

Life in a country martyred by war

Syria: has the war finished?

Interview with Robert Chelhod

*Robert Chelhod is a Syrian Focolarino who works with the Italian not-for-profit organisation, AMU, which aims to support to the people of Syria. **When will the war be over?** was the title of a talk he gave in Italy on 5th December 2019. Even though Syria is no longer in the media spotlight, there are continuing tensions but they are not being caused by the Syrian people themselves. We took the opportunity to ask him a few questions.*

People claim that the war is over; yet we see it reappearing in new forms and places. Roberto, you are originally from Syria, can you tell us your experience of living through this conflict which has gone on for 7 years?

In 2012 I was in Lebanon where I had lived through a different war, one that began in 1975. It was distressing to witness what was happening to Syria, my beloved country and people. We immediately began a chain of prayer for all those fleeing to Lebanon that they might find a safe refuge and not be turned away. Two years ago, I returned to Syria and experienced first-hand the drama of the situation in which my people are caught up now.

Christians are a minority in Syria, yet until a few years ago, we did not hear much about tensions between Christians and Muslims. How is the situation affecting Christians? Do they have a special role to play in Syrian society at this moment in time?

Forgive me for saying that neither we nor the local church are very keen on using the word 'minority'. Even President Assad recently told a group of young Christians not to 'consider themselves a minority' but rather 'an essential and constitutive presence within the fabric of Syrian society'. So we are not a minority but a leaven. While a large number of Christians are involved in social initiatives promoted by various organisations and by the Church, thousands of Christians have fled Syria over the last few years. Aleppo once had about 120,000 Christians but now there are only about 30,000.

The one positive outcome of the war is that it has brought Christians and Muslims closer together. Despite being initially cautious, the Church realised that Muslims were also in need. First and

foremost, we are Syrians whatever our religion. The government appreciates that without the help of the Church and Christian organisations, the tragedy would be far worse.

The reality is that Muslims have also suffered greatly as a result of the war and had to leave their land and their homes. Some have crowded into Christian districts, especially in Aleppo, where Christians have taken them in and responded to their most urgent needs. Neither the church nor any of the Christian NGO's present in the region make any distinction between helping both Muslims and Christians.

I have heard of Muslims being touched by the love shown to them by Christians which is a new discovery for them since previously there was not a great deal of contact or relationship between the two communities. I have often seen young women wearing a veil or young men enter the churches, curious to see what goes on inside.

Christians too have suffered greatly, especially in Homs and Raqqa, which have been the headquarters of the Isis Khalifat. In Homs they were forced to abandon their homes, almost all of which have been demolished. In Raqqa Christians suffered persecution at the hands of Isis and other extremist groups. People have disappeared, including two bishops and two priests. Yet I must emphasise that this is not a war between Christians and Muslims as is sometimes portrayed by western media. For the most part, Christians are greatly respected and appreciated for what they do.

Syrian society is a complex weave of socio-religious strands and the role for Christians is to be leaven; to promote inter-religious dialogue. During the height of the crisis, their works of charity and solidarity with suffering of every kind, affirmed this... as the late Mons Armando Bortolaso, retired bishop of Aleppo, said to me one day: new and stronger Christians will emerge from the war".

Can you tell us about the ways in which you have helped people concretely during the war and during this time of rebuilding your country?

When the war broke out in 2012, the situation was desperate. Armed groups surrounded the main cities and supplies could not get through. Prices soared as the Syrian lira devalued. We had to intervene with emergency supplies of food, petrol and medicines. People needed ongoing economic support just to survive. Many who were fleeing had to rent somewhere to live and did not have enough money for their basic needs.

We launched an appeal for help to our international Focolare community; AMU, Missio Aachen and other organisations supported our efforts and together we reached out to the families most in need. 75% of them were Muslims.

Apart from material help, we try to create reciprocity amongst us; those we help, help us in return or, in the case of young children, their parents, as we have seen with those who join our after-school clubs.

Since 2015 we have set up other initiatives too: 2 healthcare projects for cancer patients to help meet the cost of their medicine and offer psychological support to accompany them through their illness.

Our children are the future of our country, so with this in mind we set up 3 after-school clubs. Since the outbreak of war many teachers have left, leaving classes in state schools to amalgamate with up to as many as 70 children in one class which makes healthy learning conditions almost impossible. The children come to us after school for help with their homework; go over their lessons; receive speech therapy or ethical instruction as well as enjoying lots of play and having a snack. Many of them have suffered trauma or live in difficult family situations and receive help from a social worker or psychologist. I'm thinking particularly of those whose fathers or older brothers are no longer at home because they have been conscripted into the army, killed or are missing.

We offer professional training and training in skills and development such as in joinery, mechanics, sewing, healthcare, women's education and development. We have a group of physiotherapists who rehabilitate up to 450 people every year who live with disabilities or have suffered injuries during the war. All of these projects provide regular income for 100 people and reach 1400 others with their unconditional love. Our projects are like seeds of hope which will surely flower one day in a new Syria.

Can you share with us the mood in Syria at this time? Are there signs of hope, of people returning who had to flee in the darkest moments? In a nutshell, how do you see the future?

The war is not over. Conflict is still rife in some regions. Turkey has invaded the northern territory under the pretext of protecting itself against Kurdish 'terrorism' but causing hundreds of deaths and displacing thousands of people. Along with the armed Islamic groups, it controls the north west, whilst in the east, on the border with Iraq, the Americans have seized the Syrian oil wells without any opposition from Western governments.

The war is not yet over and there are serious economic consequences for the people. The cost of living is way above the level of earnings. In some areas there is no work at all. People still want to leave, especially young people. The future is uncertain and we do not know what will happen to our beloved Syria. I doubt whether people will return, especially families who have lost everything and whose young children are now settled in schools abroad.

As a Christian I never lose hope, otherwise my faith would be built on sand. I believe that a new Syria will arise from the ashes. It may take a long time but we need courage and perseverance. We must do everything we can so that the few remaining Christians share our hope and do not leave Syria. Without a Christian presence, we cannot hope to fulfil God's plan for Syria. Let's be united in prayer for the peace that is so longed for.

by **Maria do Sameiro Freitas**

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- 1 see article «Ekklesia» 2 (2019/1) n. 2, pp. 39-41.
 - 2 <http://www.amu-it.eu/>