

With Refugees in Syria

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Old Bazaar, Suq Al Hamidiyah in Damascus, Syria

After fourteen years of war, the Syrian conflict has destroyed not only the country's infrastructure but also the roots of social relations and trust among Syrians. Syrian society has become completely fractured. This social divide has long-term impacts and consequences that will make it very difficult to reconcile and rebuild trust between the different groups in society.

In this context, the youth carry a heavy burden on their shoulders. Indeed, since the beginning of the war, hope has rested on young men and women to build the future of the

country and to support their families. Unfortunately, these young people have grown up in conditions that prevent them from realising their simple ambition of finishing their studies and finding a job. In the days of compulsory military service, young people put off finishing their studies as long as possible to avoid going to war. With the economic crisis, their academic ambitions have become one of their last concerns. Today, despite the end of the regime, nothing is certain for young people. For many, their only hope is to go abroad, no matter how difficult it is to travel. In this

reality, young people find themselves facing the big decisions of their lives without having the time or the means to discern their future. In short, young people are one of the main victims of these years of war, affected by insecurity, unemployment and the economic crisis.

In 2020, the Jesuits opened the Beit Alberto Hurtado SJ Centre in Jaramana, a suburb of Damascus. The choice of Jaramana stems from the desire to go to the apostolic frontiers: to a poor, working-class neighbourhood with great religious diversity, and to be close to those displaced by the war from all over Syria. Before the war, this neighbourhood was inhabited by a Druze majority with several minorities: Ismaili, Alawite, Christian etc., and had about 800,000 inhabitants. Today, Jaramana has more than 2.5 million inhabitants, the vast majority of whom are internally displaced persons from Idlib, Raqqa, Al-Hasakah, Homs, Hama etc.

Beit Alberto aims to be a response to one of the Universal Apostolic Preferences of the Society of Jesus: journeying with youth. These young Syrians are among the poorest, not only economically poor but also poor in hope and future. To accomplish this mission, Beit Alberto strives to be a place of encounter and support (educational, personal and spiritual development) where young people of all religions and social classes can meet and give meaning to their lives. A place that encourages young people to open up new horizons to build their future despite all their enormous challenges. A space that helps to mend the social fabric of a torn and polarised society.

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To achieve its objectives, Beit Alberto is opening a library for university students, with a fraternal atmosphere that helps them to work, study and be creative. It also organises various artistic workshops, educational and personal development training, and cultural, sporting and leisure activities. Finally, Beit Alberto also supports young people by offering spiritual activities such as retreats, weekends and prayers inspired by Jesuit spirituality.

The centre is called 'Beit Alberto Hurtado SJ' or 'Alberto's house' – a name that expresses what we Jesuits want for this space: we want to be more than an educational or cultural institute; we want to be a home for all, where each person is comfortable, respected and welcomed, and where each person finds their place. A home where everyone can live, share, create, converse and collaborate with others (Christians, Muslims, Druze etc.). After the end of the regime and in the face of the unknown consequences that have increased sensitivity to sectarianism, especially among minorities, Beit Alberto throws its doors open to everyone as a sign of a dream for the new Syria: a space for all, which seeks respect and the development of the human being in all its dimensions.