

News from Syria

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'Life in Syria today is harder than at any time in the last twelve years.' I remember vividly the stark statement of one 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'.

Compared to the horrific levels of all-out war, spanning the years 2011–2017, Syria today is less violent. The grotesque trajectory, estimated at over half-a-million dead from over a decade of war, is largely now confined to a limited number of hot zones and sporadic incidents elsewhere. Now people suffer and die away from the glare of international news cameras. Over eleven years of war crisis has produced a range of interconnected and severe challenges that give the humanitarian crisis a new complexity and urgency.

Over thirteen million Syrians either fled the country or are internally displaced. Children are dropping out of school to work. Early marriages are on the rise, especially among the most



impoverished families. Improvements in access to education and healthcare are at risk of being eroded.

90% of the population in Syria live below the poverty line. It is impossible to meet basic daily needs for food, shelter, safety, medical care and education. Three quarters of all households cannot meet their basic needs. 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. Spending on bread alone can burn almost all the monthly income.

These compound challenges of survival resulting from poverty are complicated by the divides that exist along religious, ethnic, clan and cultural lines. Syrian society has long been acknowledged as a complex



A town near
Palmyra in Syria

tapestry of diversity of cultures, religions and ethnicities. We often forget that Syria is the birthplace of Christianity, – it was to Damascus that Paul was travelling 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 one of the countries in the Middle East where Christians and Muslims coexist 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 turn diversity into

a source of social fragmentation.

Large scale 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 yet another potential fault line in the complex diversity that makes up Syrian society.

Through its Education and Health Programming, JRS in Syria 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 seeks to accompany the people in a conscious way aimed at fostering social cohesion and bridging divides across all the potential social fault lines.

Across Syria in Damascus, Homs and Aleppo, JRS offer a ‘safe space’ within the neighbourhoods where we work to invite people who share this same neighbourhood but are often segregated and mistrustful of each other. Men, women and teenagers come to the JRS centre to pursue together ordinary development activities of common interest. Helping women to read and write, supporting teenagers’ access to 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, ‘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 can overcome the divides that threaten peaceful coexistence as Syria overcomes the catastrophe of war.