

# Western-backed Islamist forces attack historic Syrian town of Maaloula

By Johannes Stern  
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As the imperialist powers prepare for a major attack on Syria, their Islamist proxy forces on the ground feel strengthened and are intensifying their murderous campaign of ethnic and sectarian cleansing.

Yesterday, international news agencies reported that Islamist opposition forces attacked the historic town of Maaloula, in the Rif Dimashq Governorate 50 km northeast of the capital, Damascus. The town is inhabited by Christians and Muslims alike and is on a UNESCO list of tentative world heritage sites.

Maaloula has two of the oldest monasteries in Syria, the Greek Catholic monastery Mar Sarkis and the Greek Orthodox Mar Taqla. The origins of Mar Sarkis go back to the fifth or sixth century. The village is also famous as one of the three locations where Western Aramaic—the language Jesus probably used the most—is still spoken.

Residents of Maaloula said that Islamist militants stormed their village Wednesday night, after a rebel blew himself up at a government checkpoint near the entrance of the city. According to Rami Abdul-Rahman, the director of the Observatory for Human Rights, a London-based pro-opposition group, said the fighters included members of the Al Qaeda-linked Al Nusra Front.

After the suicide bombing, Islamist fighters attacked government forces and took over the checkpoint, disabling two tanks and an armored personnel carrier and killing at least eight Syrian army soldiers. The rebels then staged hit-and-run attacks on the village and eventually overran the Safir hotel on the mountain overlooking the city. From there, Islamists shelled Maaloula's Christian churches with mortars. According to the Surya al-Ain web site, the Temple of the Holy Prophet Elijah caught fire and was damaged.

“It's a war,” a frightened nun who asked not to be

identified as she feared repercussions told Associated Press. “It has been going from 6 a.m. in the morning.”

She also said some 100 people from the village took refuge in her convent. Twenty-seven orphans who live there had been transferred to nearby caves overnight “so they were not scared.”

On Thursday the Syrian military sent reinforcements to Maaloula from Damascus and drove out the Islamists. Heavy clashes between army troops and rebel fighters reportedly continued in the surrounding mountains. The nun said the frightened residents expect the Islamist militants to return to the mountaintop hotel and continue shelling the town below.

According to the Arabic *Al Hadath* web site, the Islamist fighters vowed to take revenge on the Christians after the “triumph of the revolution.”

The attack on Maaloula and the shelling of another world heritage site in Syria highlights the criminal character of the imperialist intervention. The imperialist powers rely on violent Sunni Islamist forces and a policy of ethnic and sectarian cleansing to bring down the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad as part of their strategy to recolonize Syria and prepare for war against Shiite Iran. In the past two years, US imperialism and its European and regional allies have financed and supported the Syrian rebels, who are dominated by Al Qaeda and terrorize or murder Syria's religious minorities.

Opposition forces are responsible for countless massacres, such as the Houla massacre in June 2012 and in Hatlah in June this year—where dozens of Shia Muslims and Alawites were slaughtered by the Free Syrian Army. Syrian minorities and especially the Christians face the threat of extinction.

In a recent testimony to the US House of Representatives' Committee on Foreign Affairs, Nina

Shea, the director of the Center for Religious Freedom, said Syrian Christians “face a distinct peril so dire that their ability to survive in Syria is being seriously doubted by church leaders and independent secular observers, alike.”

According to Shea, “Christians have been reportedly displaced by the regime in Tal Nasri, Um Sharshoh, and the old city of Homs. They have been reportedly displaced by the Free Syrian Army in Mesmye, Daraa, Ghassaniy, Idlib, Quseir and Rable in Homs.”

Jean Clement Jeanbart, the Archbishop of Aleppo’s Melkite Greek Catholic Church, referred to the fears of the 2.5 million-strong Christian minority in Syria about the Islamist mercenaries.

After the public execution of Muhammad al-Qatta, a 14 year old coffee seller, in early June by a group of jihadists in Aleppo for allegedly insulting the Prophet Muhammad, he told the Rome-based Catholic outlet *AsiaNews*: “Wherever they appear, Islamist militias have made life impossible for the Christians. Christians are terrified by these militias and fear that in the event of their victory they would no longer be able to practice their religion and that they would be forced to leave the country.”

Jeanbart described how jihadist fighters entered Syria's second city Aleppo: “As soon as they reached the city, Islamist guerrillas, almost all of them from abroad, took over the mosques. Every Friday, an imam launches their messages of hate, calling on the population to kill anyone who does not practice the religion of the Prophet Muhammad. They use the courts to level charges of blasphemy. Whoever is contrary to their way of thinking pays with his life.”

With a Western military assault on Syria is imminent, the Islamist fighters, who had been on the retreat in the past months, are intensifying their terrorist actions. On Thursday, a car bomb exploded in front of a research center belonging to the Ministry of Industry, killing four and wounding several people. According to the Syrian news agency SANA, an attack on a sports hall in Damascus killed Mohammed Ali Neimeh, a member of the Syrian national taekwondo team.

In the recent weeks, more graphic videos appeared on the internet documenting the gruesome crimes of the US-backed opposition. One video showed the killing of three Alawite truck drivers who ran into a roadblock set up by Al Nusra fighters in the Eastern desert, close

to the Iraqi border. The Islamist fighters drag the frightened workers on the road side and murdered them immediately. The video was shot and posted by the Islamists themselves to use it for their propaganda. It was later documented by PressTV.com and can be seen here .

Another video shows the gruesome beheading of three Syrians. One of victims was identified by the Vatican as Syrian Catholic priest Francois Murad.

The jihadist forces’ horrible actions give a glimpse of the crimes to come as the imperialist powers push to topple Assad and put the opposition in power, as part of their drive to re-colonize Syria and the entire Middle East.

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