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## SYRIA | At Least 90 Abducted from Christian Villages

The Islamist jihadi group Daesh (Islamic State) kidnapped at least 90 people from mainly Assyrian Christian villages in northeast Syria.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), the kidnappings took place on Feb. 24, following dawn raids on Assyrian villages in areas held by Kurdish forces in al-Hasakah Province. The villages, mainly populated by the ancient Christian Minority, are near the Assyrian town of Tel Hmar. The nearby city of Hasakah is divided between Kurdish and Daesh forces.

On Feb. 22, fighters from the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) claimed they had driven Daesh out of 22 villages, including several Assyrian ones situated between Hasakah City and Syria's border with Turkey. YPG forces seized 19 villages during an offensive in Raqqa Province, which is next to Hassakeh. Daesh fighters countered by advancing into the Assyrian villages in an effort to regain control.

As well as abducting local Christians, the jihadi militants reportedly executed two people in the village of Ghibsh near Tal Tamer for "dealing with Kurds."

While there are currently no details on those who have been kidnapped, Christians living in these areas had previously received an ultimatum to convert, pay a religious levy (Jizya) or face death, causing many to flee their ancestral lands.

Last week, Daesh fighters released a video reportedly showing the mass beheadings of 21 mostly Egyptian Christians on a beach outside the Libyan capital, Tripoli, which sparked an international outcry and led to airstrikes by Egyptian forces on weapons caches and training camps in the coastal cities of Derna and Sirte.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said: "This kidnapping is the latest appalling assault on these ancient Assyrian villages. Daesh was already inflicting terror and suffering in the region through systematic use of religious taxation, destroying Churches and capturing and killing anyone who does not share their beliefs. Syria is the cradle of world Christianity, which far from being a Western or alien religion, was birthed and is rooted in the Middle East. It is both tragic and an irony that members of this ancient, indigenous community continue to suffer at the hands of a mercenary army. Our prayers are with the family and friends of those who have been abducted and we would point the international community to this latest act of aggression as evidence of the need to provide protection for Syria's Christians against an onslaught that seeks to erase the country's diverse heritage."