this battle, there is the Turkish Armed Forces, but along with it, which we must not forget, is the Syrian National Army. The Syrian National Army, along with our armed forces, entered this battle in a self-sacrificing way, and up to today they have had 97 martyrs. And, as you know, we have 20 civilian and seven military martyrs. Their number of injured is much higher than ours. And they are people who frighten death. They are people who pursue death." Media Research Institute.

*Cont/...*

### **5 Nov: New Wave Of Christians Set To Quit Iraq – Warning - Release International**

[releaseinternational.org/new-wave-of-christians-set-to-quit-iraq-warning](https://releaseinternational.org/new-wave-of-christians-set-to-quit-iraq-warning)

*Insecurity in Syria and Baghdad causing remaining Christians to 'lose hope'*

Growing insecurity in Iraq and on its border could lead to a fresh exodus of Christians from the country, warns a partner of Release International, which is supporting refugees in the country.

The Turkish invasion of Syria and growing protests in Baghdad could drive even more Christians out of the country, believes Jamal Liddawi, a partner of Release International, which provides aid to persecuted Christians.

Only around 300,000 Christians remain in Iraq from a peak of 1.8 million in the year 2000. They've been driven out by conflict and insecurity. And many more are now anxious to leave, says Jamal:

### *'Lost hope'*

'Most of the Christians have lost hope. Many of them are applying to leave the country, and if they can, they will.'

Jamal Liddawi is working with Release International to support refugees in Erbil, the principal city of Kurdistan, in northern Iraq.

The recent Turkish invasion of neighbouring Syria is threatening to drive a new wave of refugees into the region.

'The Kurdistan government are preparing for between 100,000 and 200,000 refugees,' says Jamal. 'They're preparing for a big number to come.'

The Release partner says the Kurdish people in northern Iraq were shocked by the American decision to pull their troops out of Syria, which precipitated the Turkish invasion.

### *'Betrayed'*

'The Kurds feel betrayed by the US decision to take their troops out of the north. They believe it has given the Turks the right to invade the Kurdish area in Syria. Many people have been killed. This has impacted Kurdistan because even more refugees are now coming into the region. Everybody's confused and shocked by the decision.'

The street protests in Baghdad and Karbala, to the south, are deepening that sense of insecurity. Hundreds have been killed in continuing protests over government corruption, high unemployment and the influence of Iran in the country. As a result, many of Iraq's remaining Christians now want to leave.

Many have already fled to Erbil, where the Kurds have given them safe haven. Some 50,000 others are said to be scattered across the plains of Nineveh, in towns and villages near Mosul, which until recently was occupied by Islamic State.

### *Under attack*

Many Iraqis have been refugees several times over – driven out by the Gulf War, insurgency and IS fighters. They've had enough, believes Jamal Liddawi. 'For the last hundred years they have been under attack. They have lost hope. They have lost the desire to rebuild again.'

He says there are now more than 6,000 Christian families across the border in Jordan, who have been trying for up to six years to get asylum in the West. 'We encourage them to go back to Iraq but their homes have been burned down, there's no water or electricity, there are no jobs and some of their villages still don't have schools.'

And the recent death of Islamic State leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, will do little to allay the Christian community's growing fears, says Jamal. Baghdadi blew himself up, along with his children, in a surprise attack by US special forces. But even though the self-proclaimed Caliph has died, his ideology lives on, believes Jamal.

### **6 Nov: Warning Of Fresh Exodus Of Christians From Iraq - Release International**

<https://releaseinternational.org/warning-of-fresh-exodus-of-christians-from-iraq>

Ten minute audio interview with Release International partner Jamal Liddawi, who is helping Christians in Kurdistan to reach out to refugees.

See also: **4 Nov: Uncertain future for religious minority in northeastern Syria | News | Al Jazeera**

[www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/uncertain-future-religious-minority-northeastern-syria-191104042215712.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/uncertain-future-religious-minority-northeastern-syria-191104042215712.html)

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[churchestogether-marketdrayton.org.uk/p4pc](http://churchestogether-marketdrayton.org.uk/p4pc) - then follow the link to "Recent Reports"

*For more information contact about these sessions Randall Hardy - Tel:01952-540970 or [p4pc@amen.org.uk](mailto:p4pc@amen.org.uk)*

**23 Aug: The Gospel is Spreading in Kurdistan - Prophecy Today**  
[prophecytoday.uk/comment/israel-middle-east/item/1554-hope-amid-brokenness.html](http://prophecytoday.uk/comment/israel-middle-east/item/1554-hope-amid-brokenness.html)

*Hope amid brokenness.*

In the midst of the poverty and destruction left by ISIS, Kurdish Muslims are turning their backs on Islam to embrace the true Messiah. South African evangelist Mark van Niekerk shares the Gospel alongside believers in Iraq and Kurdistan and brings us this encouraging update.

Dear family in Messiah,

Serving the Lord is both challenging and enthralling. What has become mundane and ordinary to us in the Christian West is astonishing news to people who have never heard of a Heavenly Father who identifies with their suffering. Their hearts are languishing in darkness, desperate to hear there is an alternative.

I honestly believe that if we commit and equip ourselves to be used of Messiah Yeshua, he will take us places we never thought possible. This has been my experience starting here in my native South Africa, during many years in Israel, speaking throughout New Zealand and now in recent years as I go to the inhospitable regions of the Middle East, where I have just returned from my fifth visit.

*Visiting Peshmerger Widows*

Every time we are able to assist the widows of the Peshmerger (the Kurdish military) I'm been moved emotionally. Clad in their long black dresses and head coverings, these dear women are a woeful sight. Many of their homes are damp and poorly insulated, making heating fuel an absolute necessity.

A dear brother has opened up a 'Widows and Orphans Organisation' registered with the government. The patriarchal society makes it hard for single mothers to get work, so a teacher is training them as seamstresses so they can earn a living. We purchased good sewing machines for four women who are primary caregivers for their families.

*Devastation in Nineveh*

Numerous people warned me against visiting Nineveh, the once proud city on the banks of the mighty Tigris, where the Prophet Jonah preached. Although ISIS was officially overthrown in 2017, sleeper cells of Islamic terrorists are still underground. As we ventured past a number of roadblocks into the ruins, militias drove ahead of us with men brandishing ready machine guns.

The Al Nuri Mosque in the city centre, where ISIS leader Bakr al-Baghdadi had proclaimed the caliphate in 2014, is now destroyed. As we drove past, I recognised its green dome hanging lopsided in the air, suspended eerily by reinforced steel. We found armoured ISIS vests lying on the ground and ISIS receipt books strewn in the rubble. The evangelical church had been used as a fresh produce market.

A woman in black appeared out of nowhere. She had lost two sons, both ISIS leaders, in air attacks. "What do you think of your sons' treatment of the Yezidi women?" my co-worker asked. "They are better off as [ISIS] sex slaves or dead than staying alive as Yezidis", was her cold response.

We gave the Gospel to the families we visited, along with Bibles, provisions and some money. We met one man whose wife and two daughters had been killed when a bombed building collapsed on them. A third daughter, eight years old, had been pulled from the rubble by her legs. Her head and forehead had been partially crushed. She sensed security and climbed into my arms, hiding her scarred head with her hair. My co-worker whispered to me, "She has never in her life experienced the arms of a man embracing her in this way. It's not in the culture."

She took one look at the gifts we offered, showed absolutely no interest, and curled back into my arms. I could not hold back my tears: all she wanted was to be loved and secure in someone's protective care.

*Helping Refugees in Erbil*

In Erbil, the capital city of Iraqi Kurdistan that had been so flooded with refugees after the chaos of ISIS, numerous camps were being dismantled. Yet Syrians were still pouring into the city. As previously, we supplied all the resident families with groceries, household materials and nappies, not neglecting the Gospel. "If you had not brought this today, we would not have eaten tonight," one man said. "This will last us nearly a month. We are so grateful."

It is hard to believe that these were formerly wealthy businessmen with their own companies. "If we go back, we will be forced into the army for five years. The young men are gone from Syria," I was told.

I cannot minister to these people without being broken before them. They have lost everything: their businesses, homes and family members. Yet despite being 'Christian', they come from Orthodox backgrounds – invariably they will say we are saved by faith and works. Having experienced the powerlessness of the Orthodox Church to protect them against ISIS, many are now responding to the true Gospel. The church meetings were packed. I wept, pleading with them to come to Jesus, and it was obvious that many hearts were moved by the Lord's Spirit.

A number of Muslims in Erbil have come to faith in Jesus and are meeting in home groups. The only positive aspect of ISIS is that it has caused Muslims to re-evaluate their lives. Of course the challenges are great – knowledge of their conversion may well lead to death. The fear is real, yet they have made a very conscious decision to follow the truth.

*Hunger for Bibles in Soran*

One village in the entry to the Zagros Mountain Range, near the Iranian border, had opened their arms to us on previous visits. I was stunned to find their senior men waiting to welcome me back. After I spoke on the reconciliation between the Jews and the other half of Abraham's descendants, the municipal head said to me, "You need to come here and teach aspects of the Bible we have never heard about. It is important for the Muslims to hear about this history and prophecy."

During one of our visits to the town of Soran, northern Iraq, we went to see a Salafi2 Muslim family. The room was suddenly full of men and children sitting along the walls, waiting to listen. Some of them immediately opened the Bibles we offered and started reading. One young man beckoned me to go with him to his home where his child was sick. He wanted me to pray, not only for the child, but also for God's blessing on his home and family. "Do you realise what has happened today?" a brother asked me. "This is unheard of. These are the most radical of the Muslim sects. Never will they accept this." There is no whipping up of emotion as we see in some churches today; this is authentically God speaking to the Muslim people.

We met with mullahs who wanted Bibles and even sons of mullahs met with us clandestinely. "Islam and Mohammed are finished in Kurdistan", we were told after meeting five young Kurds who had called us for Bible study. They were so hungry to grow in their new faith. I kept hearing, "We are tired of lies and silly stories from the mullahs [Muslim teachers]."

At one of the gatherings seven new believers were baptised, all extremely excited to be making the final cut with their past. This is a raw and emotional Christianity that I imagine the early Church experienced.

*Cont/...*