

# Christians flee Syria village that speaks the language of Jesus

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*The Syrian Christian town of Maaloula The Syrian Christian town of Maaloula  
Photo: AFP Photo: AFP*

Rebel groups, including a branch of al-Qaeda, have taken control of Maaloula, one of the few remaining villages where the language spoken by Christ is still in use, residents and activists reported.

“Our army, the Syrian army, has failed us,” said Sister Antoinette, a nun from Maaloula. “We called the army, we begged them to come inside Maaloula and save us but they stayed outside. They abandoned us because we are Christians.”

The Syrian regime denied losing control of Maaloula. But footage posted on YouTube showed rebel fighters walking through the streets of the town. A commander pointed out damage to the walls of the ancient St Thecla monastery that he said was caused by government fire.

Nestled in mountains 35 miles from Damascus, Maaloula is one of only three places in the world that retains Western Aramaic, a dialect of the language spoken by Christ. St Thecla, who is said to be buried in the convent, was a follower of St Paul who fled to the village to avoid marriage after taking an oath of chastity.

Its inhabitants are mostly Melkite Greek Catholic and Orthodox Christians, who have historically lived alongside a Sunni Muslim minority.

Throughout Syria’s civil war, Maaloula has been a place where Sunni Muslims and Christians can peacefully coexist.

The attack on Maaloula was a joint operation between moderate rebels from the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and Jabhat al-Nusra, jihadists aligned with al-Qaeda. Villagers said that after winning control of much of the town, the rebel groups turned against each other, with jihadist fighters seeking to force out FSA rebels.