

Voices from Syria:
Syrians spoke with us about the
current situation in Syria
at our Spring 2021 Advocacy Gathering



Syria-Lebanon Partnership
Network of PC(USA)
www.syrialebanonpn.org

These are verbatim transcripts of recordings from the Spring Gathering. The recordings can be accessed on the SLPN website at www.syrialebanonpn.org/2021-advocacy-gathering

Mathilde Sabbagh, pastor of NESSL church in Hasakeh, Syria

Mathilde described the current situation of the church and the Christian community in Hasakeh

For water for drinking and washing, they're pumping water once a week, sometimes every 9 to 10 days. The situation is not good, but it's better than what we experienced last August. We are still distributing water for the poor Christian families because the water being pumped is not good for drinking -- it's full of disease.

Electricity, for the last 9 years, we have been out of electricity almost completely. It comes on maybe for 1 hour, max 2 hours, every day. People depend on electrical generators that you can buy or participate with to get enough electricity for daily living. It is so expensive for our families. With the help of our Synod, we are helping families with the fees.

Covid is everywhere but people don't care about it because they are much more concerned about their daily living. Surprisingly enough, the Syrian government govt and Kurdish forces announced yesterday (April 12) that we're doing into quarantine and no one shall go to work. They stopped the schools until September. This is really an issue.

The Syria pound has greatly deteriorated in relation to US dollar. If a person doesn't work, they won't live. We can't really stop working.

As for the church, we are still serving; we go for everyday ministry, let's say. You can see how the church is serving the remnant of the Christian community here.

Please pray for us and think of the people who are living here in a very hard situation how they are witnessing to our Lord, and we also pray for you. We hope to meet you soon in person and encourage one another in the love of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Salam Hanna, pastor of NESSL church in Latakia, Syria

Economic situation, Since 2019, a rapid depreciation in Syrian currency. In Oct 2019 640 Syrian pounds was equal to \$1 US. Today each \$3,300 Syrian pounds = \$1 US. Inflation, escalation of prices, deterioration of the average Syrian's salary to \$15/month. In the US, the average poverty line is a little more than \$1,000/month for a one-person household.

Shortage of fuel for cars, electricity, factories, generators, etc. I filled up my car in Damascus on Jan 16; this was the last I filled up my car. Three months, I've been out of fuel. Either I have to wait for 72 hours and do a lot of effort to fill my car, or stay like this.

The shortage of fuel means that we are reaching a point where we are out of energy, and we are back to the 19th century. For example, I have electricity for 1 hour and then 5 hours off. This is 4 hours electrical power/day.

We are suffering a severe shortage of electricity; our power plants are at 30% of capacity. Before the crisis, the capacity of the Syrian power plants was 9,000 megawatts. This is due to the wealth of gas and fuel oil controlled by the Kurdish forces backed by the US troops. Second reason: we don't have spare parts for maintenance of the existing power plants, due to sanctions by US and EU. Third reason, construction of 2 new power plants that would bring an increased 1,150 megawatts has been halted due to the sanctions. One of these plants was being built by India, the other by Russia.

The hope that we are still living. Many people are facing struggle; they do not have hope. Yet the Church is trying to give hope, even through more than 10 years of struggle. WE learned to have faith in God in the face of the crisis. We didn't have that faith at that beginning, but we learned that God, who was been with us, is still with us. And now we are still surviving after 10 years.

The story in Mark 8 of Jesus and the disciples in the boat with one loaf of bread. This comes after two boat stories and two feeding stories. In Mark 8, the disciples are in the boat and a big storm came up – high winds and waves. They had one loaf of bread, which brought to their minds the fear of hunger. We in Syria are similar to the disciples, where we are afraid of the storm, winds and waves, and we have one loaf of bread, very little resources. Yet Jesus is with us. Jesus has been with us for 10 years of struggle and war. The boat did not sink, and the loaf of bread did not finish. Because Jesus was and still is with us. This is our hope.

You might ask how we survive; how do we function; how do we still smile? Because Jesus is with us in spirit and in partnership. We are not just alone. And also because of our sisters and brothers in Christ around the world. I want to thank the SLPN, the Presbyterian Church USA, the PDA, the Outreach Foundation, the congregations, the presbyteries, and all our sisters and brothers who showed great compassion in various forms, not only by sending money but by visiting Syria even in times of struggle. This is a true partnership, a true compassion, that we are very thankful of.

The Church – NESSL -- responded from the very beginning, and gave a hand of help, word of encouragement, visits of solidarity to all people. The Church will continue to do that, continue to be the Church that God has called it to be. The Church of true love and compassion; not of empty words or empty rituals; but a church of hope and healing to the people, especially to the poor and the hungry.

We are still passing through a very difficult time, and we know there is light at the end of the tunnel, and we know that light is Jesus, in his life, death and resurrection. In resurrection, Jesus told us that nothing is impossible for God. He overcame death, and he will overcome all types of death that humanity is still living.

Josh Landis, academic expert on Syria who has lived in the Middle East and has family in Syria

40% of the country lies outside of Syrian control – Kurdish section in the east, Turkish control in northern Aleppo, and Idlib province, ruled by one of the leaders of Al Nusra (later became ISIS)

The objective of US policy has been to turn Syrian into a quagmire for Iran and Russia. It's about stopping Russia and Iran from winning in Syria.

They have been trying to deny Assad as much of Syria's wealth as they can. But since the US didn't want to get involved, the US has had to align itself with other groups to do the heavy lifting. These groups are distasteful to us, yes, but they have accomplished the US policy. Wheat, oil, and energy have been denied to the Syrian govern and by extension the Syrian people.

Personal Story Josh's brother-in-law Firas originally was in charge of a small manufacturing/ textile company in Aleppo; employed 40 people they supplied jeans and t-shirts made from Syrian cotton. With the uprising, rebel troops overran this small factory, as they did 1,000 or so factories around the Aleppo suburbs. They stripped them of all the machines, fixtures, wiring, etc., because it could be sold on the market for copper, etc. Firas went through several other attempts at doing a business. Most recently he started a plastic bag factory in Tartous, but there's no electricity so he couldn't run the machines. So, he bought expensive generators, but then he couldn't get any oil to run the generators.

So my brother gave up, and he moved the machines to a factory outside of Latakia in a government zone, where the govt tries to supply electricity on a more regular basis.

The moral of this story is that sanctions are designed to make the Syrian people unhappy and rise up against the government by starving them. But it's doing the opposite. It's making the Syrian people more and more dependent on the govt for the small amount of service they get.

For example Syrians can no longer afford to go to private bakeries and buy expensive bread. So they have to line up for hours at the government-supported bakeries, which are subsidized, and get their bread from the govt. My brother-in-law had to go to this govt industrial zone and get electricity. So people are desperately attached to – dependent on -- on the government.

My parents-in-law have a combined pension of \$500/month, which puts them in the upper middle class. Now, between their two salaries, they can buy 9 roasted chickens at the local chicken shop.

There's just no money. Trying to get the money is a giant pain. You have to send it to Beirut, then someone has to go to Beirut and get it in dollars and come across the border. At the border you have to pay bribes. This makes people anxious and worried.

The people who are surviving are getting money from the outside. Otherwise, incomes are wiped out. All of this not related to sanctions -- the Lebanese bankruptcy has destroyed the Syrian currency. All Syrians with any extra money do their banking in Lebanon in dollar accounts, where they thought their money would be safe and would grow. Now their bank accounts are gone; all their money has disappeared. This has been a terrible blow to Syrians, after the war was largely over.