

On the Road To Damascus

by Antonio S.C. Rosa

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I participated, May 1-11, 2013, in the Mussalaha International Peace Delegation to Lebanon-Syria alongside fellow TRANSCEND member Nobel Peace Laureate Mairead Maguire, from Ireland, and 15 others from eight countries. Keenly aware of my responsibility, especially to my newly made Syrian and Lebanese friends left behind, I shall try to report, describe, make sense of what I saw, heard, and experienced; also offer views and insights based on interviews....

First impressions first: the people, the civil society, women, men, the youth, elderly, children, workers, the Arab street, as it is called.... After some time I noticed a striking absence of anger or negative excitement in the air; people going about their daily business as if nothing was happening, as if life were normal....

...Nonetheless, the country has been as if divided by checkpoints in every strategic entrance and exit. To give an idea, our Damascus hotel was surrounded by



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six different checkpoints strategically located around it. Armed personnel and soldiers on the streets are a common sight that adds to a sense of security.

Mairead [Maguire] and Mother Agnès-Maryam Soeur (our leaders) met privately with Syrian armed fighters, and we were introduced to some persons victimized by their atrocities. Audiences included: Syrian Prime Minister Mr. Wael Al Halki, Deputy PM and Minister of Economic Affairs Mr. Qadri Jameel (opposition), Minister of Health Dr. Saed Anayef, Minister of Social Affairs Ms. Kinda Al-Shammat (a pleasant and intelligent young lady), Minister of Justice Dr. Najem Hamad Al-Ahmad, Minister of Information Mr. Omran Ahed Al-Zouabi, Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Walid Muallem, the Syrian Ambassador to Lebanon Mr. Ali Abd Karim Ali, the Iranian Ambassador to Lebanon, and General Michael Aoun, an influential Lebanese party leader (who is rumored to discriminate against Palestinian refugees).

We visited the People's Council of Syria (parliament), hospitals, refugee camps, were briefed by senior field coordinator Maeve Murphy at the UNHCR [UN High Commissioner for Refugees] intake center in Zahleh-Lebanon, and met with a representative of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, and with ambulance drivers and health workers. We were also welcomed by some ten leaders from various religions, sects, and faiths, were greeted in churches and mosques....

Actors and Parties to the Conflict

...Of one thing you may rest assured: Bashar al-Assad is not the sole culprit, THE bad guy in this saga. He is a well-liked leader all over, which is evident in different cities, in talks with differing kinds of persons, and by their attitudes and actions. Body languages, eye contacts, non-verbal messages work wonders in bringing hidden messages to the surface. Billboards with his picture are spread throughout the land and they are clean, well-preserved. One does not see graffiti over them, obscenities or anything like that....

In addition, as much as I tried, no one leader could or would answer my two basic questions: What is the source of this conflict? What are the solutions?... But I got a generalized reply based and around a single theme: "The violence must stop!"...

Refugees

The Syrian state and its population are being indirectly attacked by US/EU/NATO/UN; and directly by

Israel, ... by the autocratic dictatorships of the GCC-Gulf Cooperation Council: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, UAE (mostly Sunni Muslims) in partnership with Turkey (secular), and by Al Qaeda, plus a diversity of mercenary jihadists (by definition terrorist groups), each with its own agenda, recruited from 29 countries and paid by GCC/CIA. Syrians are also assailed by UN sanctions and an embargo, and by a foreign press bent on demonizing, lying, destabilizing the country (not merely the regime)....

We visited and talked with a chief of family of refugees in Lebanon, and saw 20 people living in a space roughly 6x6 without ventilation, a room inside a warehouse, for which they pay the equivalent of \$400/month. One filthy kitchen, one bathroom. And that is that. They are on their own to find work and everything else. Some resort to stealing and committing petty crimes to survive. This is typical, not an exception....

In one of the refugee camps we visited in Lebanon (more aptly called a concentration camp) we talked with a couple from Homs—he being a pharmacist and engineer—who had their house and business blown up due to terrorist activities. Now they live by charity in the Bekaa Valley-Lebanon, under a tent and with nothing but the clothes over their bodies. They are not allowed to work, own property, have a dignified life. There is no sanitation, and there are checkpoints with armed soldiers at the gates. Multiply this by about 1.5 million and you will have an approximate dimension of the human tragedy....

This is how it works, according to Prime Minister Wael Al Halki himself, with whom we spent 2.5 hours: ...Jihadists take a village by assault, kill public officials, take over private houses in which to hide, burn plantations, spread terror and devastation. Their aim is simple: to render the country as ungovernable as they possibly can, disrupt normal life, destroy institutions, livestock, people. They occupy hospitals forcing medical personnel to look only after foreign fighters, not allowing wounded locals or government soldiers to be treated. This has created a wave of refugees from a total population of 21.9 million. Internal displacement is calculated at 1.5 million people. And 600,000 external refugees according to the Minister of Social Affairs, Ms Kinda Al-Shammat (estimate)....

Government Retaliation

Syrian authorities, on the other hand, reacted to the rampant and aggressive terrorism through a policy



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The Umayyad Mosque in the old city of Damascus is emblematic of the religious tolerance that existed in Syria before the war. Shown: the shrine of St. John the Baptist, at the center of the huge 4,000-year-old structure, which is located at the end of the famous Road to Damascus of St. Paul's conversion.

they call “iron hand.” Tanks, artillery, and infantry descend in force on the places that foreign fighters keep under siege, and blow up the buildings where they hide, keep armaments and snipers. However, before striking the buildings, fliers are thrown from helicopters advising residents to leave the area, which is not always possible because the terrorists use them as human shields, keeping them under captivity inside their own residences. Collateral damage is high; it is a policy many consider unacceptable. But given the odds, he said, it is the best alternative. And this method, as brutal as it is, is bearing fruit as the terrorists are being decimated or otherwise driven farther and farther from populated areas. . . .

Delegate Paul Larudee reports:

“There was the celebrated case of a nine-year-old Christian boy named Sari Saoud, killed by rebels in Homs. His body was taken by the rebels, but his mother, Georgina al-Jammal caught up with them, and her embrace of her dead son was captured on video by the rebels, who then falsified the account to make it appear that the boy had been killed by government forces.

“I talked with Georgina, who supports the government, but blames it for leaving the area without protection. She told me that she recognized some of the rebels

from the neighborhood, but that others were strangers.”

Conclusion

A positive note: we were gifted with a VIP visit to the famous Umayyad Mosque in the old city of Damascus, fourth-holiest [Islamic] place after Mecca, where is located the tomb and shrine of St. John the Baptist right at the center of the huge 4,000 year-old construction that had previously been a temple of Jupiter in Roman times and the Basilica of Saint John the Baptist. This mosque is at the end of the famous Road to Damascus, of St. Paul's conversion, which we walked by foot seeing the exact spot of the event. Upon exiting the mosque complex, one could see another building erected by Saladin (1174-1193), also buried in Umayyad. . . .

We were hosted by the head of Umayyad, the Grand Mufti of the Syrian Arab republic, Dr. Ahmad Badr Al-Din

Hassoun, and by the Greek Catholic Patriarch Gregory III Laham, who organized and hosted our whole trip, along with Mussalaha. . . .

The Mussalaha International Peace Delegation to Syria issued a Concluding Declaration. Being from varying backgrounds, delegates did not agree on everything and one of them did not sign it. Therefore: no groupthink, and no possibility of collective brainwashing of our group by Syrian authorities. And Mairead Maguire's messages to the media, as the Nobel Peace laureate head of the delegation, remained impeccable and on point. She started all interviews with affirmations to the effect that,

“It is for the Syrian people to decide about their own problems, their own destiny, their own politics, their own leadership and form of government. No one has the right to interfere in their internal affairs and all foreign forces must withdraw and stay away. The flow of arms and armed fighters must be stopped, sanctions must be lifted, and if the arms embargo should remain in place, it ought [to apply] to all parties involved, not just to the Syrian government that has a right to defend itself from foreign aggression, [from] the foreign bands of invaders that are killing and terrorizing the population. All parties must follow the rules of international law.”. . .