



## Christmas Celebrated in Terror-Ravaged Syria

Christmas trees, carols, church services, and the resilience of the human heart

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*Due to corporate media's misrepresentation of Syria, some may be surprised to know that Syrians—suffering terribly under nearly five years of the foreign war on their country—are also celebrating Christmas from Damascus to Homs to Aleppo. Glittering displays, street Santas, choirs singing carols and people [singing Jingle Bells](#), and tacky, exuberant Christmas parades are not unique to the West.*

However, most Syrians I have met who are celebrating any religion's holy day do so with heavy hearts—the loss of loved ones to NATO's terrorists dampens festive spirits. But they also celebrate with a determination not to be cowed into submission or nonexistence, and not to allow their children to forget traditions.

Re-visiting Syria last week, I spoke with many Syrians about Christmas preparations and the situation in Syria. I visited a number of churches in Damascus and Homs. Although the unholy war on Syria persists, some of the areas ravaged by the NATO/Zionists/Gulf's death squads but secured by the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) are coming back to life.

### **Homs: Celebrations After So Much Sorrow**

Rather than home to a "revolution" Homs was home to an infiltration of the most sadistic terrorists, who over their unwanted two plus year-stay not only killed, maimed and stole from Homs residents, but also targeted, and in many cases destroyed, Christian heritage and relics, including many churches in the Old City.

When I [visited in June 2014](#), after the terrorists had been extracted from most of Homs, the destruction and vandalism I saw were immense. Even back then, as soon as the terrorists were gone, Old City residents were already returning in trickles to begin the cleanup and think about re-building their lives.

Now, a year-and-a-half later, while immense reconstruction remains, there was a significant improvement. I saw new shops opened, and saw homes, stores, streets, and churches decorated in the spirit of Christmas.

Christmas lights dangled over Old City lanes and in church courtyards. A friend from Homs later sent me photos of the streets lit up at night, and of the once-burned St. Mary's Church (Um al-Zinnar) now repaired and decorated, and filled with worshippers, a youth choir and band.

At the Old City's Jesuit Church, new portraits of Dutch priest, Father Frans van der Lugt,

assassinated in April 2014 by the West's "moderate" terrorists. The church also had a simple Christmas tree and home-made nativity scene, the grotto walls of which were made of crumpled brown paper.

Two well-known restaurants, which suffered differing degrees of destruction, have been re-opened. Beit al-Agha, greatly-damaged by the terrorists, is now coming back to life, although repairs are still needed. Al-Bustan restaurant, which was completely ravaged, is fully re-built and open to customers. Photos from [al-Hamidiya Community](#) Facebook page show a [packed restaurant](#) during Christmas, [and dancing](#) at night. The page shows celebrations in the different churches and streets of old Homs.

In Saha al-Majaa, an Old City square, I saw six locals adding finishing touches to the Christmas tree they'd crafted using scavenged and bought materials. In a nearby room, full-size nativity scene figures, made of sponge and cloth and other basic materials were stored until the display went up. Neighbourhood residents had chipped in for fabric, bought from Tartous.



Volunteers who chipped in to build a Christmas Tree and Nativity Scene in Old Homs.

"Come, tomorrow at 5 pm and you'll see the finished display," I was invited, but didn't have the chance to get back. However, photos on social media show their creative efforts have paid off: in this square where despair was once deep, hope is flourishing anew.

## **Damascus Celebrates**

Two kilometres from the front line with the extremist and terrorist groups, the people of Damascus Celebrates Christmas.

— Fady, a Damascus resident.

Homs-based Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Bishop George Abu Zakhem was in Damascus for a day. I met him at the Mariamite Church in the centre of the Old City. He spoke of the situation for Orthodox Christians in Homs and Damascus nowadays, noting that of the 150,000 Orthodox in Homs, 20,000 have become internally displaced, fleeing to Tartous, Lattakia, Damascus, and elsewhere. "Nobody wants to leave, but they are obliged, because

it's very hard now." On the other hand, Homs has also absorbed Syrians from other areas. "We have about 18 families in Homs who came to us from Aleppo. Many others went to Tartous or Lattakia."

Bishop Abu Zakhem also spoke of efforts to bring back Christmas celebrations to Homs.

In order to change the atmosphere, we tried to do something, especially for the younger generation. We had a program in Homs for 20 days before Christmas... every couple of days we had an event for children.

Ziad, the friendly driver of the shared taxi I had taken from Beirut to Damascus, was from Jebal al-Sheikh, and as we traversed Syrian countryside toward the capital, he spoke of the early attacks: "They kidnapped our priest and even after we paid \$15,000 ransom, they killed him and sent his body back to us."

He and others in his village took up arms to defend themselves. "I have two kids. Nusra came to us. I got a gun," he said (something I've heard from many a Syrian, including the priest of St. Thekla convent in [Ma'loula](#), himself taking up arms to defend the village against Jehbat al-Nusra and other terrorists). As Bishop Abu Zakhem said, "We have the right to stay here, to defend ourselves. We are rooted here."

One day in Damascus another driver talked about the mortar terrorism which is particularly heavy on Bab Touma (Thomas Gate, in the Old City). "They're trying to drive the Christians out of Syria. They target Bab Touma because it is a Christian area." He took out a photo of his son, martyred in terrorist mortars a year ago. For him the terrorism is working. He wants to leave.

Nonetheless, in Bab Touma and throughout the Old City, there were decorations and a vibrancy defying terrorists' attempts to stifle life. Strings of simple white lights adorned streets and alleys. Carols wafted out of churches which were dressed in Christmas ribbons.

Walking towards Bab Touma one evening, the lilt of carols being sung drew me into the simply adorned St. George's Cathedral (Syriac Orthodox), full of worshipers, brimming with light and with the faith of Syrians who refuse to die and insist on celebrating life.



St. George's Cathedral in the old city of

Damascus.

Deep in the twisting lanes of the Old City, on the last Thursday before Christmas, a popular restaurant was packed with friends, lovers, and families, meeting before their own family celebrations at Christmas. The friend who took me said that in spite of the huge rise in cost of living over the years (thanks to both the war on Syria and the criminal sanctions), this restaurant has kept its prices relatively affordable.

I was invited to hear the [Farah Choir](#) (the Choir of Joy) Christmas concert at the Notre Dame de Damas Church on December 19. However, largely [due to a visit](#) to the practicing choir the evening prior by President al-Assad and First Lady Asma al-Assad, the church was packed to the maximum, the line of people wanting to enter extending onto the street. I was able to squirm inside, to standing space at the very back of the large, packed, church and catch a glimpse of the performance. There at the back, the same simple hand-made decorations and nativity scene with its brown paper wall, the same insistence to celebrate Christmas, however simply.

### **Martyr's Tree and Mortars**

Many of the National Defence Forces (NDF) men and women soldiers I met at Bab Touma, Bab Sharqi (East Gate) are Christian, and like elsewhere in Syria they've become soldiers to defend their families, country, and their heritage.

Near Bab Sharqi, I chatted one afternoon with one of the NDF soldiers, Fouad. "We live and die here. But aside from death, there's no other way we're leaving here." Sadly many of Fouad's NDF friends who felt the same way have indeed been killed, some while fighting terrorists, others by the mortars which terrorists rain down on Damascus routinely. Not far from Bab Sharqi, at the Syriac Catholic Church, a Christmas tree dressed with blinking lights was also adorned with photos of martyred soldiers from the area.



Martyrs' Tree: paying respect to martyred soldiers from the East Gate neighbourhood of Damascus.

The dome of the St. Sarkis Armenian Apostolic Church beside us at Bab Sharqi was punctured with shrapnel. Fouad told me that the Armenian school behind the church has been struck by mortars many a time. Incidents include the killing of six elementary children in [November 2013](#) when terrorist mortars struck both church and school, and the killing of



the church [Deacon's own son](#), along with three other children and a school bus driver, when terrorists mortared the bus. (For more on mortars, see [my earlier article](#): "The Terrorism we Support in Syria: A First-Hand Account of the Use of Mortars Against Civilians")



Hand-made nativity scene near East Gate, Old Damascus.

As we talked, Fouad mentioned that he and a friend had made the simple nativity scene in front of the church. A tire staircase covered with rough brown cloth led to a platform hosting the nativity scene, backed by the same crumpled brown paper "rock wall" Syrians have crafted for the scene. Friends in the area contributed to it, the decorations on surrounding trees, and the gifts they will give out to around 300 children in the area.

It was the third year they've done this, Fouad said, the incentive largely being to distract children from the stress of living under mortars, and to keep the traditions of Christmas alive, "so that they don't forget what is Christmas."

I asked him if he had a message for people outside of Syria. His reply:

The problem is that those outside of Syria will not believe unless they come and see with their eyes. We can talk all we want but people won't believe us. But when they come here and see we are Muslims, Christians, Jews... all religions, and no one asks what your faith is. My good friend is Muslim; he sometimes comes with me to church, and I go with him to mosque.

### **Volunteerism and Unity**

Further along in the Old City, walking towards the [Melkite \(Greek\) Catholic Patriarchate](#), also known as the Zeitoun Church, I spotted a few men and women wearing vests with a logo reading (in Arabic) Saaed Association, also walking church-wards. The Director, Essam Habel, explained that they are a volunteer group and among their various campaigns they were now decorating a Christmas tree in the church square and baking Christmas treats, helped by around 1,200 mostly student volunteers from a special needs school.

He and another volunteer gave me a lesson in the art of making date-stuffed cookies known as Mahmoul. A video [filmed](#) later shows the finished tree, the children participating, and the

handing out of sweets to Damascenes. As we walked back toward the tree where volunteers worked, he mentioned that most of the volunteers are Muslim. Syrians continue to reject the sectarianism that outside forces, particularly Saudi Arabia, has attempted to impose on Syria.

As I saw during Orthodox [Easter celebrations](#) in April 2014, Muslims join their Christian friends in observing celebrations, whether in restaurants, churches or their own homes, and in the case of Christmas, many put up their own Christmas trees. And every time this issue comes up with friends in Syria, they speak of how they've always shared holidays, how they have [inter-faith marriages](#), how they are Syrian before they are any particular faith.

The highest Muslim official in Syria, [Grand Mufti](#) Dr. Ahmad Badr Al-Din Hassoun ([filmed leading mass](#) in 2013) regularly attends Christian events, has a Christian advisor, and publically speaks on unity and against sectarianism. Mufti Hassoun usually describes himself as Mufti of Syria, not of Muslims in particular.

Dr. Bouthaina Shaaban Political advisor to the Syrian President, told me last week:

I'm a Muslim but I have a Christmas tree in my house, and I always have, since my daughters were born. Now my daughters are in their thirties and their children want Christmas trees. Many of those in Bab Touma (Thomas Gate) celebrating Christmas are Muslims. We go to churches, we celebrate Christmas, because our friends are Christians, we are all living together. Society is not divided along sectarian or ethnic lines.

## **Elsewhere in Syria**

In the ancient Aramaic-speaking village of Ma'loula, terrorized, looted, vandalized and greatly damaged by al-Nusra and other NATO-backed terrorists, life seems to be returning. A [Facebook post](#) shows a youth band at the St. Thekla convent enthusiastically playing an out of tune rendition of *Jingle Bells*. The convent, which I saw on a [June 2014 visit](#) to Ma'loula, had been burned and thieved by anti-Syrian terrorists.

While I didn't get back to Ma'loula this time, as I sat in a home not far from Bab Touma in Damascus, talking with my hosts about the situation in Syria, hearing about their close calls with terrorists' mortars, I was offered a glass of hand-made wine from Ma'loula. Even now, traditions live on.

Syrian news sites and social media also show Christmas celebrations in Lattakia, [Safita \(Tartous province\)](#)—with a 22 metre high Christmas tree—and [Aleppo](#).

And even now, as Syrians endure more Western-supported terrorism and struggle under criminal sanctions but insist on celebrating, Christian and Muslim friends alike send me Christmas wishes, direct from Syria. The Christmas and daily wish of so many I have spoken with in Syria is for peace to return, for an end to this foreign war on their country.

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