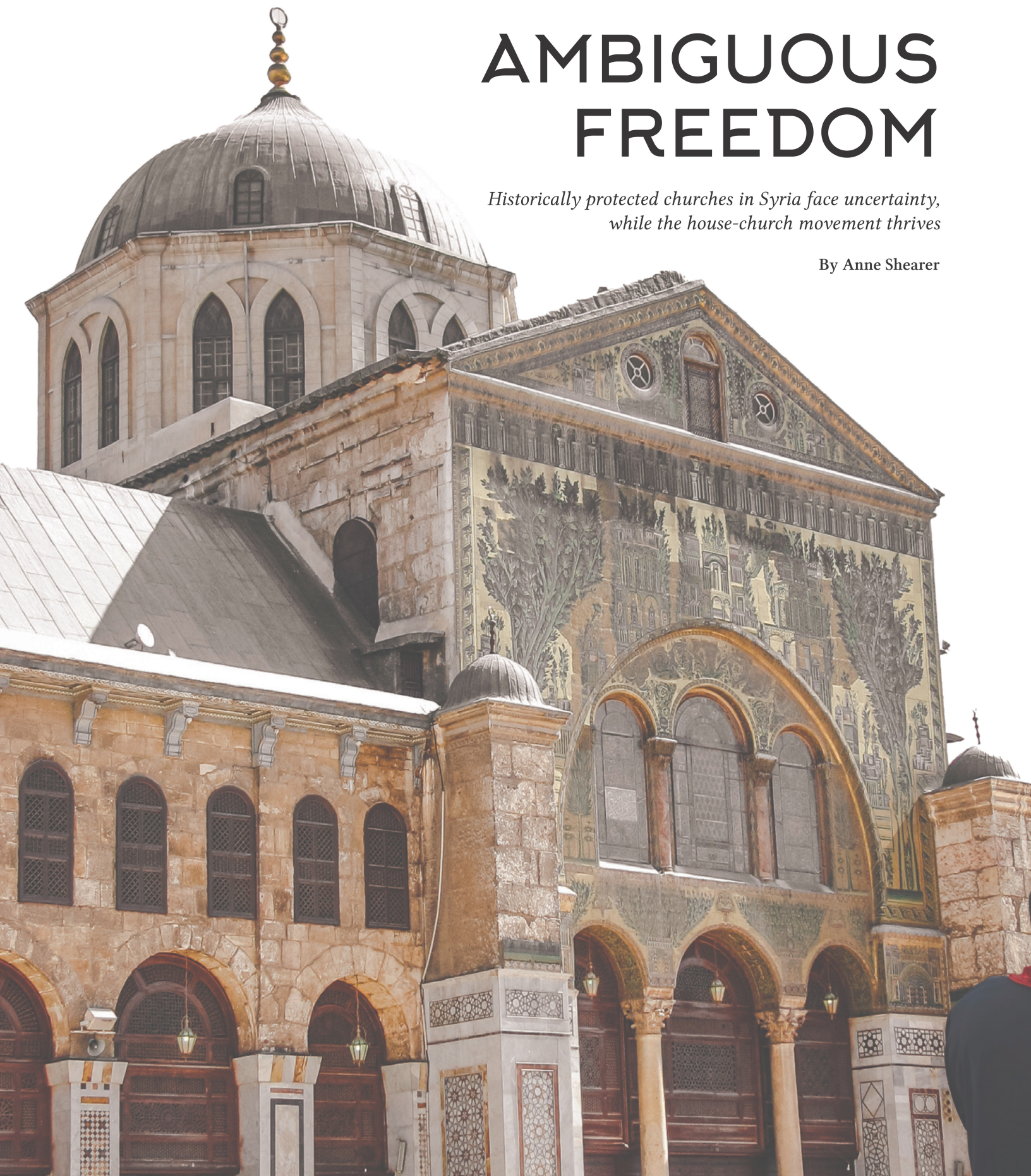


COVER PACKAGE

AMBIGUOUS FREEDOM

*Historically protected churches in Syria face uncertainty,
while the house-church movement thrives*

By Anne Shearer



With the recent rise to power of the Syrian rebel group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in the aftermath of the fall of Bashar al-Assad, many churches have seen their previous protections falter. HTS, a former al-Qaeda affiliate that has rebranded itself, has made public assurances to protect Syrian Christians and other minorities, allowing them religious freedom and returning seized properties. Concerns remain, however, about whether such commitments will endure over the long haul.

Some with anti-Christian sentiments have used the new freedom in Syria to act out against these churches.¹ On December 18th, a Greek Orthodox church building in the diverse Hama region was shot and vandalized. Just before Christmas, masked men burned a Christmas tree in the town square of Christian-majority Suqaylabiya. Other reports include intimidation of Christians, property seizure, and cemetery vandalism.

However, HTS publicly condemned these incidents with calls for arrests and justice. Reports stated police were track-

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ing suspects who vandalized the Orthodox Church (though no updates were available at time of writing), and after the tree burning, Christians filled the streets of Suqaylabiya and capital city Damascus to protest unhindered. “Zachary” (not his real name), an American who lives in the Middle East and works with the Syrian house-church movement, said that “there hasn’t been direct regime persecution yet against Christians that we know of. It’s been people and groups that feel free to [make such attacks].”

While historical Christian communities in Syria have outlasted empires, this vacillation between violence against Christians and outcries for tolerance highlights a new era of uncertainty following the takeover of HTS. Assad’s government provided legal protections to historical congregations such as Catholic, Armenian, and Orthodox churches. A few comparatively newer protestant denominations were also legally registered.

Congregants of these legal churches are largely from Christian backgrounds. “Freedom of religion, at best, in Syria is freedom to remain as you were born,” Zachary said. For converts from non-Christian backgrounds, publicly joining a church is risky. These believers are more likely to join one of the various secret house-church movements in Syria.

Zachary works with two of these house-church movements. To remain under the

radar, they meet in small groups, only gathering occasionally for larger group worship and fellowship. And they’re growing.

“There are flourishing gospel movements happening inside of Syria today,” says Zachary. “That’s the real story that is infinitely more newsworthy, and has more staying power than any other trend you’ll read about regarding Syria.”

While HTS has touted messages of religious tolerance, its jihadist background casts doubt on how it may follow through on its promises. At the time of writing, the HTS-ap-



pointed Ministry of Education had announced school curriculum revisions stirring controversy for what critics cited as an increasingly Islamic focus— further calling into question its commitment to religious tolerance.

While an un-friendly government is bad news for all Christians, it is not new news for underground churches. Zachary says house-church techniques that worked under Assad will likely work under another oppressive government. Over the past few years, some of the legal churches have adopted the small-group, under-the-radar flexibility of house churches that creates the resilience to weather political changes.

“There are ways to do gospel work when the government is against you,” said Zachary. “Thankfully, there have been a lot of people working to build that into the fabric of the church in Syria for some time now.”

Anne Shearer is a newswriter for this magazine.

¹ Some sources point to attacks by jihadist groups (<https://www.newarab.com/news/syria-police-investigate-attack-greek-orthodox-church-hama>); HTS claimed the tree-burners were foreign actors.