

A visit to Syria by an independent group



31 August - 7 September 2016

CONTENTS

Executive summary	1
Meetings	6
Personal experiences	38
A personal view	40
Conclusion	42
Appendix	44

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why did we come to Syria?

- We came to listen, to learn and to meet as many people as possible in order to contribute our experiences to the wider discussions of the situation in Syria.
- We emphasise our commitment to the fundamental principle of impartiality and solidarity with all those who are suffering, whatever their faith and cultural traditions or political views.
- A pastoral visit to the suffering people of Syria – including Christians, Muslims and Yazidis; to see for ourselves the realities on the ground; to listen to a wide range of voices which are not being heard outside Syria; to hear from religious leaders, communities, political leaders and Internally Displaced People (IDPs).
- To visit religious communities in different Syrian locations; to listen to the voices of their members and leaders; to experience their places of worship and to view any destruction of churches and mosques and the loss of ritual treasures.
- To learn about efforts being made within Syria to bring about a peaceful resolution.
- To reflect on our response, that of the UK and other members of the international community.
- To explore academic relationships relating to possible cultural and academic collaboration.

Members of the group

Revd Andrew Ashdown
Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali
The Baroness (Caroline) Cox
The Lord Hylton
Revd David Clark
Ms Jo Simister
Dr Simon Fisher

Invitation

We were invited by Bishop Armash Nalbandian, Armenian Archbishop of Damascus of the Armenian Apostolic Church; Bishop Antoine Audo, Archbishop of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Syria; Revd. Harout Selimian, President of the Armenian Evangelical Church in Syria, and the Grand Mufti of Syria, Dr. Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun.

Programme

The programme was planned to enable us to meet many faith, political (including internal Opposition) and community leaders as well as IDPs in Damascus and 'ordinary' people from different parts of Syrian society.

Itinerary

Places visited included Damascus, Maaloula, Aleppo and Latakia.

We emphasise our fundamental commitment to as much impartiality as possible. For this reason, the visit was at our own expense.

Main findings

1. The resilience and perseverance of the Syrian people enduring sustained and intense suffering.
2. The existence of many initiatives by Government and local communities to address problems of war and poverty (e.g. Government and churches' initiatives to support IDPs and the provision of free health care).
3. Reconciliation initiatives at local and Government levels with positive outcomes - for example, in enabling ceasefires. The Minister for Reconciliation told us that there are reconciliation initiatives in 70 cities, towns and villages involving 4.5 million citizens.
4. The devastating impact of sanctions on all Syrian people and the massive destruction and theft of the industrial infrastructure.
5. The group has heard the consistent cry of Christians and Muslims for their ritual places to be respected and preserved and for a sympathetic response and engagement from their counterparts in the West.
6. The consistently positive working relations between Christians and Muslims in Government controlled areas in Syria.
7. Important and significant people with genuine voices of peace and reform are being prevented from visiting the UK and engaging with the British government and people.
8. The coverage by some media of the situation in Syria is not an accurate representation of many of the realities we have

observed. For example, we met the Senior Doctor's Council who confirmed that there are over 4,000 doctors in Aleppo, with 3,150 currently working there; that many hospitals in Government held areas have been bombed and damaged by Opposition forces; and that the medical needs of the vast majority of the city's population are profoundly impacted by the refusal of the international community to engage with Government-held areas of the city.

9. The acute polarisation inherent in protracted war has all but destroyed the existing movement to implement greater democracy within the country. The majority of Aleppo's population are profoundly impacted by the refusal of the international community to engage with Government-held areas of the city.
10. Many media narratives in the UK are refuted and disputed by the vast majority of people whom we have met.
11. Many people whom we met believe that the partisanship of many Western media narratives with the exclusion of most moderate voices will lead to the destruction of civil society and its replacement by violence, terrorism and another failed State, as well as increased terrorism in other countries, including the UK.
12. Widespread concern was strongly conveyed over the UK's military support for Opposition forces which we are repeatedly told are not 'moderate' but virtually indistinguishable from those fighting for the ideologies of ISIS and Al Nusra.
13. People are deeply concerned that the fundamental principle of End User Accountability is not being applied to all military support by the UK with disastrous results.

14. Without exception, every person we met believes that current UK and international policies of commitment to 'Regime Change' will destroy the pluralistic and diverse society which has existed for hundreds of years. They also passionately believe that Syrians should have the right to determine their own future and elect their own leadership.
15. While almost all media coverage in the West focuses on the devastating effects of military offensives by Government forces, in just one day during our visit (September 5th) the following attacks by the armed Opposition inflicting indiscriminate death and injury included: 12 killed and 30 injured by four car bombs at Homs; 45 killed and 100 wounded in Tartus; 3 killed and 12 wounded in the Damascus countryside; 6 killed and 20 wounded in Hasaka.
16. This is only part of the daily toll of death and injury inflicted by Opposition forces on civilians, such as the shelling of the University in Aleppo by 4 missiles on the day we were there.
17. The people whom we met in Syria and members of the group all expressed concern over perceived asymmetry in international media reports, highlighting the tragic effects of Government military offensives and the relative lack of coverage of the civilian casualties caused by the terrorists. This has serious implications for perceptions of the nature of the war, minimising the gravity of the military offensives by the armed Opposition relative to those by the Syrian Army.

MEETINGS

We were keen to meet as wide a range of people as possible to hear their views and concerns. Arrangements were made for us to meet the President, Ministers (including two Opposition Ministers), religious leaders – Christian and Muslim; victims of the war, including Internally Displaced People (IDPs) and members of the general public.

This report presents a summary of the main issues discussed at these meetings.



A symbolic and sobering image from faith communities under attack by Islamist terrorists

FRIDAY 2ND SEPTEMBER

POLITICAL AND MEDIA ADVISER TO THE PRESIDENT, DR BOUTHAINA SHAABAN

Diversity and pluralism

'There are three offices here with Sunni, Shia and Christian staff working together. We are created different so we can appreciate each other and no-one is better than another. The emphasis on differences is the basis of racism and terrorism. I believe the human family is one family and we respect each other whatever their faith and I go to celebrate Christian festivals as a Muslim.'

Biased media representation of Syria

'Syria has no voice in the international arena to tell what is happening in our country and the war.'

'Western countries have pulled out except for the Czech Republic who have a very different story from other countries which have left.'

'I used to receive the media but they always asked how we can support a government which is killing its own people. Now we don't receive them because they don't listen to us but just attack us.'

'450,000 people have been displaced by terrorists but this issue is not covered by the media who focus on much smaller numbers.'

'We want a voice to tell the world what is happening here but they don't let us do this.'

The war and terrorism

'What is happening in our region is the targeting of secular regimes. I don't understand why Western countries won't agree on the meaning of terrorism and what is happening in Syria and why they don't join forces with Russia to fight terrorism. The terrorists are supported by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey.'

'The Arab League chaired by Qatar gives massive support to terrorists; and the UK and France are there selling souls to Saudi Arabia and Qatar for money and arms sales. One UK MP said: "Nothing anyone says or does will change our relationship with Saudi Arabia - get over it".'

'Recently 8,000 armed men arrived in Aleppo from Turkey. This is a war of attrition supported by the UK. The Russians are truly targeting terrorism.'

Barrel bombs and chemical weapons

'We asked for an investigation and it took 5 months - and they didn't go to the places where weapons are used by terrorists.'

The UNSC Resolutions

'Resolution 2253 was taken one day before Resolution 2254. The first focused on punishing countries supporting terrorism and the second related to Syria because of a reluctance to offend Saudi Arabia and Turkey.'

Criticism of our failure to develop democracy

'We have made mistakes but we didn't expect the scale of the assaults. We do have an active civil society with multiparty democracy, civil institutions, unions, NGOs, etc. We have our own democracy, not Western with McDonalds.'

'My Message: I would love you to bring the truth to Parliament and the faith communities.'

'Arab people are very intelligent and we hope you will give more space to Syria to speak the truth. We were very grateful when Parliament voted against military support for the Opposition and this sent a message to people here about the value of democracy.'

'I'm passionate because of the amount of suffering inflicted on my people.'

THE SYRIAN ORTHODOX PATRIARCH

The war

'People are trying to continue life despite all that's happened. We do not want a change of regime at the cost of democracy and we don't want the democracy of Saudi Arabia.'

The Government

'The regime has its own problems but we are better off than under Daesh. We can enjoy any religious freedom here; our country has enjoyed freedom for 2000 years.'

'Now our people are being killed by groups supported by the

U.S. and they are trying to get rid of us. Western involvement is getting Christians out of Syria.

'We want people to live in peace and safety.

'I was sitting with a Foreign Minister of an EU country and he asked what the solution is. I said we do not want the kind of democracy of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The people should have the right to elect our own leaders, including the right to elect Assad. He said Saudi Arabia would not accept this. I said that does not matter and I asked if our blood is so cheap. He just got up and left the room.'

The truth and propaganda

'The West does not hear the truth but fabricated stories. Some footage which is shown is taken from other countries and they forget to change the flag. In some places, they get young people to come out of mosque to demonstrate for a few minutes and they give them money and they disappear. This happened in Homs and one church leader passed by and saw them giving the money.'

The need for an amnesty process

'We can't go back to 2011. So much blood has been shed. Communities have been badly affected and polarisation has taken root. An Amnesty Process is already in place as the President has offered amnesty for those who disarm. This initiative is being promoted to allow people to live in peace.'

Message to the British Government

'I'm not ashamed of the Government of Syria which should be recognised as a legitimate Government. You say Christians are

supporting the regime. But there are people who kill us and bomb us. We are not ashamed to oppose this.

'In a war there are casualties on both sides. I don't think the President would kill his own people if he wants to be elected. The other side is killing us with mortars and bombs on streets. Here, a bomb fell on the Bishop's house. We're not armed and they target us because we are Christians.

'We are in support of a legitimate Government and we see no alternative. If we stood with the West and toppled the Government we would have Mullahs ruling us now. Any moderate opposition would be used by Daesh to come to power and then Daesh would get rid of them and there would be no secular opposition in Syria.

'We don't want sharia and theocracy. Their interpretation of Koran is killing.'



Message to the Churches

'We greatly appreciate your coming. I wish to thank very much those Christian groups who are helping us to stay here, especially by providing help for young people.'

'We want our Churches to have a better life and we want us Syrians to be able to choose our own life and our own future. I wish our brothers and sisters in the West would support us. My message to our Christian brothers and sisters is: please try to understand and come and see for yourselves. I hope we will see churches in the West come and especially the World Council of Churches who have not even asked if we are OK.'

'We have received no word about our two Bishops who were kidnapped. Up to 50 percent of our people have left and if this process continues, you will not find many Christians here.'

THE GRAND MUFTI

Relations between Muslims and Christians

'I feel we've met before because this is a meeting of people of faith. Before I was a Muslim I was a Christian. Jews, Muslims and Christians read the Old Testament; Christians read the New Testament and we read the Koran.'

'Christ summarised 'God is Love'. Any religion not based on Love is made by man. I celebrate Christmas in Aleppo. God is not in temples, churches or mosques but in human hearts.'



Meeting with the Grand Mufti of Syria

Problems in the UK

'But Muslims in the UK don't believe this. I feel very sad because the UK and USA have given mosques to extremists from Saudi Arabia, who say they come to UK just to use them. I went to the Regent's Park mosque where I found Saudi and Egyptian imams. I said if you want to be an imam you should be in your own country. You shouldn't bring your ideology here. All UK mosque leaders are followers of Al Karadawi.

'Police were around the mosque because after Prayers, different nationalities fight each other and want to take power. I was asked to preach and I said I hoped the police wouldn't be needed. I preached about all people being children of God and

people are more holy than any holy place. If we destroy buildings they can be rebuilt, but if we kill a child we can't restore that life. We're not allowed into the UK because we don't support Saudi Arabia. I'm ready to go to UK and stand in front of Parliament and the media to clarify the facts of what is happening in Syria and the dangers to Europe.

'In 2007, I raised the point in the UK of the importance of producing British imams because those appointed from Saudi Arabia and Egypt come from closed societies. So the UK should establish an institution with a British-Islamic curriculum, instead of Saudi or Pakistani curricula. The Muslim Brotherhood is teaching their own countries' curriculum with pupils who do not know the UK.

'In my family, religion is a bridge to connect with others not a wall. So schools should educate the children in ethics and teach curriculum with the message that we have brothers and sisters throughout the world. I'm happy to help to develop the curriculum - for free!'

The murder of his son

'My son was murdered in 2012 when he was leaving the University. He was never armed. 15 armed men were waiting for him. I went to Aleppo and found my son was a martyr.

'I said I forgive those who killed my son. But I asked them to put down their weapons and come to talk. They replied they would kill me.

'I am Abel not Cain. I won't carry weapons and if they want to kill me, so be it.'

Terrorism in Syria

This is the Syria being destroyed by the media. Thousands of terrorists have been sent to fight here.

I have a niece from Raqqa who has seen people from the UK, and that if they want to return to their own countries they are killed. They are told to continue jihad in other countries including Europe. When Turkey invaded Jerabalus, terrorist soldiers shook hands with UK and US soldiers.

'Around 200,000 Ismaili's are here, but in areas taken by militants they have suffered massacres where hundreds have been kidnapped, burnt alive, tortured. Most have been forced to leave their areas and the majority are now in a place in the centre of Syria controlled by the Government fighting ISIS. Different militant Opposition factions are now collaborating to siege the city with c. 300,000 people only built to accommodate 1/3 of that number. So there is much agony there. What makes us strong is the hope we see in the eyes of the people.

'Opposition rebels supported by the international community burnt my homes and dug up bodies of family members from their graves.

'In Ar Raqqa, a 19 year old who had been trained in Saudi and Turkey slaughtered his mother.'

The Government

'I do not stand against Assad and his government because we are secularists in that we separate religion from politics. It shouldn't be for others to tell us what to do but we should decide our own future.'

Message for the BBC

'In the name of God, our Creator, Who says all human beings are brothers. Muslims are related to Mohammed, Christians to Jesus but all believers are related to God.

'You are my brother whoever you are, Buddhist, Christian, atheist, you are my brother.

'If there is a God, we will be asked one question on the Day of Judgement: did you love one another? So religion must be the bridge which connects us. So let's meet in mosques, churches and synagogues. If God exists, we have a God of love.

'If He doesn't, then let's begin to build love as heaven on earth. As a Muslim, I love Jesus, and I call you my brothers. Please let us stop fighting. Let's give our children flowers of love, not seeds of hatred, or they will ask us "Why didn't you teach us how to love so that our flowers will be your perfume?".'

SATURDAY 3RD SEPTEMBER

THE PRESIDENT

Terrorism in the Middle East needs to be seen as an assault against plurality and democracy.

Regime change

'What is the alternative? The God of ISIS isn't the God of Christians or moderate Muslims. It is impossible to talk about tolerance with extremists.'

Women

'The extremist Islamist ideology places women as second class citizen and treats them as property. As a Government I have women in key positions, like my adviser.'

The role of the international community

'After the Arab Spring, it became clear that democracy is not enough as it can become a tyranny of majorities. I asked the West not to send the Army but to send culture in order to promote democracy.'

'Even our more moderate Sunni sects are influenced by Wahhabism.'

The work of the Ministry of Reconciliation

'We must put emotions aside because love and hate are strong influences. Reconciliation is most important for the families of victims, especially if they are able to say that despite the loss of a loved one they don't seek revenge.'

'It has been Government policy to give an Amnesty to Opposition fighters and allow them to return to normal life. This process has been accelerating and many militants have joined or supported the Syrian Army - and some of these have died. Others have returned to normal life. This is the only hope for the future. Hundreds of small villages joined in this process.'

Civil society

'This is growing. There are 14 political parties, but they are not very active and there are now more than 1500 NGOs.'

Dialogue

'Dialogue must involve the new generation which has been brought up in an atmosphere of killing and hate. Addressing this problem is a priority.'

The huge number of casualties and people in trauma

'This is associated with the high level of involvement by external powers and foreign fighters.'

The significance of external influence

'This is most significant. The majority of militia leaders are foreign, including some from Norway. Ideology knows no borders. 80 percent of recruitment is now via the Internet and this is a problem which needs to be addressed inside Western nations. The Syrian problem could be solved in one year without external influence.'

Conditions in prisons and torture of detainees

'Before the crisis there were not so many prisoners, so conditions were not as bad regarding space and health care. Now there are many more prisoners so conditions are bad.'

'With the increase in numbers, it is difficult to provide adequate conditions. We try to solve the problems but only have partial success. So we have given amnesty to reduce numbers. Many members of the public are angry, saying that'

the President is giving freedom to killers and criminals. Tens of thousands have been released. Some are killers, but because of the crisis some people may be sent to gaol without good reason.

'We are also trying to accelerate the judicial process because some people have been held without trial. The situation is better than before and every few months there is amnesty. This also helps reconciliation. But we still do have problems. We live in war.'

Reconciliation

'Now the people are much more positive about reconciliation. They are exhausted and want reconciliation. But Saudi money tries to stop this.'

The Amnesty International report concerning 27,000 prisoners and torture

'The Amnesty International report is not correct. They say this is the situation but how can we torture thousands and release thousands? The families of militants have joined the government. How could I torture them? If I torture prisoners the people will know and militants will fight harder and prefer to die. I can't have the ability to torture 20,000.'

A visit by the ICRC to prisons

'I would be willing to agree to a visit by impartial investigators. But many reporters, including some from USA, have come and had interviews but they weren't objective. If an international team without an agenda and bias will come, that would be acceptable.'

Legacy to nation and how to achieve reconciliation and healing

'The war is being fought to save the nation from terrorists - and polarisation and desperation. When I became President, my priority was to promote culture and individual freedoms and to open the minds of citizens so they can accept differences such as a woman with a bikini working alongside a woman in a burka.'

The economy

'The main thing Islamists use is poverty. If the economy is not good, Saudi Arabia will use money to convert people to their ideology, so poverty is very useful for Islamists as people need to eat. Therefore, it is important to develop the economy.'

'Although in the short term this will expand inequality, it will improve in the longer term. My longer term priorities are culture and education. My father promoted education but it is more difficult now because there is much more widespread Wahhabi indoctrination.'

Reports of barrel bombs by the Government killing civilians

'Reports of Barrel bombs are used to influence opinion. We don't have these and we do not use indiscriminate bombardment. Every war is bad and civilians are killed, especially in cities. But if I want to attack civilians, this will be against my interests because civilians will not like me and therefore they will not support me. If civilians are killed it is by mistake and there is a difference between mistake and policy.'

Statistics

'We don't have statistics of refugees but it is estimated there are 4-6 million IDPs.'

Conclusion

'Yes, I have made mistakes but we are trying to put into place policies to promote civil society and the well-being of citizens. For example, there is free education and health care for all citizens.'

SUNDAY 4TH SEPTEMBER

THE GOVERNOR OF ALEPPO

Terrorism

'We have to lobby governments that have taken a stand fighting terrorism. It's important to realise that terrorism doesn't respect any religion or geography so terrorists will attack anywhere.'

Support for the Government and President

'The Syrian people stand side by side with the Syrian Army which is our Army of Heroes. We send a message that we love the President, we respect him, and we elected him. We won't allow any intervention which goes against the will and wishes of the Syrian people.'

MEMBERS OF THE MEDICAL DOCTORS' COUNCIL MEETING IN ALEPPO

The doctors welcomed us very warmly, saying they were delighted we had come to see the situation. They included

specialist representatives in hospitals which had been destroyed by terrorists.

Concerns over media propaganda led by the US, UK and Turkey

‘There is a media war against Syria, so you won't hear what's happening in Government-controlled areas. The Syrian national media tells the truth but this is not allowed to reach people in the West. Your presence here is important as you will see the reality and tell it.’



Images of the Destruction of Aleppo

The general situation in Aleppo

'You always hear about only one paediatrician in Aleppo, but there are 250 paediatricians now active in Aleppo. However, there are 4,260 doctors in Aleppo with 3,150 active doctors from all specialties. 20 hospitals have been destroyed by terrorists. But there are still 6 active public hospitals and around 40 small private hospitals.'

Account of an example of a terrorist attack by the Head of a mental health hospital in the North

'I was working in the Hospital which was in a Government-controlled area until 2012 with all my staff. We were giving all services to patients. Then Daesh attacked: they bombed and took patients as hostages. They looted and sold most of the equipment and destroyed ECG equipment. One patient was bipolar and doing well but she was raped; then she had a baby by the man who raped her. She is Christian but was forced to become Muslim. She was then divorced and she returned to hospital with PTSD.

The Syrian Army retook the hospital and returned it to us with 1 million dollars to rebuild it. We now have 100 patients.

'Even in war-torn areas under terrorist control we provide some medicines and treatment. All hospitals were being destroyed before the Russians came to help us.'

The effect of sanctions on medical supplies

'There are huge shortages of medicines and equipment in public and private hospitals, including MRI machines. Our priorities are spare parts for equipment. Much of the aid given by WHO and all resources given by Saudi Arabia or Turkey goes to the terrorists.'



Church Service in Aleppo

MEMBERS OF THE YAZIDI COMMUNITY IN ALEPPO

Their experience

'The Syrian Government supported us when we were attacked by ISIS and Turkey. Our village near Afreen was attacked by ISIS because we are Yazidis and they killed more than 10 families. The rest of the villagers had to flee for their lives.'

Their message

'We are minorities here in Syria so please protect the minorities and keep Turkey away from us.'

LATAKIA

The University now has 160,000 students (only 60,000 before the war) and a famous teaching hospital with 800 beds. There are also seven public hospitals in the city.

The current situation in Latakia

‘A new hospital was opened last year at the height of the war. Many people came here for safe haven from other cities. There are doctors, teachers, engineers; handicraft and local people share their homes, food, water, schools with the families of soldiers who have gone to fight.



Children of Aleppo singing in the Armenian Evangelical Church

'Health care is provided for free for all, including expensive operations and transport - even to and from war zones. The Government provides electricity and bread for all.

'There are over 1000,000 IDPs and only 4,000 in Centres. The rest are in homes. In the Centres, all services are provided, including schools, health care and employment. The Centres are located in the best possible conditions such as the city's sports centre.

'There hasn't been a single incident of violence against local people, whatever their background. People can go freely to the market and they will be safe.'

The war

'We have suffered greatly from terrorism and shameful massacres, especially in Kessab and the northern region which was attacked by terrorists (mostly foreigners) committing heinous crimes, slaughtering people, cutting bodies into parts and burning some alive. Even women and children were not safe.

'Thanks to the Syrian Army, we were able to defeat the terrorists, except for one area near the Turkish border where the terrorists are protected by Turkey.

'Without the Syrian Army we could not have resisted terrorism for so many years. We suffer suicide bombs daily with 4 yesterday. When such terrorist attacks occur we hear no word of condemnation from the UK or elsewhere.'

Wider implications of the war in Syria

'What is happening in Syria is not just terrorism attacking Syria but the whole world, and the countries supporting terrorism in Syria will suffer from terrorism in their own countries.'

'More dangerous than armed terrorism is the ideology affecting the next generation. Syria is committed to reconciliation. We recognise we are all Syrians and we will always welcome those who have left even if they have been fighters against us. We fight terrorism on behalf of the whole world.'

'I'm talking on behalf of all the suffering Syrian people. We shake hands with all countries who will help to end the terrorist war.'

'I thank all people who stand with Syria and everyone who supports us with aid such as UN aid organisations and good people who come to see the reality.'

IDPS IN LATAKIA

Arrangements were made for us to visit some of the IDPs living in Latakia.

The Government has provided accommodation in the buildings of a sports complex, where each family has a room. There are facilities for cooking as well as running water, showers and lavatories. The Government runs a kindergarten for the children with other small local NGOs and the Patriarchate of Antioch brings milk. The people living there were not given advance notice of our visit so we were able to see the situation as it would be on any ordinary day.



Baroness Cox and one of the IDPs in Latakia

We were welcomed by one of the administrators who told us that they had fled from Idleb and some have been here since January 1st, 2013.

He described what had happened:

'Back home, we were besieged for 2 years by Nusra, Ahrar al sham, no FSA, Nur-ud-din zenki and ran out of all supplies, including food.

'The Jihadists stopped all food supplies and placed snipers in mountains who shot us. We had to put the bodies of those who died in houses. We had no medical care for those who were wounded and we had to use clothes as bandages.

'In two months, 250 people were killed by snipers, mortars and tanks and at least 300-400 were injured – some with minor wounds and others with severe injuries. After the continuous siege we decided to escape from the village. As we ran, some went to the Turkish border, some to Idleb. 130 of those who fled to Idleb were captured and killed. Those who fled to Turkey had relatives there who helped them. Then the Syrian government brought us here and provided this accommodation.'

'The media say that the majority of IDPs flee from the brutality of the Syrian government. But we had safety. I don't need the freedom the Jihadists are calling for as we already had freedom. Please help us by leaving us alone. We have enough of their freedom.'

Some of the women then told us their experiences:

Fadila: *'We were besieged by terrorist groups supported by Turkey, attacking us with all kinds of weapons. My husband was helping the Army to defend us and he was killed by a sniper. I have seven children and I hope we will return soon. The town I came from has two parts. One part helped the terrorists but the majority resisted.'*

Fatima Mahmoud: *'We were under siege and on December 24th, 2012 I fled with all the people of the village at night. As women we were divided into two parts and we arrived safely. The rest were captured and killed, including my three children, aged 48, 42 and 37. They all had children who are with their mothers under the protection of the Government here.'*

Aysha Mahmoud: *'I lost my son aged 25 and my husband aged 52. When we escaped they were captured and killed by beheading. My husband was caught, beaten and shot with 50*

bullets. My brother and my brother's son were also killed the same way.'

MONDAY 5TH SEPTEMBER

THE MINISTER FOR RECONCILIATION

The Minister is a medical ophthalmic specialist and was in clinical practice until he became a Minister. He was also Chairman of a political activist Opposition Party since 1972, the Syrian Social National Party [To avoid confusion, there are two Parties with the same name. The other is fighting with the Syrian Army.]

He welcomed us, saying he is always pleased to meet visitors who voluntarily come to Syria to see with their own eyes, looking for real stories.

He said: *'We have been ignored by the international media.'*

Introduction of reconciliation initiatives

'Being a political party in opposition, we thought we could help with reconciliation as we have members from different religions and ethnic backgrounds.'

'When the Syrian crisis began 15/3/2011, we soon warned fellow Syrians that violence isn't an option and we began reconciliation understanding.'

'Our main idea is that there is no resolution except political. Violence will not achieve any resolution.'

'In June 2012, there was an opportunity to form a new government and our Party was invited to participate. We said

we could only make effective contribution in a Ministry of Reconciliation.

'We have two objectives: local reconciliation between neighbouring areas and national political dialogue.

'We believe that the only solution is political and that the local initiatives would pave the way for national reconciliation. Now, the main focus is on the local level. It's a long, painstaking process and differs from one area to another according to the nature of local groups. The first priority is to ensure groups are not caught in the crossfire between fighting forces.'

Practical steps

1. *'Choose an area and initiate direct contact with fighting groups. If they refuse, we find local religious or other leaders to mediate.*
2. *'The goal is to achieve a situation where the area is free of weapons and armed militias.*
3. *'We have to address the problem of foreign fighters who create a situation where Syrians are financed by foreigners and their ideologies.*
4. *'If there are any foreigners, the first step is to get them out of the area because they are anti-reconciliation.*
5. *'Locals are given the choice to continue with foreign fighters or to leave fighting and to join the Syrian Army or authorities such as the police. Many have chosen the former and have lost their lives.*

6. *'Once the fighters have left, the priority is to maintain stability and to ensure there are no illegal weapons in the area.*
7. *'The usual services provided for civilians such as education, medical care and electricity will be restored and resumed and the two major services of education and medical care are provided free of charge for all. The presence of these is an indication of the success of reconciliation.*
8. *'We need to address the much more difficult and painful issues of the dead, missing and kidnapped. We establish local Communications Committees to liaise with Government Departments to help life to return to normal.*
9. *'The ultimate target is to ease tensions and pave the way for national and international reconciliation.*
10. *'Re IDPs: we help to provide support and communication with guarantees of safety of return for those who fled abroad, including leaders of Opposition who have returned to Syria.'*

External negative influences and the possibility of national dialogue when foreign states are pouring in massive money and weaponry

'Some people argued that the reconciliation process should start after the war is over, because of the extent of foreign intervention with money and weapons, which hinders not only the reconciliation process but also an end of war. There is now involvement of other nations with their own interests. But we have achieved success in many areas.

'If we can save some lives we regard this as a positive development. We seek Islands of Peace. The President is very positive regarding this idea.'

Sieges and the question regarding UK media reports of Government sieges, with people eating grass and no access by aid organisations and how reconciliation work can be undertaken there

'We're aware of such media attacks and I'm banned from Europe. We need to prove it's the civilians/citizens who are benefiting. We also need to understand that this is not one-sided. Major cities are besieged and the Government is dropping food by air. This issue is being used as a political rather than humanitarian weapon.'

'During the preparations for Geneva 1, the whole world was talking about the siege of Homs and people eating grass. This was not the case. Similarly, there were stories of other cities, but the plight of 2 cities besieged by the Opposition was ignored.'

'The Syrian Army allowed access by ICRC in November 15 and there were public statements by ICRC that there was enough food and medicine for months. But the militia used to sell these at high prices and use them as blackmail to force families to send their sons to become fighters for the terrorists. When ICRC could evacuate ill people, they spoke openly about their treatment by the terrorists and the enforced military service of sons.'

'57 lorries of food were recently sent to another city which was hijacked on route. Similarly, truckloads of food to Duma were sent but were hijacked by terrorist fighters. A few days later there were media stories about people eating grass.'

‘Another scandal: 3 weeks ago, the UN and ICRC claimed there were 10,000 civilians in Darayya and food was allowed in. When the town was liberated, there were 1,826 people there of whom 1,200 were fighters.

‘There were only 490 civilians. They are now living in temporary shelter provided by the Government - and they are the wives and families of the fighters.

‘I’m not saying all is good. There is suffering. But the main cause is the armed groups in these areas because they refuse to allow the UN and ICRC to supervise distribution.’

Prevention of access by aid organisations

‘In Aleppo, armed groups would only allow any distribution of aid if it comes directly to them. Also, they insist it comes from Turkey, and we know that previously aid has been mixed with weapons.’

Failure

‘In some areas, the process gets stuck at various phases and in some cases it has failed. Reasons include foreign intervention and direct instructions to stop the process and/or new groups arriving to stop it. For example, in the city of Qudsaya near Damascus, the process was almost complete but was stopped by fighters, by Turkey.’

How the process works and dangers for the teams

‘Manpower is limited so we depend on volunteers who are prepared to take risks. They are also much more efficient than paid employees. They include faith communities. Many are victims who’ve lost loved ones (including the Minister who lost his son). They really feel commitment. My son was a leader of

a demonstration at his university. His slogan was “Oh gun, you have stolen our revolution.” This was the reason for his assassination.’

Whether a moderate armed opposition exists and if they are responsive to these efforts

‘The only difference between armed Opposition groups is their method of killing: One slaughters by beheadings, the other by shooting. There is no moderate armed Opposition in Syria. We can prove this. Fighters trained by the U.S. and in Turkey and Jordan come with huge numbers of weapons when they return they take them with them for Daesh or other groups. All antitank missiles given to ‘Moderates’ are given to Daesh so the West is supplying the terrorists. All the groups in Aleppo are fighting together under one leadership, Jabhat Alnasra.

‘The atrocities perpetrated by ‘Moderates’ are as bad as those of Daesh but the media doesn't cover those.’

Political ideologies

‘These are the same as Al Qaeda. It is in Europe's interest to have Syria as a moderate nation, not a place for “Moderate terrorists”, so this is how the West should evaluate the nature of these groups and their influence. It is the duty of European people to assess this.’

LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION DR ELIAN MOUSOUD

Dr. Mousoud is a Medical Specialist in Internal Diseases. He joined the National Congress for a Secular Syria.

Political agenda

'The crisis started in 1946 with Independence. We now have programmes to finish the war and crisis. Many Arab countries are dictatorships without democratic regimes, with no respect for human rights. Sadly we are surrounded. From one year ago until now the State has been tolerant with us Opposition. We want changes to the present Constitution; also laws relating to local government. There are 16 laws which this Opposition wants changed. But we want to achieve these changes democratically.

'The armed Opposition wants to use violence. If they want change they should go to the ballots. Must I take up arms to be heard? I want to change laws for the benefit of Syria.

'I asked President Assad what he would do if we win or he wins. He said he would follow the will of the people.

'As Leader of Opposition, I accept Vienna 1 & 3 and UNSC Resolutions and the roadmap for Syria, and we have declared we are ready to help to prepare a draft Constitution, as agreed in Vienna.

'We're ready to sit with anybody and to cooperate with armed groups who will disarm.

'Unfortunately Obama recognises armed opposition. We consider the people of countries to be human. There is a media and political blockade against us. The UK attitude is the same.

'The USA is using hypocrisy as it knows that ISIS is based on violence. It is using ISIS to pressure the Syrian people. They claim the regime is a dictatorship. I may agree but they want an even greater dictatorship.

'Also, unless Turkey stops smuggling arms to ISIS and other armed groups, the war will not end.

'We have a plan for peace. We ask USA and Russia to help. We want a General Election, national reconciliation and return of IDPs.

'The international community doesn't want to end the war but to maintain areas of influence for other nations such as USA, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. In the future, people will say that the President saved the world from terrorism, not only the Middle East'.

International media

'There is media blockade against domestic opposition in Syria. BBC, CNN and others won't take one word from us, just the statements of the Opposition which uses violence and they are therefore weakening the unarmed democratic opposition which wants a peaceful solution. But they only listen to those who use violence. Maybe the Opposition outside Syria isn't armed itself but represents the interest of the violent Opposition.'

Chemical weapons

'All sides have used chemical weapons. The Syrian government put its chemical weapons facilities under inspection after an accusation of their use a few years ago. But the Opposition fire Hell Fire canons randomly into Government held areas which kill many people indiscriminately. These are gas cylinders which are cut in half and filled with screws, nails etc. which explode like cluster bombs.'

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

A young man who is working to promote better understanding of the situation whose girlfriend was killed in Homs in 2011.

His girlfriend was a student in Homs, returning from university in a taxi with another girl student. One was Alawite and one was a Christian. Both were wearing symbols of their faiths. They were kidnapped and their bodies were found in the street three days later.

Also, this young man's brother was a university student who was kidnapped, beaten, tortured by destruction of his knee joint and incarcerated in a crowded room with many other hostages, with no sanitation or food. He was released after payment of a ransom of \$10,000 which had to be collected from family members. He would have died if left in those conditions for many more days. He was in a very bad state, having lost so much weight and he was deeply traumatised. Although he has recovered physically he is still traumatised and hardly speaks.

Four weeks ago, this young man suffered from an explosion while driving, which was so powerful that he was thrown 10 metres into the air and he landed on his neck, which is still giving him pain; at the same time, his friend lost one leg and has had an above-knee amputation.

Antoinette, a young woman in Maaloula

She was woken in the morning by shouts of 'Allahu – Akhbar'. Her house was attacked on July 7th 2013 and her brother and 2 other relatives were slaughtered: Anton aged 40, Michael in his 50s and Sarkis aged 22.

'The terrorists broke down the doors and came in. We were sitting in this room when they broke the door. Our house is old-fashioned so there is a cave. When we heard the shouts we hid in the cave. Someone who originally came from here knew about the home and told the terrorists we were there. They told us to come out and we'd be safe. The three men came to the balcony. I stayed in the room in the corner. They started shooting and a bullet ricocheted and hit me in the chest and I hid under the table. They kept shooting and threw a hand grenade and shrapnel which wounded my arm, breaking my elbow.

'When the three men came out of the room the terrorists asked where their weapons were and my brother said he was only a child and could not join army and so he had no weapons. They then said: "Either convert to Islam or we kill you" Michael said "I'm Christian and I will stay a Christian."

'They were then forced to stand against the wall and were shot immediately. After they killed the three men, they saw the door and thought people had fled there so went after them.

'My cousin Sarkis who was still hiding in the cave came out and I told him I'm wounded so he called the Civil Defence men and they came to help me. I stayed here from 9am until 2pm. I was then carried to the street and the Army took me to a First Aid post but they couldn't remove the bullet from my chest so I was taken to a Hospital.

'I left the Hospital to attend the funeral of my brother and other relatives. The terrorists also kidnapped six other people and still no one knows where they are.'

The atrocities were perpetrated by soldiers of the Free Syrian Army and Ahrar Idleb.

The son of the victim at a funeral receiving condolences in the Syriac Orthodox church.

'My Dad is dentist. Family of four, my parents and two sons are dentists.

'The situation was stable until ISIS wanted to occupy Jazeera. They couldn't take the city. After two-three weeks, the fighting started in all the streets. Dad and Mum heard very loud bombing so they hid in the basement. Then a rocket hit cars in the garage. Dad said he couldn't see anything and it was all smoke and then he saw fire and knew it was Mum burning. He tried to extinguish the flames and burning clothes on Mum's body. They couldn't get out. One brave neighbour broke the glass window and rescued my Mum and Dad.

'They took them to the nearest hospital where the medical care couldn't treat the injuries so they took them to Armorisja, but both parents suffered 65 Grade two and three percent burns, which had taken all the tissue from Mum's leg. My parents were then transferred by military plane to Damascus. My Mum got an infection, her burns were too many, so she succumbed to shock and died on Tuesday. I came on Wednesday. Dad is still in hospital and his condition is very bad.

'Four-five years ago we never experienced situations like this. Then we were living in peace'.

A PERSONAL VIEW

Serena, a young woman in Damascus speaking passionately about her fears for the plight of women if the Government is removed and replaced by Islamist rule:

'Well, you've walked here in the streets and you saw Syrian females. We have the total freedom to dress the way we want, to eat what we want and to get appropriate education and medical care. We choose our own way of life.'

'Females' situation in Syria is perfectly good. And it was so before the crisis too. Now in some areas which are under the control of Daesh (ISIS), females are really suffering: they are not allowed to get education or practice their rights under the control of the extremist mentality.'

If the regime changed here in Syria and these extremists took control of everything, just imagine how miserable life would be for us, the females! We won't even be able to walk in the street without a male accompanying us! Females will be forced to stay at home and oppressed. Imagine yourself in this situation!'



CONCLUSION

We were invited to visit Syria by leaders of different faith communities, both Christian and Muslims.

The purpose of our visit was primarily pastoral: to meet a wide range of Syrian people in different locations, to hear their experiences and to tell their stories.

This report documents their accounts of their situation and the messages they have asked us to convey to the wider world. Their suffering is widespread and horrific.

They are deeply concerned about their perception of media coverage focussing on the suffering caused by the Government Army, creating inaccurate impressions of one-sided brutality. They also see this is part of bigger agenda to demonise President Assad.

We acknowledge that President Assad has been accused of perpetrating atrocities and caused much suffering. But he admits his failures and discusses proposals to reform and improve the situation – such as reconciliation initiatives, some of which are already successful.

We also met Ministers in Opposition who wish to see many reforms, but they do not wish to see ‘Regime Change’ which would result in the removal of President Assad by external powers.

The alternative Opposition, including the so-called ‘Moderate Opposition’ are also carrying out war-related brutalities, including the use of chemical weapons (gas canisters). As one person told us, the Opposition factions kill in different ways –

shooting, bombing or beheading. They also perpetrate horrific atrocities of torture, rape, and beheadings.

The extent of the casualties caused by the Opposition forces is under-reported, as illustrated by the scale of killings on the days we were there which received no media coverage to our knowledge. All the people whom we met, including leaders of different faith communities as well as the genuinely moderate Opposition who do not take up arms, agree that the Syrian people should have the right to choose their own President and Government and that the international community should not interfere with their democratic rights.

Everyone to whom we spoke is passionately against any Regime Change, such as that supported by the UK, arguing that the alternative would be disastrous. Even if a genuinely moderate Opposition were to gain some power, this would be rapidly taken over by Islamist fundamentalists and the nation would disintegrate into an Islamist dominated chaotic situation.

They also argue that the support for Islamist factions currently being provided by countries such as the UK and USA is not only deeply damaging for the Syrian people but also will be harmful to the West by helping to disseminate Islamist extremism worldwide.

We returned deeply disturbed by the massive suffering of the people of Syria; by the policies of countries such as the UK which are seen by all whom we met to aggravate the present situation and to be dangerous for future developments in Syria and by the lack of balanced representation of this profoundly complex and utterly tragic situation.

APPENDIX

The Rape of Kessab, by Dr Declan Hayes

Kessab's descent into hell began at 5.30am precisely on March 21st 2014, when merciless shelling from the Turkish side of the Syrian border rained down on the undefended Armenian village, not only sending its 2,000 residents into panic but portending the apocalypse that was about to befall them.

Over 20,000 fanatics from al Nusra, the Free Syrian Army and a number of other extremist groups swarmed over the border on motor bikes, pick-up trucks and Western ambulances converted into troop- and munitions- carriers for this blitzkrieg. Though hopelessly outnumbered, lightly-armed Syrian troops held off the invaders until the inhabitants could be evacuated. Sunnis, Shias, Alawites and Armenian Christians all fled for their lives from these fanatics who some Western commentators still insist, against not only all the evidence but against common sense as well, are progressive liberators; several Kessab residents, such as Hovian Khatcherian, found themselves fleeing from these Islamic hordes for the third time, having previously been forced to flee Raqaa and Aleppo for their life. Such are the perils that are part and parcel of daily life for the Levant's remaining Christians and for which there seems to be so little pro-active sympathy beyond Syria's borders.

The 'liberators' systematically desecrated all Kessab's churches, they looted the village's graves, they scattered the bones of the deceased around the town for stray dogs to scavenge on, they stripped every house and outhouse of anything of value, window and door frames included, and these fanatical despots even hoodwinked the West's press into praising their actions as some

sort of praiseworthy activity against the supposedly tyrannical regime in far-away Damascus.

Kessab's very elderly residents, who were too infirm to flee, were ferried, against their wishes, into Turkey and, like the earlier kidnapped nuns of Ma'lulah, were cynically paraded to pretend their kidnapers had their interests at heart. Pepken Djourian and his wife find that a particularly bitter pill to swallow as the invaders executed their only son in front of them and let him rot for three days in the sun before throwing him like a dog into a hastily dug hole in their apple orchard, a particularly apt analogy as his murderer said that Kevork's death meant they "had one less Armenian dog to worry about". Following his murder, Kevork's parents were held against their will for the next forty days in Turkey, where their kidnapers even brought Turkey's American ambassador to admire how well they were being treated and where noted author Nizar Khalil willingly acted as interpreter between the aged Armenian captives and their Turkish captors.

Kessab's residents are convinced all of this was done with the full connivance of the Turkish government. Kessab is in the very north-west tip of Syria and there is no other way to attack it than with the permission of the Turkish authorities through the heavily-militarized hills of nearby Turkey. Indeed, Samuel Poladian, who stayed in Kessab for the entire occupation, lives only 200 metres from a Turkish police station and, like all the others, he not only claims he heard Turkish military helicopters overhead on the morning of the invasion but that Turkey orchestrated the whole outrage. Because the Turkish side of the border is speckled with countless army outposts and because not even one of the invaders nor one of the looters was arrested or even detained on the Turkish side of the border, their claims and their contrary narrative are much more credible than Turkey's lame excuses for these crimes.

The Armenians claim the Kessab outrage, which was directed solely against Armenian Christians, was Turkey's brutal way of showing the Armenians and the Syrian government and army which protect them that, just as in 1909 and in 1915, they can occupy Kasab and slaughter its inhabitants at will any time they choose to. The wilful destruction of the centre of Kessab, together with all its churches, makes sense within that framework. What does not make sense to the people of Kessab, or to those of the Aramaic-speaking town of Ma'lulah I visited a few days earlier is why they have been so completely and utterly abandoned by the Christians of the West, so much so that the departing fanatics booby-trapped the entire town of Ma'lulah with bombs marked as donations to the Free Syrian Army by the European Union. Neither of these ransacked Christian towns has received even one penny in aid from the West, which seems to focus its relief efforts on the refugee camps the rebel extremists and their Turkish hosts control and use as forward bases to attack those they denigrate and dehumanize as "Cross worshippers" and who we should regard as fellow human beings we are duty-bound to help.

Though the Syrian Arab Army retook Kessab on 15 June 2014, the Armenians' nightmare has not ended. Less than 800 of Kasab's more than 2000 residents have returned to their wrecked and looted homes, the schools are bereft not only of all teaching materials, the liberators having burned the lot of it, but also of the wherewithal to replace them with, their orchards, their means of making a living stand fallow, the trees being more "collateral damage" caused by their erstwhile "liberators" who have promised to return again with a vengeance, the Western world, together with the Armenian diaspora, have other "more important" things to concern themselves with, their tormentors commit stomach-churning atrocities on a daily basis and Turkey and other sinister forces lurk in the long grass, waiting to strike at the defenceless Christian Armenians of Kessab whenever is most opportune for their nefarious agendas.

Unless people of goodwill act, the Christians of Syria will follow the Christians of Iraq and Turkey itself into the trash can of history. Syria shows that the maxim that, for evil to prosper, it is only necessary for people of goodwill to do nothing remains as true as ever. Islamic extremists are using funds collected in the West to wage wars of extermination on the minorities of Syria, Iraq, Northern Nigeria, the Central African Republic and a number of other communities and countries that have been targeted for destruction. April 24, 2015 marked the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide which Armenians worldwide commemorated and used to call for an end to such unspeakable acts of terror. We should join them not only in that call but into the calls for help by the people of Kessab, of Maaloulah and of all of Syria and Iraq.

Dr Declan Hayes is currently on his third trip to Syria this year. He helped organise a conference in Damascus for April 24th 2015, tentatively called: *Syria: Between Destruction and Reconstruction* to mark the murder of all Syria's innocents and to help plot a way forward out of the morass. He may be reached at londonhayes@gmail.com