

Report about my visit to Syria (January 14-24, 2020)

Dear friends and supporters,

Please allow me to share with you the impressions gathered during my most recent visit to Syria. The security situation across the country has been improving, except for Idlib, where fighting is still going on. The poor economic situation burdens people everywhere and pushes them into ever greater poverty. Therefore, the temptation to seek a better life somewhere abroad is not yet banned, particularly among young and better qualified people. As Christians, we are called upon to help people on-site survive and rebuild their home country. We must not just stand by and watch.

My impressions can be categorized as follows:

1. Social and economic situation:

When you visit Syria today, the first thing you notice is that the poor economic situation has worn out and exhausted people. Poverty is present everywhere, although the war has ceased already a while ago in most parts of the country. There is a lack of jobs and most people have only sporadic income. Those who are hit most severely by the economic sanctions that are still in force are the very poorest of society. During the cold winter months you can feel the lack of heating oil everywhere. In the rural areas, the supply is particularly poor and very often electricity is cut off for many hours. Another obstacle regarding the supply of food, medication, energy, etc. is the enormous inflation (the rate of the US \$ is currently at SYP 1,000). The crisis in Lebanon is massively contributing to this currency devaluation.

2. Bakery of Grace in Maaruneh:

I visited the bakery building in progress and had discussions with the relevant experts on site.

A visit to the Minister of Internal Trade and Consumer Protection, for the purpose of obtaining an extension of the license for commissioning of the bakery, was successful. The extension was granted until June 19, 2020.

The application for subsidized flour for the operation of the bakery can only be submitted and approved later, i.e. close to the date of start-up. In any case, it is reassuring to know that, despite financial difficulties, the Syrian state is still highly committed to enable and support the production of bread. Subsidized flour is supplied to bakeries across the country, including in areas where fighting is still going on. The Bakery of Grace will initially produce bread for approximately 2,000 people (the



residents of Maaruneh). The quota for subsidized flour will initially be calculated for this number of people. All surrounding villages, which likewise do not have their own bakeries, will gradually register their demand, so that the flour quota for the Bakery of Grace will be increased step by step. The calculated maximum capacity in multi-shift operation is sufficient to provide bread for 10,000 families. At that point, the bakery will offer jobs for 40 people.

A detailed interim report on the state of the bakery as per February 6, 2020, including the further time schedule, was mailed out recently.

3. School for children with special needs:

During my visit to Syria, I also attended a special school of the “Community of Charity” in Damascus, which is looking after 45 mentally handicapped children aged 7 to 17 years. Most of these children were born with Down’s syndrome. In a meeting with the school principal, I learned that the future of the school is becoming increasingly precarious.



In the past, the funding of the school used to be secured mainly via those children who came from well-off families. At that time, two residential buildings were built as an investment tool in order to generate ongoing rental income. At the moment, hardly anyone can afford such rents, so that most of the time there is currently little or no rental income.



The school's required annual budget is 10 million SYP, the income from rents and school fees amounts to scarcely 8 million SYP. Some of the parents can no longer afford the current contributions, let alone an increase. For this reason, materials have not been purchased for a long time and the teachers are insufficiently remunerated, which entails the constant latent risk of losing qualified employees.

The school bus for taking students to the school and back home is desolate and extremely expensive to repair. In the foreseeable future, it will no longer be in service because of the horrendous and unaffordable repair costs. The school building is also in urgent need of repair wherever one looks.

The funds required for renovations are likewise missing.

In addition, there is a lack of normal and even of the most modest materials for handicraft training and playful learning.

The Foundation “Korbgemeinschaft – Hilfe für Syrien” has collected some suitable second-hand furniture and toys, which will be shipped to Syria with our next humanitarian goods container. These items will be handed over to this special school. For the school’s financial needs, contributions from donors are urgently needed.

4. Kindergartens



All of the kindergartens are privately run institutions. While recent increases in salaries (albeit moderate) have been made for employees at state schools and other state institutions, the Church currently doesn’t have the means for any salary increases. To make ends meet, the only option left is to reduce the kindergartens’ opening hours. The parish kindergartens (of which I know at least 15 personally),

where the children are very well prepared for school, are held in high esteem by everyone. They are financed by contributions from the parents. An increase in contributions, let alone additional payments for necessary renovation work, would financially overburden the parents. In case of increases, many children could no longer attend kindergartens.

5. Medical help

During my visit to Syria, questions regarding the availability and affordability of medication have been of special interest to me. That's why I visited a pharmaceutical factory, namely the company "Thameco" in Damascus (formerly the largest pharmaceutical company in Syria). The good news I heard was that many of the drugs that had no longer been available in recent years are now being produced again, – even drugs for cancer patients. Thankfully, most of the old pharmaceutical factories have been put back into operation and even some additional, new factories have been built.

Nevertheless, insufficient medical care is one of the main problems in Syria. Many families need medicines they can no longer afford, although prices are often kept very low compared to those in Western countries. Patients are hit most severely, when a drug has to be imported and paid for in foreign currency. Since the dollar exchange rate is high, such imported medicine becomes unaffordable for most people.

I also paid a visit to a pharmacist in Damascus. This pharmacist has agreed to provide patients – who come to her after consultation with me – with medicine at the purchase price. The cost of this is reimbursed to her from donations received by the Foundation “Korbgemeinschaft –



Hilfe für Syrien". The pharmacist told me about her concern that the prices of the raw materials that are needed for the manufacture of the pharmaceuticals, and which come mainly from abroad, could become more expensive.

6. Protection of vulnerable children:

For a friend involved in projects to protect endangered children, I made inquiries about particularly vulnerable children in Damascus. I discussed the topic in detail with several priests. Apart from the Christian ethical responsibility to protect children at risk, this topic is also of great social relevance. In any case, there is no doubt that abused, humiliated children who in some cases are already turning violent themselves may, if they do not receive appropriate help and guidance, very easily become potential criminals.

If a concrete aid project is developed in this sector for endangered children in Damascus, I will eventually write a separate article about this theme.



7. Support for youth:

Many young people in Syria are talented and eager to learn, but they don't see perspectives for a good future in their home country. Syria is thus losing more and more qualified people. Other young people can no longer afford even the relatively low tuition fees. Since we know that youth and education are important for the future of the country, we need to help quickly. The best option is to offer help for self-help, e.g. by creating small-sized and family-run businesses.

Concluding thoughts:

The current desolate situation in Syria could be a good chance for a new start for Christians there. When I look at the people in need, I think that Christians now are facing great challenges and numerous tasks. First of all, ideas are needed and subsequently the means to implement these ideas.

I look forward to your suggestions and recommendations and remain Yours gratefully
in Christ

Fr. Hanna Ghoneim

Vienna, February 18, 2020