



## Kobani, Syria, Once Bombarded by ISIS, Sees Increase in Christian Converts

In Kobani, Syria, which was largely destroyed by ISIS artillery and U.S.-led coalition air strikes against ISIS targets during 2014 and 2015, some former Muslim Kurds have become Christians.

The city of Kobani, in the far north of Syria and very close to the Turkish border, was under siege by ISIS from September 2014 to January 2015. After much of the city was destroyed, most of its population fled to Turkey. However, starting in 2015 — after ISIS militants were beaten back by U.S. air strikes and Kurdish fighters — many refugees returned.



Prior to the Syrian civil war, the majority of Kobani's residents were Kurds — an ethnic group who are culturally and linguistically related to the Iranian people. The People's Protection Units (YPG), a mainly-Kurdish militia, took control of Kobani in July 2012 and Kobani has been under Kurdish control since then.

The majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims, but a minority practice Shia Islam, Alevism, Yarsanism, Yazidism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity.

The cruel and brutal treatment that the radically Islamic ISIS inflicted on residents of the areas of northern Syria it once controlled was injurious to the faith of more moderate Muslims. Many Muslims lost their faith entirely and became agnostics. However, others, including some in Kobani, have converted to Christianity.

Last year, the number of Christians in Kobani had grown to the point where the city's first evangelical Christian church was established. About 20 families, or around 80 to 100 people, attend the new church.

"After the war with Islamic State people were looking for the right path, and distancing themselves from Islam," Omar Firas, the church's founder told Reuters. "People were scared and felt lost."

Reuters interviewed the church's current pastor, Zani Bakr, a convert to Christianity who arrived last year from Afrin, another border city 115 miles east of Kobani.

"This was painted by [ISIS] as a religious conflict, using religious slogans. Because of this a lot of Kurds lost trust in religion generally, not just Islam," he said.

Their horrific experience with ISIS caused many Kurds to become atheist or agnostic, noted Bakr. "But many others became Christian. Scores here and more in Afrin."

The Reuters reporter interviewed another member of the new church, Maxim Ahmed, who lost an arm in an explosion in Kobani and fled to Turkey for medical treatment. While there, he met Kurdish and



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Turkish converts to Christianity and found their faith so appealing that he eventually decided to join them.

“They seemed happy and all talked about love. That’s when I decided to follow Jesus’s teachings,” Ahmed said. He said that several of his friends and family members were now interested in coming to the new church.

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