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Syria

Al-Qaeda Rebels in Syria Tell Christians to Pay Up or Die

ISIS leaders are invoking an ancient law to force Christians living in their areas to pay for protection

By [Aryn Baker/ Beirut](#) @arynebaker | Feb. 28, 2014 | 0

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Syrian walk in front of the Armenian Catholic Church of the Martyrs in the northern rebel-held Syrian city of Raqqa on Sept. 16, 2013.

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Radical Islamist rebels running the northern Syrian city of Raqqa have made the Christians living in the area an offer they can't refuse: pay for protection, convert to Islam, or "face the sword."

In a [statement](#) posted to Jihadi websites and signed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-designated emir of the future Islamic caliphate of Raqqa, as well as the founder of the Islamic State of [Iraq](#) and Syria [ISIS] rebel brigade, Christians are urged to pay a tax in order to continue living under ISIS's protection. The terms are simple: twice a year wealthy Christians must pay the equivalent of half an ounce of gold — about \$664 by [today's market value](#). Middle-class Christians have to come up with half that sum, and poor Christians can get away with paying a quarter, or about \$166

[Terrorism](#) analyst Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi offers a [translation](#) of the statement for the Syria Comment blog. ISIS's -called "[dhimmi pact](#)," which refers to an ancient piece of legislation that allowed Christians and Jews to live and practice their religion in Islamic kingdoms as long as they paid a tax and submitted to specific rules, lays out what they can expect in return. Their churches will not be attacked, their wealth will not be confiscated, and they will not be physically harmed. They will have the right to practice their religion — as long as they keep their crosses, their Bibles and their churches out of sight. They are not allowed to ring bells, evangelize or pray within earshot of a Muslim, nor are they allowed to sell pork and alcohol to Muslims or bear arms.

Raqqa, the only Syrian city completely under rebel control, was seized by ISIS in May. Since then the group, which was an al-Qaeda franchise until last month, when it was [expelled](#) for being too radical, has attempted to establish a new Islamic kingdom governed by laws dating back to the days of the Prophet Muhammad and his successors. Fierce battles between ISIS and other rebel groups aligned against the regime of Syrian President [Bashar Assad](#) over the direction of the revolution have resulted in some 2,000 dead over the past few months. ISIS's latest dictate will raise hackles, but there is little that the other rebel groups can do, short of opening another front in their war.

In the statement, ISIS members said that some 20 Christian leaders had already agreed to the terms. It's a figure that has many scratching their heads. Before the Syrian conflict started three years ago, less than one percent of Raqqa's 300,000 population was Christian. Most of those Christians had already fled by the time ISIS moved in. "I find it hard to believe that after all that happened, there are any Christians at all left in Raqqa," says Bassel, a 36-year-old Christian from nearby Aleppo, who asked to use only one name in order to protect his family still in Syria. To Bassel, the attention the statement has garnered outweighs the impact and has diverted attention from more important issues, like civilian casualties. The Syrian regime has long used Islamists' threats against Christians and other minorities to justify their assertion that all rebels are terrorists. ISIS, on the other hand, gets to highlight its Islamist bona fides. Christians, says Bassel, are an easy way to focus the world's attention. "We are good for propaganda."



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Aryn Baker is the Middle East Bureau Chief for TIME, covering politics, society, culture, religion, the arts and the military in the greater Middle East, including Pakistan and Afghanistan. She currently resides in Beirut, Lebanon.



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