

Solidarity with the Syrian People

Dear friends and supporters,

Today, March 15, 2021, marks the 10th anniversary of the so-called "Syrian Revolution". At that time, we really understood the uprisings of numerous Syrian citizens as a revolution and we were hoping for a better future. It later turned out that it had basically always been a matter of conflicting geopolitical and economic interests of other countries on Syrian soil. The Syrian population was unscrupulously exploited and "sacrificed" for these bloody purposes.

In retrospect, and when looking at the overall picture, we can see the following interconnections. In the beginning, people took to the streets, especially in the big cities, and called out for democracy, human rights, freedom of expression, etc. At that time, there was solidarity in the population until people noticed that Islamist calls for Islamist power were getting ever louder and the situation was escalating out of control. This is where the division within the Syrian population started. Some wanted to go back to the existing government in order to re-establish order, others wanted a radical Islamization. Indeed, there was also a small political opposition group that was, however, not very popular in the country. Most of the Syrians were backing the government. The Islamists sought help from abroad to oppose the power of the government. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the Emirates and Qatar were the countries that supported these Islamist groups financially, politically, logistically, with media connections and with weapon deliveries in order to overthrow the government. First they wanted to weaken the Syrian army. The Islamist officers deserted from the Syrian Army and formed their own army called the "Free Syrian Army" (FSA). Already at that time I asked myself: "In which country is there a "free" army that fights against the army of one's own country?!!" In fact, this FSA did not have a unified leadership. It was split up in itself. Every officer wanted as many territories as possible for himself and his troops or his family clan. The FSA consisted of many brigades who fought each other again and again for their own power advantage, which ultimately prevented them from overthrowing the Syrian army. Military support from abroad was inevitable. At the same time, one could observe that the roaring guns were drowning and eventually silencing people's calls for justice, democracy and human rights. With the formation of the FSA, every citizen was forced to choose to be either on the side of the government or on the side of the military opposition. Indeed, the Syrian people have been thoroughly divided over this "either-or" decision.

The military uniform initially did not reveal whether a soldier was a member of the Syrian Army or of the FSA. So many acts of violence and atrocities occurred during this time of division: bomb attacks, kidnappings, torture, and homicide attacks in the middle of the street. It was difficult to identify the perpetrators as all soldiers were wearing the same uniforms.

The FSA received military support from the Al-Qaeda terrorist group in Iraq. This so-called "Al-Nusra Front" (Nusra = support) came with countless jihadists from many nations around the world. They invaded Syria with huge amounts of arms and assimilated many of the FSA's Islamist brigades. They grew in power and succeeded in drawing large parts of the country, where the people had chosen Islamism and the Islamization of the state, onto their side.

The Al-Nusra Front wanted to establish a radical Islamic state in Syria and, according to their concept they wanted to "restore" the old rule of Islam. However, the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda in Iraq wanted the Al-Nusra Front to link Syria into the Islamic State in Iraq. This sparked a bloody conflict due to the contradictory interests of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) on the one hand and the Al-Nusra Front together with the FSA brigades on the other hand.

The ISI invaded Syria with many jihadists from all over the world (from Europe, Russia, North Africa, Arab states, etc.) using the expanded name ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria). This



happened two years after the outbreak of the so-called revolution. Words cannot describe the atrocities and terror perpetrated by ISIS. Many pictures on the Internet show the brutal behavior of ISIS against the Syrian people. ISIS succeeded in conquering large parts of Syria, including the big cities (Damascus, Aleppo, Homs). The population's fear of the ISIS coming to power was growing. This was the situation in 2015.

As a result, there was a massive wave of refugees going abroad. The Syrian government had to ask Russia for military help because many soldiers had deserted from their own army and many young men had panicked and left the country. The Russian military arrived at the behest of the government in September 2015. With the intervention of the Russians, the Syrian army was able to liberate many of the territories conquered by ISIS. The military war against the Islamists, Free Syrian Army, Al-Nusra Front and ISIS was officially ended in April 2018.

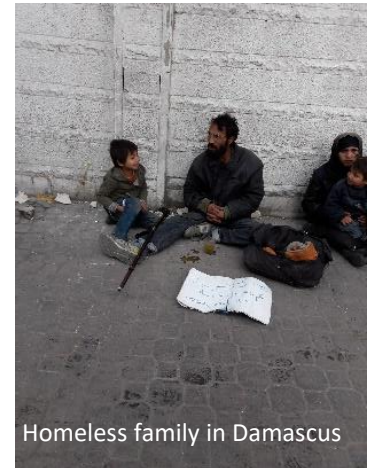


Today, the Islamists still have power in Idlib and the surrounding area. The Turkish government is controlling the political and military events there. In short, the military attempt to overthrow the government has failed. Another method of overthrowing the Assad regime followed, namely by weakening the economy. The economic sanctions on the part of the Americans and the European countries have been in place since the beginning of the revolution. They are currently being further tightened. The argument was that Assad was a despot and was killing his people, so he and his government had to be punished. Hardly anyone in the West seems to have looked closely at the unbelievable atrocities and their perpetrators. Instead of doing so, banking transactions were prohibited; many European companies have closed their companies and branch offices in Syria. The western countries are not allowed to import or export. All of this means high unemployment and rising inflation. This also means that everything will become more expensive. As a result, desperate people, especially the young

generation, still decide to turn their back on their home country, which at the same time causes a painful loss of a variety of professional qualifications.

With the worsening economic situation, the humanitarian situation became ever more desperate. The local currency is losing its purchasing power exponentially. Everything becomes expensive and is no longer affordable. The people are impoverished to the verge of famine. Their survival energy is dwindling.

In the face of this threat of starvation of an entire people, it is incomprehensible that the western countries are reacting with more severe economic sanctions instead of humanitarian aid. The governments in the west keep asserting the need to overthrow the Syrian government without having the faintest idea what is to come



Homeless family in Damascus



Aleppo

afterwards, without considering that the consequence might well mean a development from bad to worse, and above all without considering the plight of the civilian population. Russia and Iran are trying to keep the Syrian government. But they do not help the civilian population either.

The Syrian people have long noticed that this is a grim fight by foreign powers on Syrian soil, a geopolitical tug-of-war in the form of a bloody

proxy war. Today, a Syrian citizen is not interested in who rules, but in who can bring back the necessities of life. Even in the so-called “developed” democracies, politics evidently are dictated by economic interests, even if this is done at the expense of the poorest, at the expense of those who are least able to defend themselves.

After a veritable genocide with the participation of numerous countries, who will later claim to have supported the embargo measures only in the interest of “democracy, human rights and freedom of expression”, the history books will one day certainly come to a different conclusion. Is the “right of starvation” indeed so high up in the human rights list?

The Syrian people are tired of politics and of the resulting economic implications. The government can do little for the good of the people. The economic sanctions have destroyed the basis for social spending, education, medical care, public transport, etc. What civilians need is not some sort of lip service to human rights, but genuine help and solidarity.

Each one of you, dear friends and supporters, is sensing – from a deeply compassionate and Christian attitude – that sustainable solutions are now required in order to avert the extinction of the Syrian people. Sustainable reconstruction projects that create meaningful jobs, above all to keep the young people in the country, which will in turn ensure the care for the elderly and the sick. True brotherly and sisterly love in the form of lived Christian solidarity, regardless of any political calculations.

As a priest who is concerned about the Christians in Syria and who looks to Christ, I see that it is high time for the Church to start moving and to fulfil its task in the spirit of Christ, namely to stand on the side of the poor and to do something for them. I am convinced that the Church can indeed do a lot for the poor people who are “lying half dead by the wayside” and waiting for mercy. Therefore the call must get louder: Solidarity with the Syrian people!

I should like to add a few words about the Bakery of Grace: The dollar has meanwhile risen above the 4,000 mark, i.e. at today's exchange rate 1 \$ = 4,100 SYP. We still sell the bread for 100 SYP/kilo = 0.02 €. Of course the production cost is higher now. Even so, we haven't stopped producing bread to feed the poor. The Covid pandemic has additionally exacerbated the situation.



Bread from the Bakery of Grace

Soon we will add to the building a social market and a soup kitchen to provide the people with basic food.



Portioning rice for food packages

We are currently organizing emergency food packages. Every month we are distributing packages to between 500 and 1,000 families, thanks to the support of some aid organizations such as ICO, Diocese Stockholm, Archdiocese of Cologne, Cathedral Chapter of the Metropolitan Church of St. Stephen's in Vienna. Of course, the need is much greater. I am



Food packages for poor families

not exaggerating when I say that almost every family is at risk of famine. Therefore we should show solidarity with one another by raising our voices louder and by acting in favor of the Christians in Syria, so that they can stay in Syria and fulfill their social task there for all people in need.

With this letter I am sending an appeal for donations and ask all of you to display it on the notice boards of your parishes.

I am confident that only God's grace can save. In the current time of grace, we may be able to show the grace and mercy of God to the people of Syria.

May God bless each of you who supports us in bringing this solidarity to the Syrian people and may you experience a Lent full of grace as well as blessed and joyful Easter days.

Gratefully Yours,
Fr. Hanna Ghoneim

Vienna, March 15, 2021