

## **Culture of encounter and dialogue: the only way forward in Syria. JRS advocacy on Syria**

“Peace must be looked for and built together through small actions every day.”

With these words Pope Francis captured both the tragedy of the war in Syria and the profound longing of Syrians for peace. This echoes the same clear message that the Jesuit Refugee Service<sup>1</sup> staff, their families and local Syrian communities wish to send to the international community.

The daily experience of JRS teams in Syria, providing relief, education and psychosocial services to conflict-affected communities embodies a culture of encounter and fosters dialogue. Equally importantly, it plants seeds of reconciliation among communities.

“We see parents of different backgrounds coming together to our centres. Their children play together, building trust among themselves and leaving the ghosts of war and violence behind. Encouraged by the actions of their children, overcoming hesitation and diffidence, parents seek renewed dialogues among themselves”, said JRS Middle East North Africa Director, Nawras Sammour.

In support of Pope Francis’ continued plea for international solidarity in pursuing peace in Syria, the Jesuit Refugee Service urges the international community to:

- prioritise diplomatic efforts and apply pressure on the Syrian government and the armed opposition forces to agree upon an immediate ceasefire and cooperate to reach a negotiated solution to the conflict. Consultation opportunities must be created for the meaningful participation of Syrian representatives from communities engaged in humanitarian assistance across social, religious and ethnic divides;
- put pressure on all armed forces to allow humanitarian assistance for communities in need, to refrain from disrupting humanitarian operations and hindering the work of personnel, and to allow unimpeded access to Syrians requiring assistance;
- increase financial and technical support for grassroots humanitarian initiatives targeting the most vulnerable Syrians in full accordance with humanitarian principles;
- ensure that international development donors provide greater technical and financial support to ease the pressure in host countries and help refugees and vulnerable local households alike. Support should be offered to help counter increasing discrimination and xenophobia towards Syrians.
- ensure greater international protection for Syrians forced to seek safe haven beyond the region. Refugee households in the most vulnerable circumstances should be granted access to resettlement programmes or offered temporary protection visas in Europe, the United

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<sup>1</sup> The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is an international Catholic organisation with a mission to accompany, serve and advocate on behalf of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. The work of JRS is guided by the humanitarian principles of humanity, independence, impartiality and neutrality. JRS is inspired by the core values of compassion, justice, participation, solidarity, hospitality, dignity and hope. JRS programmes are found in over 50 countries, providing assistance to: refugees in camps and cities, individuals displaced within their own countries, asylum seekers in cities, and to those held in detention centres. The main areas of work are in the field of education, emergency assistance, healthcare, livelihood activities and social services

States and other countries willing to share the burden with the immediate neighbours of Syria.

The on-going violent conflict has caused more than 2.7 million Syrians to seek refuge in neighbouring countries, more than 150,000 deaths and displaced more than nine million Syrians. Notwithstanding the risks to their lives, tens of thousands of Syrians across religious, ethnic and economic divides have continuously promoted harmony, reaching out to build “a culture of encounter and dialogue”. This is the silent majority of Syrians who reject violence.

The levels of displacement have reached nearly three times the population of the city of Paris, in as little as three years. More than one quarter of the Syrian population is in need of assistance – refugees, those displaced within the country and others living in dire circumstances.

Approximately 242,000 Syrians currently live in areas besieged by the government or opposition forces. Civilians in these areas are denied access to food, medical provisions or basic amenities. Malnutrition rates are growing and risk of starvation is real, with some people living on only olives and lentils. Humanitarian access into these areas should be permitted immediately; while those civilians who wish to leave should be allowed to do so in safety.

JRS projects in Syria help communities resist and survive the logic of war that threatens to overwhelm and destroy them. Families are repeatedly displaced both due to generalised and targeted violence. The conflict has also caused the near collapse of the economy, as well as a brain drain and the mass exodus of many middle-class families.

Within the country, there has been a dramatic reduction in the provision of essential services and an exponential rise in poverty rates. This poverty cuts across the many cultural, religious and ethnic communities in Syria. As such JRS serves all marginalised groups – be they Sunnis, Shi’a (including Alawites), Druze, and Christians. In this way, inter-religious dialogue remains part-and-parcel of JRS daily activities.

While coordination between JRS, Jesuit networks, Christian and Muslim entities and secular organisations help civilians receive much needed support, this assistance it is not sufficient to meet the escalating needs. By and large, the international community has not adequately supported Syrian groups engaged in humanitarian initiatives, a process that needs to be reversed.

In Syria, JRS teams provide **emergency humanitarian assistance** to the most vulnerable people. These services include:

- educational and psychosocial activities
- food, non-food items and rent support
- basic healthcare services (clinic and referrals)

In total, more than **300,000** people are helped by JRS in Damascus, Homs and Aleppo.

In addition to building strong relationships based on trust and fairness, JRS has a distinct way of working with families. Accompaniment, one of the pillars of JRS work is embodied in recurrent family visits, which are at the heart of every JRS project across the region. Through the visits, JRS teams identify and address the most urgent needs of the families.

JRS teams also work in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey providing urgent assistance and educational and psychosocial support to different refugee communities.