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Maaloula: Islamist rebels abduct 12 nuns from the St Thecla Orthodox monastery

The sisters were abducted this afternoon when a group of armed men stormed the monastery. For Vatican nuncio Mgr Mario Zenari and the Greek Orthodox Church, the rebels have taken the nuns to Yabrud, a city 80 km from Damascus.



Damascus (AsiaNews) - Islamist rebels have kidnapped a group of nuns from the Greek Orthodox monastery of St Thecla (Mar Taqla) in Maaloula (north of Damascus). Mgr Mario Zenari, the Vatican nuncio in Damascus, confirmed the information after speaking with the Greek-Orthodox Patriarchate. Through the Vatican diplomat, the latter "calls on all Catholics to pray for the women religious."

"Armed men burst in the monastery of St Thecla in Maaloula this afternoon. From there, they forcibly took 12 women religious," Mgr Zenari said, citing a statement from Patriarchate. The group of Islamist rebels has apparently taken them to Yabrud, some 80 km north of the capital. Neither the nuncio nor the church Greek Orthodox Church know reason behind the kidnapping.

Islamist Rebels from the [Free Syrian Army \(FSA\) had invaded the small town on 5 September](#) after driving out regime troops

with the support of al-Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Brigades. After taking control of the city, they went on a rampage against Christian buildings, killing three young Catholic men.

More than 3,000 people, the town's entire Christian population, fled their homes seeking refuge in Bab Touma, the Christian quarter of Damascus. Some found shelter with relatives in Lebanon or in local Greek-Catholic convents.

Only Muslims were left in town, plus 40 nuns at the St Thecla Monastery who stayed to help care for dozens of orphaned children.

As of yesterday, Maaloula became again the scene of heavy fighting between the army and Syrian rebels, including many members of the extremist Jabat-al-Nusra militia.

Clashes are concentrated mostly in the upper, oldest part of the town, where the St Thecla Greek-Orthodox and the Sts Sergius and Bacchus Greek-Catholic monasteries are located.

From there, the rebels have launched repeated attacks against army positions in the lower part of town.

Fighting is intensifying, sources told *AsiaNews*. "The army is trying to regain control over the villages north of Damascus. For this purpose, it has launched a major offensive against the rebels, who are trying to hold government forces back through a scorched earth policy in the areas under their control."