

European Parliament  
Roundtable Event: Don't Forget Syrians!

24 June 2025

I extend my cordial greetings to the Honourable Massimiliano Salini, Vice-Chair Group of the European People's Party, and thank him sincerely for his kind invitation to participate in this interesting round table.

My earnest thanks also goes to Ms Dubravka Suica, Commissioner for the Mediterranean, for her kind participation in this meeting, which is a great honour for us all.

For the last 17 years, I have been in Syria as Apostolic Nuncio.

I have witnessed what has been described as the “most serious humanitarian catastrophe since the Second World War”.

I have seen destruction and death, but also the solidarity of so many “Good Samaritans”, of various institutions, of the international Community, and of the various donor Conferences in Brussels. Drops of water in the desert, but very precious!.

I have also witnessed the disastrous negative impact of sanctions on the poor population. It is true that these did not intend to undermine humanitarian aid. In practice, however, this was not the case — due, in particular, to so-called ‘over compliance’.

**Too late!**

With their recent lifting, a breath of hope has once again reached Syria! It is true, as the saying goes, that it is “*never too late!*”. But let me tell you that their lifting was *too late* for little Omar who was forced to go to bed at night on an empty stomach — *also* because of the sanctions! More than once, I mistook Antun, Mohamed, for children, when they were actually teenagers! *Too late* for Samir, Fadia, some 2.5 [*two point five*] million children who are unschooled — *also* because of the

sanctions. *Too late* for the elderly Mansour and Salwa who died for a lack of medicines and hospitals — *also* because of the sanctions.

And, by way of a perverse mechanism, while one could see queues of people lined up in front of state-subsidised bread bakeries and others rummaging through rubbish bins, one could also see luxury cars, like never before, through the streets of Syria, 5-star beach hotels filled to capacity, and boutiques carrying luxury goods just like in Paris and London!

### **Christians**

The long and bloody conflict has not spared the Christian community which has declined from around 5% to less than 2% of the population. A Christian community that has suffered like all others, and more than all. The cowardly and bloody terrorist attack perpetrated last Sunday in the Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Elias in Damascus causes great concern.

Their exodus — still ongoing — is a deep wound for their respective Churches, but it also constitutes a loss for Syrian society itself. In the course of their two-thousand-year presence in the country, Christians have made a considerable contribution in the fields of literature, the arts, education, healthcare, and even politics. Indeed, Fares Khoury, the Christian Prime Minister at the time of independence, is still held in high regard by all. In general, Christians are well received for their spirit of tolerance and openness. I have visited many mixed villages, where Christians and Sunnis, Christians and Alawites, Christians and Druze, Christians and Kurds live together in harmony. By virtue of their tolerant and open spirit, Christians are, for Syrian society itself, like an open window to the world. A window that tends to draw closed whenever a Christian family leaves. At the beginning of the conflict, some Muslim village leaders visited me to express their sadness at seeing the Christians emigrate. In this regard, several times the recent Popes have expressed their concern, noting that: “*The Middle East would no longer be the Middle East without the presence of Christians*”.

During these difficult years of war, the various Churches present in Syria have set up numerous charitable-relief initiatives, with the help of Christians scattered around the world and sometimes even of some governments, and of the EU itself. Emergency and development programmes: soup kitchens, medical assistance, schooling, housing, employment, and so on.

Among the many humanitarian projects, I would like to mention one in particular, encouraged by the Vatican and promoted by the Apostolic Nunciature in Damascus with the valid operational expertise of AVSI:

It is the ‘*Open Hospitals*’ programme that started at the end of 2017, when about half of the state hospitals were, due to the war, partially or completely unusable. It involved making operational the three Catholic Hospitals that had been operating in Syria for more than 100 years — 2 of them in Damascus and 1 in Aleppo — above all, for the benefit of poor patients, of any and all ethnic-religious affiliations.

Between 2017 [*two thousand seventeen*] and 2024 [*two thousand twenty-four*], the project, together with the five Catholic dispensaries, assisted a total, to date, of **188,748** [*one hundred eighty-eight thousand, seven hundred and forty-eight*] poor people. Nearly 200.000 people . Twelve million euros have been spent on treatments alone, not counting supplies of medical equipment, and so on. From the ‘*Open Hospitals*’ project, we have now moved on to ‘*Dispensaries of Hope*’ – of which there are six – to have medicine on the ground and close to the people, with analyses and medical examinations available.

It is worth noting that the vast majority of those assisted are poor Muslims, who represent the largest ethnic-religious group. They often come from remote provinces with a family member, a sick child. They are very grateful to the hospital and the Christians for the free assistance and the dignified welcome they receive. This service most certainly contributes to the mending of the torn social fabric.

### **8 December 2024, the unexpected political change**

The international community, after an initial moment of reserve and “wait and see”, decided to support the new historical course.

The then-Pope Francis expressed himself saying:

“Syria, after years of war and devastation, seems to be pursuing a path of stability. I hope that the territorial integrity, the unity of the Syrian people and the necessary constitutional reforms will not be compromised by anyone, and that the international community will help Syria to be a land of peaceful coexistence where all Syrians, including the Christian community, can feel themselves to be

full citizens and share in the common good of that beloved nation.” (Address of Pope Francis to Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See - 9 January 2025).

The drafting of a new constitution is awaited. And with *inclusiveness*: a Syria for all Syrians.

The Christians, in accordance with the Abu Dhabi Declaration on *Human Fraternity*, signed on the 4<sup>th</sup> of February 2019 by Pope Francis and The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, are promoting “citizenship”, “based on the equality of rights and duties, under which all enjoy justice. It is therefore crucial to establish in our societies the concept of full citizenship and reject the discriminatory use of the term minorities which engenders feelings of isolation and inferiority. Its misuse paves the way for hostility and discord; it undoes any successes and takes away the religious and civil rights of some citizens who are thus discriminated against” (A Document on *Human Fraternity*, Abu Dhabi, 4 February 2019).

And, again in the words of the then-Pope Francis to the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See:

“Christians are able and desire actively to contribute to the building up of the societies in which they live. Even where they are not a majority in society, they are citizens in their own right, especially in those lands where they have lived from time immemorial” (Address of Pope Francis to Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See- 9 January 2025).

The two main problems Syria currently faces are territorial integrity and internal unity — both of which are seriously threatened.

In conclusion, Syria now finds itself in a situation of ‘**Hope and Uncertainty**’.

As for the internal unity of the country — to wit, the peaceful and harmonious coexistence of its various ethnic-religious groups — it should be noted that Syria was an exemplary mosaic of coexistence, particularly with regard to relations between Christians and Muslims. A typical example of this climate of tolerance and conviviality was, and still is, the mutual exchange of good wishes on the occasion of the main religious holidays: the “*Milad Majid-Joyeux Noel!*” that Muslims wish to Christians, and the “*Ramadan Karim-Happy End of Ramadan!*” wished by Christians to Muslims.

The indescribable and numerous atrocities committed — particularly during the long years of gruesome conflict — have damaged, sometimes severely, this mosaic of exemplary coexistence. A brutal defacement of that mosaic occurred with the horrific massacre of several thousand civilians — mostly Alawites — on 6-8 March of this year, in various locations along the Mediterranean coast. As a result of this and other events, some Syrians no longer feel safe. Others feel discriminated against — in employment, for instance. And while some refugees attempt to return to Syria, others, still feeling unsafe, are trying leave the country.

The caretaker authorities try to solve these serious problems, but not always successfully. Appointing, for example, an Independent Commission of enquiry to address the massacres of civilians last March, establishing the so-called “Transitional Justice”, promoting, at the urgent request of the international community inclusiveness, setting up a special government Commission for the disappeared persons. The road ahead, however, is still a long one.

All these necessary and urgent initiatives can help — in some way — to recompose the social mosaic that has been seriously compromised by so much hatred and thirst for revenge sown in the hearts of many people.

Grandiose projects are planned — to rebuild villages, neighbourhoods and major infrastructures — and an economic boom is hoped for.

However, these ambitious reconstruction programmes will not be enough unless the deep personal wounds are healed and the social fabric of Syria is sewn back together.

Urgent and decisive programmes are needed to ‘defuse’ the hatred and thirst for revenge! This is a huge and urgent challenge for Syria and for the international community itself!

It is a huge challenge for Religions as well — particularly the Muslim and Christian ones.

When the massacre of civilians took place last March, many people, in panic, fled to the Russian military air base in Hmeimim, Latakia [or *Homaymime-Khmeimin (Lattaquieh)*], while others ran for shelter inside the few churches in the region. As far as I have been able to learn, the people who took refuge there belonged to different ethnic groups: Alawites, Sunnis,

Christians...ethnic groups not always in harmony with each other. In short, these churches became Noah's ark, where wolf and lamb, dove and vulture coexisted to escape danger.

'Defuse' discrimination, hatred, the thirst for revenge! A very arduous task — seemingly impossible — also in view of the fact that in Syria, in the Middle East and elsewhere, the word '*Reconciliation*' is not in the current vocabulary.

At other times and in other circumstances, there have been some people who have instead believed in it, and bet on it. And they succeeded! Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Founding Fathers of Europe: Robert Schuman, Alcide De Gasperi, Konrad Adenauer.

I thank you!

Damascus, 24 June 2025

Cardinal Mario Zenari  
Apostolic Nuncio in Siria