

Report about my latest visit to Syria

Dear friends and supporters of the Foundation *Korbgemeinschaft*,

Unfortunately, the Covid pandemic had prevented me from visiting Syria during the past year and a half. After this long interruption, I was relieved to be able to recently travel to Syria again. This time I spent three weeks there, from June 21st to July 10th, 2021.

I should now like to share my impressions with you about the current situation. First, I want to describe everyday life of the people in Syria by focusing particularly on families and on young people. Subsequently I want to address a few ideas which came to my mind during the numerous on site encounters and discussions and which have the potential to contribute to further project developments. I hope that some of these ideas can be put into reality.

The current everyday situation of the people in Syria:

Although one doesn't hear about the war any longer, people live in an extremely depressing humanitarian situation. Their main concern is securing daily food, especially bread in sufficient quantities for all family members, as bread is the cheapest food to combat hunger. That's why one can see long queues in front of the bakeries.



Waiting endlessly for the daily ration of bread

The second concern is the lack of sufficient energy, not only electricity for businesses and households but also fuel for mobility. Prices are high and volatile. Salaries are so low that one cannot afford to buy the essential daily goods. Even if someone works all day long, the income will only last until about the 10th day of the month. There are often power outages for hours, causing problems for many small businesses and for the households. In addition to worrying about food and energy, people are constantly looking for paid work. I have noticed how difficult it is to get a job. Most companies can only offer jobs on a daily wage basis, if at all. This represents an existential uncertainty factor and also overshadows any form of family planning. There are no signs of the country being rebuilt. The extremely limited government funds for reconstruction and public services leave many people depressed and disappointed.

I have heard many times that in poor families everyone has to work, young and old, and one has to accept any job in order to survive. I've witnessed with my own eyes how children are searching the garbage for reusable items. This has become a normal reality today. In the streets I noticed exhaustion and hopelessness on many faces.



Children searching the garbage

The scarcity of fuel for vehicles renders mobility difficult for everyone. Very often I saw long lines of people standing at bus stations in the heat, waiting for a bus. When a

minibus finally arrives, it should technically transport only 11 persons at a time. But there are always crowds of people waiting, who then desperately push in and cling on to all sides or even climb onto the roof of the bus.

Taking a taxi is completely unthinkable for a normal employee. The problem is that fuel is also rationed. When it is used up, the drivers are left without work and the passengers have to wait forever.

The health system leaves a lot to be desired, both for the physicians and for the patients. Many types of medication are not produced locally and have to be imported from abroad (currently the only possible source is Lebanon). You sometimes have to pay for these pharmaceutical products in foreign currency, so the sale shifts to the black market. This means that prices are uncontrollably high. The social institutions and the public hospitals are chronically overloaded (too few qualified people owing to the still ongoing emigration, – a phenomenon known as *brain drain*). This effect applies to many sectors, especially education, commerce, technology and medicine.

In short, one can say that life in Syria has become hardly bearable. The needs are enormous wherever you look, and there are very limited resources for coping with these needs. For many families, emigration seems the best solution, especially if there are already relatives living in Europe. I have therefore been asked many times if I know of ways to help with emigration.

Young people suffer a lot under this depressing economic situation. They don't see any prospects for a good future. Some have to work day and night to make ends meet for themselves and for elderly or sick family members. They have the impression that they could earn several times more abroad for the same amount of work. This is why they try to make it to Europe at any cost.

During my visit, I had meetings with students whom we support through the Foundation *Korbgemeinschaft*, and they described the numerous hurdles which they are facing every day. Alone the trips to the university are posing a big challenge. Although public transport is very cheap in principle, it currently consists mostly of old, desolate buses of limited size. So you sometimes have to wait for an hour to be transported. For urgent trips, e.g. to meet an exam appointment, you have to take a taxi to be on the safe side. This costs SYP 7000-8000 within Damascus (let alone from somewhere outside). If at all possible, several students meet to go together and share the costs. Because of the energy crisis, only a few taxis are currently in use.



The study materials are relatively expensive, compared to the modest income. Computer science (a very popular subject) can obviously not be studied without a laptop. For most, however, a laptop is not affordable. In addition, there is the essential monthly internet fee. For all basic expenses combined, a student needs at least SYP 200,000 (approx. EUR 60) per month.

Young people find it almost impossible today to plan the foundation of a family (there is a lack of income opportunities, housing is scarce and expensive, planning for the future is thus almost impossible). This is reflected by the very low number of weddings in the parishes, which will in the long run create a challenge for the future of the Church. Another phenomenon that can also be observed in Syria today is that young people often hang out in pubs in the evenings and smoke water pipes. This has a lot to do with the lack of alternatives and with the frustration caused by the hopeless situation.

I also had a discussion round with a team of young people who coordinate catechetical activities in Damascus. These young people told me how difficult this task has become.



Meeting with the coordination team for catechesis

They struggle hard to get the youth together for meetings. Here, too, the inadequate public transport creates a serious hurdle. In addition, there is a lack of teaching materials for the catechists and there are hardly any toys, writing and handicraft materials for the children. These young people are certainly quite imaginative, but they cannot implement their ideas without a total lack of tools. It should be mentioned at this point that ICO

(Initiative Christian Orient) is a very insightful supporter for youth activities and catechesis. For this help, I would like to thank ICO from the bottom of my heart.

An omnipresent impression during my visit to Syria was the rampant poverty. More than 90 % of the people now live way below the poverty line. This has been the case for two years now, and unfortunately there hasn't been any improvement so far. When I speak of the dire poverty in Syria, I must also mention the increasing crime rate. Theft is meanwhile common everywhere in Syria, especially in densely populated cities. The thieves are often children who are instigated by their destitute parents or by criminals. It happened repeatedly during my latest visit to Syria that passers-by in the streets warned me to be aware of pick-pocketing children. Issues such as drug trafficking, prostitution and child abuse have become more frequent. The moral decadence can be felt in many places. What rarely happened in the past has meanwhile become part of everyday life. You can clearly sense that children are the real victims of this poverty and certainly the most vulnerable ones: they are sent to search the garbage cans and they are often the ones who have to queue up in the long waiting lines in front of the bakeries.

As usual during my visits, I had many encounters with priests who told me about social problems. I visited a nursing home, a school for children with special needs and a pharmacy in Damascus run



Pharmacist Juliette Rahhal, helper of the poor

by a friend of mine. Shortly before my return trip, my second oldest brother died of kidney failure due to a liver disease. I was amazed at how calmly people react to the reality of death. There was hardly any reference to the omnipresent threat of Corona.

In my opinion, the depressing situation in Syria is mainly due to the constantly deteriorating economy. Of course, the war brought a lot of destruction and caused many people to flee. This certainly weakened the economy. But what is paralyzing the economy today is above all the embargo imposed by the western countries, which is still in place. As a priest, I simply cannot understand the point of these sanctions. How can rich countries continue to punish poor people instead of helping them? The embargo against Syria is the cause of most of the grievances. In my eyes it is a great sin that will surely have its consequences in the history of mankind.

Ideas, suggestions and visions:

It has become clear to me that world politics does not look at the fate of people, but rather at concrete economic and power interests. Sadly, the effort of trying to get politicians to act in the interests of humanity and justice seems a *mission impossible*. As a priest, I look at the boundless grace of God, which involves so much mercy, and less towards political decisions, which sometimes change abruptly depending on economic interests.

I am convinced that the works of God do not depend on the economy, but vice versa. I traveled to Syria to bring the message to my compatriots that God is there, that he continues to give us his endless grace in spite of all the hardships. For our survival, we just have to trust HIM and rely on His gifts.

First of all, I should like to give my friends here in the western countries the certainty that His grace is present. We just have to open our hands and take action to make this grace visible. And here I would like to tell you about the projects that I have in mind:

The bakery showed us how abundant God's grace is. We had originally intended to build a small bakery for a village and the Lord Almighty enabled us to set up a large bakery (bread factory) which produces bread for many villages.

Our next project, – a social market and a soup kitchen directly above the bakery, which I already mentioned to you in my previous letter, is just about to be started.

I learned at meetings on site that the church owns quite a bit of land in the village. The same is true in many other villages. This offers a great opportunity for Christians to use the land for agriculture and thus to create jobs. We can do a lot in the agricultural sector. In my home village Maarouneh, almost half of the land belongs to the two local parishes (the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church). These are endowment properties that cannot be sold. The plots are waiting for hands to cultivate the soil. For this, we need strategies and plans that are relatively easy to draw up. We envisage an irrigation system in the village (for the thousands of olive trees and for other crops).

For these emerging projects, it is important for us to duly consider environmental and sustainability issues. We want to create meaningful, sustainable and environmentally friendly jobs. On a smaller scale, individual families could build a livelihood with just a

few farm animals (goats, sheep, etc.). A very positive effect can also be achieved by still functioning second-hand devices and tools (for agriculture and for small handicraft workshops).

For all these projects we would like to make maximum use of solar/photovoltaic energy. In addition to representing a future-oriented, environmentally friendly approach, this would help to alleviate the electricity problems caused by the energy crisis.

What type of help is needed for this? How can the friends contribute?

First, we need ideas and expertise in agriculture and mechanical engineering. Then the necessary instruments such as machines, irrigation systems, greenhouses, etc. will be needed. It is desirable to help the youth to create small businesses and to build social housing so that they can work, start families and rebuild the country. In many discussions I have been alerted to the need of setting up social facilities also in rural areas, such as orphanages, old people's homes and educational institutions for children with special needs. As regards the level of school education, there is currently also much room for improvement.

The bakery in Maarouneh has had a very encouraging effect on the people, especially the young ones, and has shown that something can be done. From here we can do a lot for the salvation of the people in Syria if we are aware of God's grace. We can provide valuable ideas and advice on how to set up businesses. I look forward to your suggestions and support, and I wish you abundant grace and God's protection.

Gratefully Yours for any help,

Fr. Hanna Ghoneim

Vienna, August 20, 2021