



Planting Seeds in Syria

Tony O'Riordan SJ is director of Jesuit Refugee Services in Syria.

'Life in Syria today is harder than at any time in the last twelve years.' This is the oft-repeated conclusion of so many of the people accompanied by JRS in Syria. I remember vividly the stark statement of one young man I was talking to, 'Give us back the bombing, at least then we had some chance of survival.' Today people feel under a relentless pressure, what the Pope's ambassador to Syria has described as the 'bomb of poverty'.

Over half a million people died over almost a decade of war in Syria. Compared to the horrific levels of generalised violence that spanned the years 2011–2017, Syria today is less violent. Now people suffer and die out of view of the international media. A lasting political solution to a war that has involved so many factions has proven elusive, making it difficult to tackle poverty.

Over 13 million Syrians have fled the country or are internally displaced. Children are dropping out of school to work. Early marriages are on the rise, especially among impoverished families. Improvements in access to education and healthcare may be eroded.

90% of the population in Syria live below the poverty line. Three quarters

Al Marjeh Square in Damascus



of all households cannot meet their basic needs. Since Russia invaded Ukraine, the situation has gotten even worse. The price of bread is 3,000 SYP per kilo and rising. To put this in context, the highest household income of public sector worker is less than 100,000 SYP per month. The cost of bread alone can burn through someone's monthly income.

These compound challenges of survival are complicated by the divides that exist along religious, ethnic, clan and cultural lines. We often forget that Syria is the birthplace of Christianity: Paul was travelling to Damascus when he encountered the Risen Jesus, and Syria is home to the oldest Christian communities. Although the number of Christians has shrunk significantly since the war, Syria remains a



country where Christians and Muslims co-exist in relative peace.

However, this rich diversity that makes up Syrian society can and often does take the shape of a fractured and segregated society with potential for conflict and division. The scarcity of essentials, such as food, fuel, income, and healthcare, experienced by vulnerable population groupings, often living in the same neighbourhood, has the potential to exasperate divides, sectarianisms and social fragmentation.

The perceived and actual allegiances of different sections of the population during the conflict has added a new cause of tension to the long-standing dynamics shaped by membership of clan grouping, by

ethnic background such as Kurdish, Turkmen and by religious affiliation. The displacement caused by war has also added new sources of 'othering' – people can be assessed as belonging to either the 'host', 'displaced' or 'returnee' groupings. This classification of grouping adds another potential fault line in the diversity that makes up Syrian society.

Through its education and health programming, the JRS (Jesuit Refugee Service) seeks to accompany the poorest people and foster resilience and strategies to deal with the humanitarian crisis resulting from the economic crisis. In our community building programme JRS aims at fostering social cohesion and bridging divides across all potential social fault lines.

Across Syria in Damascus, Homs and Aleppo, JRS offer a 'safe space' within the neighbourhoods we work to invite people who share this same neighbourhood but are often mistrustful of each other. Men, women and teenagers come to the JRS Centre to pursue together ordinary activities of common interest. Helping women to read and write, supporting teenagers in accessing university, teaching some basic craft skills become moments of encounter and peacebuilding. In one of our buildings in Homs there is a poster that says, that says, 'Today we look not for the fruit, but in hope we plant seeds.' Our prayer is that one day these small seeds of encounter and mutual understanding will help overcome the divides that threaten peaceful co-existence in Syria 