

# Syria: Christian City Attacked by “Freedom Fighters”. CNN, NYT Justify Rebel Assault

Saidnaya under rebel attack

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*Levant Report's own sources inside Syria were present in Saidnaya this week: they report that the townspeople are now sounding the alarm to the international community that Islamist rebels in the surrounding mountains are preparing a major invasion of the Christian city. The primary aim of the rebels, the inhabitants fear, is to commit “religious cleansing” against Christians – similar to what happened only months ago in nearby Maaloula. A reluctant international press is also beginning to acknowledge the potential for a genocidal event against Saidnayans, yet disinformation is already in full swing.*

This past Thursday, February 6, monasteries and churches in the ancient Christian city of Saidnaya held special celebrations for the feast of St. Elian – a Syrian saint martyred in Homs in the third century. These celebrations took place despite the village being under constant rebel mortar attack – attacks that have been stepped up over the last month.



Saidnaya, which lies 25 minutes by car north of Damascus, and 40 minutes to the southwest of Maaloula, is (alongside Maaloula) Syria's most celebrated and historic Christian city. Its scenic location at the edge of the Qalamon Mountains, its active churches and monasteries that go back to the time of Emperor Justinian, and multiple restaurants and resort hotels made it a favorite weekend getaway destination for Syrians and tourists of all backgrounds prior to the chaos of the last couple of years.

Saidnaya has, until recently, managed to stay quiet and relatively peaceful for most of the nearly three years of the Syria conflict. Its 5 active monasteries, dozens of churches, and large convent orphanage for girls, have continued life as usual as they have over the past many centuries living under multiple regimes – from the Byzantines to the Ottomans to the Ba'ath.

The mostly Orthodox Christian population tends to be presented as “pro-regime” in Western media reports – this perhaps because Syria's most well-known political prison is located in Saidnaya. But the city's Christian population believes that its very survival is dependent on the government checkpoints, tanks, and soldiers that protect it from the thousands of foreign-backed insurgents that are hunkered down in the surrounding Qalamon Mountains.

Unlike the very politically involved Maronites of Lebanon, Syria's Christian population tends to keep a low-profile, and has enjoyed the historical toleration shown by the secular pan-Arab Ba'athists and socialist nationalist politicians that have led the country for much of

Syria's modern period.

Timothy Heckenlively, a Classics professor at a major central Texas university who has lived in the Saidnaya/Maaloula area, published a brief report in October titled [“Saidnaya: another Maaloula in the making?”](#). After the initial successful insurgent entry into Maaloula, he expressed the following concern:

It appears that the Islamist opposition forces who wrecked [sic] havoc in Maaloula may be preparing for a similar assault on the equally important Christian village of Saidnaya. On Oct. 1, Fides (a site of the Vatican news network) reported that [raids were now commonplace and that one man was dead](#) after clashes the previous day.

Since October, insurgents have mounted multiple unsuccessful attempts to capture the mountaintop which overlooks Saidnaya – a strategic place from which they could destroy the city below. At the highest point of this mountain sits Cherubim Monastery – an active monastery and retreat center which has an important cultural heritage site: a church which dates to the third century. One of the tallest Christ statues in the world was recently erected on the monastery grounds – a towering 39 meters tall bronze sculpture that was years in planning with the help of Russian benefactors.

During the spring and summer months, Cherubim Monastery hosts Christian youth camps and church schools. The monks recently had to leave the monastery due to the [frequent rebel incursions](#) around the mountain; they are now sheltered in St. George Monastery in the village below.

In an October 2013 Christianity Today article entitled [Latest Stop in Race for World's Tallest Jesus Statue: War-Torn Syria](#), the reality of an ongoing *religiocide* in this historic Christian region was noted:

Saidnaya has [recently faced](#) sectarian attacks [similar to Maaloula](#), another Aramaic-speaking pilgrimage destination just 15 miles north. In addition to displacing tens of thousands of people, the attacks have [prompted](#) 50,000 Syrian Christians to [apply for citizenship](#) in Russia, reports Interfax. “It is for the first time since the Nativity of Christ that we Christians of Qalamoun living in the villages of Saidnaya, Maara Saidnaya, Maaloula and Maaroun are under threat of banishment from our land,” reads the group’s appeal to the Russia Foreign Ministry.

The parallels between Maaloula and Saidnaya are all too evident: both are iconic Christian cities that have done their best to prevent conflict from entering their sleepy countryside environs; both contain Syrian cultural and UNESCO heritage sites valued by all Syrians; both have convent-run orphanages for girls and charitable centers and retreat centers; and both are overlooked by mountains from which rebels can wreak havoc and terror on a vulnerable population. Sadly, Maaloula now sits liquidated of its Christian inhabitants (some were kidnapped, some killed, and most fled to Damascus).

[Our Lady of Saidnaya Convent and Orphanage](#) is significantly larger than Maaloula’s St. Thekla Convent. It was the very first target of rebel insurgent attack on the city as it was [struck by mortar fire](#) back in January 2012. Note that in spite of current opposition and media claims that Saidnaya is primarily a government/military target, this first target of

attack was a community of elderly nuns and young orphan girls.

We all know the story of Maaloula. A reluctant international press picked up on the terror attack after it was too late – and even then major outlets like the New York Times did their best to [protect the reputation](#) of the rebel insurgents involved in the takeover and brutal cleansing of the city's Christian population. Maaloula was of no real strategic value to the rebel insurgents – their own actions in the aftermath of the assault testify to the fact that the town's religious identity had everything to do with it.

Levant Report's sources, which have a close affiliation with Maaloula's St. Thekla Convent, confirm that the ancient monastery church and side chapels were stripped completely of their priceless religious icons, and other religious objects were urinated and defecated upon. Christian villagers who were [caught](#) in the midst of the rebel assault had their throats slit, or were shot execution style at close range.

According to Matthew Barber, Syria analyst and administrator of the hugely influential [Syria Comment](#) site, the Free Syrian Army and allied groups played a [central role](#) in the assault and takeover of Maaloula:

The video and photographic evidence available after the attack indicates that the operation was a coordinated effort between (at least) the following groups: Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, the Baba 'Amr Brigades (a rebel group possibly affiliated with the SIF – Syrian Islamic Front), FSA Commandos Unit, and Soqour al-Sham.

It is important to remember that the United States and other governments officially finance and supply weapons to some of these very groups. Though the FSA continues to be sold as “moderate” – it routinely conducts joint operations with Jabhat al-Nusra and other groups. A clear dividing line between “extreme Islamists” and the FSA is a myth sold by the United States and Western governments.

The 12 abducted Maaloulan nuns and 4 young women from the orphanage are still the objects of uncertain on-and-off [hostage negotiations](#). Shamefully, multiple Western mainstream media outlets uncritically reported opposition claims that the nuns were actually “rescued” from Syrian Army forces as a result of the rebel takeover of Maaloula. See National Public Radio's outrageous December 20 report – [Rebel Leader: Nuns Were Led To Safety, Not Seized, In Syria](#):

“He decided to kill you and blame us,” he recalls pleading with the sisters, referring to Syrian President Bashar Assad, after a surface-to-surface missile shattered the convent's thick wooden door on Dec. 3...

...But Abu Majid says local rebels were protecting the women from the regime shelling on an ancient Christian town.

Similar propaganda has already begun regarding the ongoing insurgent raids on Saidnaya. In a recent January 24 CNN exclusive [report from Saidnaya](#), the CNN correspondent declared that “Cherubim Monastery is not a civilian target these days” – this because Syrian Army tanks and soldiers are protecting the monastery and the city below. Yet the report also acknowledges that most of the fighters protecting the mountaintop and monastery are

simply local Christians who desire to keep the Islamic insurgents from entering. It is unbelievable that a reporter would brazenly declare that a historic Christian monastery that housed elderly monks and was home to summer youth camps is now a legitimate military target for the opposition.

A recent PressTV [report](#), also with camera crew on the ground in Saidnaya, bothered to include an interview with one the monks affected by the rebel shelling. Fr. Isaac Zeina, part of the monastic community that inhabited Cherubim Monastery, said in the interview "we pray to God for an end to the war." These are hardly the words of "pro-regime militarism," yet the CNN report branded Fr. Isaac's monastery and home as "not a civilian target."

Just last week, Al Monitor online news published an in-depth report on the Saidnaya assaults. The [Al Monitor article](#) is significant in that it's currently the only instance of a major international news outlet exposing the clear the intentions of the area's rebel insurgents:

The city rings its bells whenever danger is imminent, as was the case when mortar shells hit the Cherubim Monastery and the Convent of Our Lady of Saidnaya during the fourth attack [against the city] on Jan. 19. The city's citizens are now "wanted" by armed militants.

Being from Saidnaya is enough reason to be killed by the militants who have suffered heavy defeats there, the most recent of which was the fourth attack. What's more, the city's people are also guilty of being *nasara*, a derogatory term used by armed groups to refer to [Christians](#).

..."You will be next, after Maaloula," recounts one of the city's dignitaries.

The Al Monitor article also confirms that the orphans at Our Lady of Saidnaya are still in residence as rebel mortar shells continue to rain down. These girls are orphans with nowhere to go, and the convent is their home. The article further confirms that Al-Nusra Front is circulating a video declaring a genocidal war against all Christians.

Sadly, major media will on the whole continue to be silent about acts of genocide and *religiocide* committed by rebels in Syria. Some of the world's most influential and visible reporters are close enough to events on the ground to know the truth, yet they continue to willfully distort, and commit acts of omission in their reporting.

[Anne Barnard](#) is perhaps the single most influential reporter when it comes to shaping American and world perceptions of the conflict in Syria. She is the Beirut bureau chief in charge of covering the Middle East for the New York Times. Anyone who knows her work can easily perceive that she consistently and almost exclusively relies on rebel opposition sources in her reporting.

Joshua Landis, widely regard as the foremost Syria expert in the U.S., [tweeted](#) a LevantReport.com article on October 8 of last year that systematically took apart Anne Barnard's NYT [reporting](#) of the first rebel attack on Maaloula. The [critique](#) included the following:

Soon the propaganda war began. The FSA posted videos to YouTube claiming that the Assad regime was [shelling churches in Maaloula](#) and started promoting them on Twitter using various aliases. This was soon followed by a video in which a wahabi-bearded "liberator" gave a [tour of the supposed](#)

[damage](#). Their efforts soon met with the desired reward. On September 10, the New York Times ran an [article by Anne Barnard](#) giving credibility to such videos and portraying public outcry about Maaloula as potential misperception. Eight days later, [Lina Sinjab of the BBC used such materials](#) to portray the whole event as an unfortunate scuffle with few deaths and no particular damage to local churches.

The article tweeted by Landis named Barnard as a propagandist attempting to cover up the crimes of the Syrian rebels. Surprisingly, in perhaps a sarcastic or playful acknowledgement of the critique, Anne Barnard ["favorited"](#) the article on her Twitter account. This "winking" acknowledgment from Barnard lends credibility to those who say that major media institutions such as the New York Times are willfully distorting the true and full context of the Syria conflict.

Saidnaya's Christians, and all religious and ethnic minorities currently being targeted for genocide by the Syrian rebels need true and accurate reporting of their plight now more than ever. If real and lasting peace, the goal claimed by the Geneva Conference, is ever to be established in Syria, it must begin with a realistic assessment of not just the regime's crimes and brutalities, but of the unambiguous intention to commit genocide on the part of the rebel opposition.

*Brad Hoff served as a Marine from 2000-2004 at Headquarters Battalion, Quantico. After military service he lived, studied, and traveled throughout Syria off and on from 2004-2010. He currently teaches in Texas.*

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