

On the Road to Damascus: An Eyewitness Report

By [Antonio C. S. Rosa](#)

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In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

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. However, this report will take more than one article.

First impressions first: the people, the civil society, women, men, the youth, elderly, children, workers, the Arab street, as it is called. It was disconcerting coming into the country for the first time knowing what I thought I knew and seeing a calm, positive demeanor in people, which could well be misconstrued as apathy, yet exhibiting expectant, concerned, awaiting eyes and facial expressions. 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. No cries for revenge against their many external aggressors, no fists in the air, no demonstrations against a dictator, no pleading or denouncing slips of paper passed to me surreptitiously by nervous, fearful hands. Eye contacts revealed seriousness, curiosity, kindness, hope, hospitality, happiness in seeing strangers. No public laughs or smiles though. Heavy hearts do not allow for such frivolities. Syrian people are suffering, they are sad, stuck, against the wall, being victimized for which they bear no responsibility. They just don't know why they are being threatened, attacked, killed, tortured, and humiliated so viciously from so many fronts. The concept of proxy war is alien to them even though they are at its core. Fear of violence can be more psychologically and emotionally damaging than the real thing. Understandably, they are afraid of talking in public and being later identified and targeted by jihadists.

But then again, that is always the case, isn't? Who cares about unimportant people when so many more pressing factors are in play? Like the obscene profits made by the oil multinationals, the 7 sisters cartel, and the preservation of wasteful lifestyles of peoples from richer, more powerful nations that need -and will take by any means necessary- the oil that Syrians at this juncture unfortunately have underneath their feet?

Disconcerting as well was to find a country bursting with activity and life, children in playgrounds or walking to school in their uniforms, open air markets filled with people, heavy traffic, buses running, life happening in and around Damascus. Disconcerting because I had psyched myself to find a country in ruins, people fleeing for their lives from bombs, tanks on the streets, a police state massacring its own citizens, large scale suffering, buildings demolished, people resisting the government by force, and so on. Yet, I saw none of the above; quite the opposite. But you will forgive my ignorance, for I am a Westerner and that is what we hear, watch and read in our corporate media, which without a pinch of shame, honesty or humanity tell us half truths, innuendoes, straight lies, and party-line talking-points uttered by talking heads about what is happening on this part of the world.

And I stand guilty of believing them like a fool. 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 six different checkpoints strategically located around it. Armed personnel and soldiers on the streets is a common sight that adds to a sense of security.

Mairead 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 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, and I talked with common folks every time an opportunity presented in shops and in the streets. I talked with an active member of the political opposition to the present regime. He was in prison for 24 years, released 11 years ago, and wants changes—**but without outside interference** as he told me textually. The 71 year-old kind and intelligent gentleman who declined to give his name also told me he did not marry and have children because he was in prison, and he was ashamed of that.

ACTORS AND PARTIES TO THE CONFLICT

A deeper contextual assessment and analysis within a peace studies/conflict resolution paradigm would require more time and research into the complexities of the conflicts (in the plural) vis-à-vis the newest perceptions, facts and evidences acquired herein; the majority of actors are not evident whereas the main, deadliest ones are shielded by 'deniability.' However, they are all known—and very active. 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. Syrians in general show pride in having a handsome leader, an eye doctor who is not a sanguinary dictator like Saddam Hussein was. I would assume that in the present context even those who oppose him are on his side to defend Syria's integrity as a functioning society.

Quoting Johan Galtung [i]: "An image of the goals of some outside parties:

- *Israel*: wants Syria divided in smaller parts, detached from Iran, status quo for Golan Heights, and a new map for the Middle East;
- *USA*: wants what Israel wants and control over oil, gas, pipelines;
- *UK*: wants what USA wants;
- *France*: co-responsible with the UK for post-Ottoman colonization in the area,

- wants confirmed friendship France-Syria;
- *Russia*: wants a naval base in the Mediterranean, and an “ally”;
- *China*: wants what Russia wants;
- *EU*: wants both what Israel-USA want and what France wants;
- *Iran*: wants Shia power;
- *Iraq*: majority Shia, wants what Iran wants;
- *Lebanon*: wants to know what it wants;
- *Saudi-Arabia*: wants Sunni power;
- *Egypt*: wants to emerge as the conflict-manager;
- *Qatar*: wants the same as Saudi Arabia and Egypt;
- *Gulf States*: want what USA-UK want;
- *The Arab League*: wants no repetition of Libya, tries human rights;
- *Turkey*: wants to assert itself relative to the (Israel-USA) successors to the (France-UK-Italy) successors to the Ottoman Empire, and a buffer zone in Syria.
- *UN*: wants to emerge as the conflict manager.

Every single statement here can be challenged and challenged again. But let us for the sake of the mental experiment assume that this image, with 16 outside and five inside parties, is more right than wrong.”

The Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economic Affairs, Mr. Kadri Jameel, is a Communist Kurd elected on the opposition party platform. He came to talk to the delegation at the 5-star hotel where we stayed in Damascus. He affirmed that his electoral victory represented a foot on the door for further changes, which envisioned a multiparty political system. I talked with four members of his security detail. One of them, 26, showed me his wound: a bullet entered through his backside and exited through his neck, which had been broken as he was attacked by foreign fighters coming from Turkey at a Palestinian refugee camp in Latakia on Aug, 2011 when he was still in the army. Although army officers, they guard the leader of the opposition. I was told by them that these armed gangs of trouble makers target especially the minorities (Druze, Christians, Shia) in hopes that they turn against the government.

“As the government moves to a multi-party system, a non-territorial federation with two chambers, one for provinces and the other for nations, with vetoes in matters of vital concern might be useful.” [ii]

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? Perhaps it was so because all our audiences, meetings, visits, and so forth were made in groups: our delegation, composed of 16 invitees from seven countries, our hosts, the press (which at times stole the whole show all for themselves), plus the heavily armed security around us everywhere around the clock, sometimes annoyingly so. Thus no conversations or even follow-up questions were ever entertained. But I got a generalized reply based and around a single theme: “The violence must stop!” Moreover, few of the leaders spoke English. Thus a lot of our ‘conversations’ was lost or truncated in the interpreting process. What stands out is that almost all of the various leaders and people in general seem to agree that the major, perhaps only problem facing the country is the (contained) violence and threat thereof. Not could be farther from the truth, though. So I will stay more at the surface in this overview of our visit.

Galtung’s bird’s eye view of the situation (in [Syria, TMS 29 Apr 2013](#)): “Over this looms a

dark cloud: Syria is in the zone between Israel-USA-NATO and Shanghai Cooperation Organization-SCO [Russia-China], both expanding.

“Then, an image of the goals of some inside parties:

- *Alawis* (15%): want to remain in power, “for the best of all” (Assad’s power base);
- *Shias in general*: want the same;
- *Sunnis*: want majority rule, their rule, democracy;
- *Jews, Christians, minorities*: want security, fearing Sunni rule;
- *Kurds*: want high level autonomy, some community with other Kurds.”

However, Susan Dirgham, a delegate from Australia, offers a qualification:

“Much of the propaganda in Australia that leads to young Sunni Lebanese Australians to go to Syria for jihad relies on claims that in Syria you have an Alawi minority suppressing a Sunni majority. My understanding is that most of the ministers are in fact Sunni and the business elite with the economic power in Syria is also mostly Sunni. According to [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council_of_Ministers_\(Syria\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council_of_Ministers_(Syria)):

“The Information Minister, Dr Al-Zouabi, is Sunni (not Alawi, as claimed).

“The Foreign Minister, Walid Muallem, is Sunni (not Greek Orthodox, as claimed).

“The Deputy PM and Minister for Economic Affairs Qadri Jamil is Kurdish, as stated, and Communist (not Alawi as claimed).

“It is interesting that the religion of the Minister for Social Affairs Ms. Kinda Al-Shammat is not listed though one would assume she is Sunni because of her white hijab and the way she wears it.”

REFUGEES

The Syrian state and its population are being indirectly attacked by US/EU/NATO/UN; and directly by Israel, [HERE](#) and also [HERE](#), 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). The mercenaries fight among themselves to grab the moneys channeled from the CIA and other American institutions via GCC and/or Turkey. Weapons enter Syria hidden in Turkish ambulances posing as such. US cash provides weapons and logistics, fund mercenaries, pay for jihadists. Bands of jihadists armed to the teeth invade Syria through Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon (Tripoli). Turkey opened its Syrian borders to them and, through terror, they displace the populations forcing them to take refuge back in Turkey in an effort to destabilize Syria. Turkey, in fact, invites Syrian refugees into the country. It is documented that Syrian refugees in Turkey are mistreated, have their organs removed (stolen), children sold for forced marriage or else. There are an estimated 50,000 foreign jihadist fighters terrorizing Syria’s countryside: snipers, bombers, agitators. They torture and kill men who refuse to join them. In their religious fundamentalism they believe that any

Muslim they kill will automatically and immediately achieve paradise; they are actually doing them a favor (!). There is a score of young Europeans on their ranks as well (Germans, Dutch, British, Australians).

We visited and talked with a chief of family, refugee in Lebanon and saw twenty people living in a space roughly 6×6 without ventilation, a room inside a warehouse, for which they pay the equivalent of 400 dollar/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. And he explained that in his native Homs jihadists take over their houses, rape their women, and kill young males who refuse to join their ranks. Chechens, Afghans, Pakistanis, Lebanese, Jordanians, Turkish, Europeans compose these gangs armed, fed and maintained by the above mentioned foreign governments. He said they attach suicide vests around peoples' bodies and threaten to explode them if they don't do what they are told. Underneath a rather dignified posture, he was scared, terrorized. Yet we kept hearing the same mantra over and over: "I want to go back home, I don't belong here." It was truly heartbreaking, and I felt helpless in the face of it. Bearing witness we were.

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 check points with armed soldiers at the gates. Multiply this by about 1.5 million and you will have an approximate dimension of the human tragedy. We visited the Sabra Palestinian refugee camp as well, of the infamous Sabra-Shatila massacre by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in September 1982, on the outskirts of Beirut. In addition we toured the UN High Commission for Refugees intake center in Zahleh, Lebanon, next to Bekaa valley and were briefed by Maeve Murphy, UNHCR senior field coordinator. She said that there is a staff of 50 workers to deal with an influx of 1,500 refugees a day.

This is how it works, according to Prime Minister Wael Al Halki himself, with whom we spent 2.5 hours and with him doing most of the talk to explain in detail and with statistics and evidences what is really happening for the last two years. 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-Shammatt (estimate). But the UNHCR provides an official estimate of 1.5 million refugees spread over the different neighboring countries as follows:

- Jordan: 471.677;
- Lebanon: 469.217;
- Turkey: 347.157;
- Iraq: 146.951;

- Egypt: 66.922.

GOVERNMENT RETALIATION

Syrian authorities on the other hand reacted to the rampant and aggressive terrorism through a policy 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, what 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 fruits as the terrorists are being decimated or otherwise driven farther and farther from populated areas. The minister of justice said textually: "Those who invade us to kill and destroy our country will not leave Syria alive." [But the jihadists still occupy and keep under siege many localities](#). If compared to the US retaliation to the 9/11/2001 terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center, killing millions, invading other countries, and lingering still 12 years later through drone attacks and selective assassinations, such 'iron hand' policies are mild (without condoning the violence, that is). Those are, therefore, the demolished buildings shown ad nauseam and out of context, over and over on CNN, BBC, FOX and the rest of them.

According to Paul Larudee, a delegate from the USA:

"Most of the men and some of the women do not want to be photographed, but the children don't mind. Several people from Qusayr, a town on the Lebanese border said that when the demonstrations first began two years ago, they were nonviolent and the local officials would even clear the roads for them. However, as they became more violent, the central government failed to act and the town was eventually overrun by armed local elements and foreign fighters from Chechnya, Azerbaijan and other places. It was only after the population fled that Syrian troops finally came to quell the rebellion, which has apparently not yet been fully accomplished. I have no way to assess the accuracy of these stories, nor to generalize them, but at least my modest Arabic skills allow me to strike up conversations with whomever I want, and there are no government minders in Lebanon. Nevertheless, we all want to meet with groups that have a very different story to tell, and Mother Agnès-Maryam has included such opportunities in our schedule, even Jabhat al-Nusrah, the al-Qaeda affiliate, with whom none of us expected to be able to speak."

There is also the case of a boy shot by snipers in a street and whose body was whisked away by photographers who then made a video of his death; of his dying actually, fleeing afterwards and leaving the corpse behind. Medical personnel said afterwards that he could have been saved if taken to a hospital instead of to the killing fields' improvised TV studio. The result of such filth is sold to TV networks for your and my robotized consumption. Yet as the PM asserted, the workers are being paid on time, schools, universities, public offices continue operating, and the government is able to maintain a somewhat normal life under such extenuating circumstances. As we toured the city or participated in meetings, we would hear loud booms at a distance, sometimes seeing clouds of black smoke rising from the bombed sites, or else, sounds of gun fights. We taped some of these with our cell phones. 'Necessary evil,' I was told, as I asked a gentleman in a restaurant, what he thought about such retaliatory bombings. People in fact don't pay much attention to them. The UN says nearly 70,000 people have been killed since the foreign fighters entered the country

and started the armed conflict in March 2011.

Another important point made by delegate Susan Dirgham:

"I don't remember anyone we met supporting an arms embargo against the state. We were reminded by the Melkite Patriarch that the selling of arms to the state is legal. If it were stopped, the enemies of Syria would surely win. I think what united everyone I met in Damascus was support for the state + dialogue. This view was shared by people from different backgrounds and by those who supported the president and the current government and those who didn't, such as the members of the "Third Current" I spoke with. They may not have supported some of the tactics of the army or security etc, but they supported the right for Syria to defend itself from outside aggression and to remain in a position where it can defend its people and territory. It seems as though we are being balanced and peace-loving when we support an arms embargo on both sides, but actually to support an embargo against Syria without also supporting the same for all countries in the region, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, etc. would not be helpful. Syria would collapse and be destroyed by its enemies if its army didn't have the military hardware to defend the people and country, firstly against the 50,000 foreign jihadists/mercenaries, etc. and then against the states that work to destroy and dismember it."

On one occasion an IED-Improvised Explosive Device exploded about 10 minutes after our delegation had left the Patriarchate of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church (our hosts throughout), where we had attended an ecumenical prayer for peace. I was shown photos immediately after, sent by cell phone, of blood on the floor from people killed and injured from the attack. Such is life in Damascus to which, after a short 10-day visit, we were getting somewhat used to. Understanding drives away outrage and harsh judgmental assumptions and conclusions. Mairead Maguire, who talked in private with four Syrian armed combatants, said they told her they took up arms against the government because they were unemployed; one of them with five children. Al Qaida offered them money. They took the offer and started killing fellow Syrians. Moreover, three shots were fired against the car of the leader/organizer of the peace mission, Mother Agnès-Mariam Soeur, a Melkite nun, on Sat. May 11, 2013 as she traveled to her native Homs, the hotspot city where her monastery was destroyed by terrorist activities.

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 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. This was just one of many fascinating experiences afforded us by our hosts being demonized and targeted for invasion and occupation by the West. They are understandably worried that invading marines wouldn't have what it takes to appreciate such a wealth of history, art, religious traditions, faiths, civilization, and would most probably raze it to the ground as they have done elsewhere in Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan. Right they are. 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.

We arrived in Lebanon during the holy week of the Eastern Orthodox Churches and spent their Easter Sunday (5 May) as guests of one of the many Christianities of the Middle East, where it all began. An added treat.

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 all parties involved, not just to the Syrian government that has a right to defend itself from foreign aggression. Are the foreign bands of invaders that are killing and terrorizing the population. All parties must follow the rules of international law."

I find it disgraceful that our Western governments, led by US-EU-Israel and their client states, be full and willing partners in such atrocities perpetrated in name of 'human rights,' 'democracy,' 'rule of law,' 'freedom,' 'liberty,' and other such meaningless, trivialized euphemisms. The present political and economic structures, embedded in the machinery of predatory militarism and capitalism, present us with only one choice, the lesser evil; but that is an artificial construct. Gandhi, Mandela, Luther King, Lula and many others are proof that changes and transformation are envisioned, given form and arise from below, from the ranks of the oppressed and minorities, from a non co-opted periphery, and not from within the belly of an empire of banks and bases seeking unlimited profits and hegemonic powers—for their own sake. Policies must again be made to endeavor the wellbeing of human beings, of life, not the perpetuation of structures and cultures that by necessity have to go. At other times in history piracy, slavery and absolute monarchy, for instance, also represented the status quo, *the law*; but they are no more. Nonviolent resistance and actions throughout the cultural-structural apparatus are *the* means to turn this tide, which is taking our planet and all its life to the abyss. We must choose life and peace by peaceful means, resist we must; and we will!

The [formula is given](#) by Galtung: **Equity, Harmony, Trauma Reconciliation, Conflict**

Resolution:

$$\text{Peace} = \frac{+ \text{Positive Peace}}{- \text{Negative Peace}} = \frac{\text{Equity X Harmony}}{\text{Trauma X Conflict}}$$

*“For Syria, what comes to mind is a Swiss solution. One Syria, federal, with local autonomy, even down to the village level, with Sunnis, Shias and Kurds having relations to their own across the borders. International peacekeeping, also for the protection of minorities. And non-aligned, which rules out foreign bases and flows of arms, but does not rule out compulsory arbitration for the Golan Heights (and June 1967 in general), with Israeli UN membership at stake. The search could be for solutions, not for **the** solution. Let 1,000 dialogues blossom, in each quarter, each village, enriching the gross national idea product, GNIP. UN-supported facilitators, with knowledge of mediation, rather than with guns and binoculars.” [iii]*

Like Paul meeting the angel Ananias on his way to Damascus experienced a change of heart and became St Paul, so have I met many angels on my own Road to Damascus and, although not gone into sainthood, I have reinterpreted and upgraded my own vision of reality—which I now share with you.

[i] Johan Galtung, [Syria](#), TRANSCEND Media Service, 29 April, 2013.

[ii] Galtung, [Turkey-Cyprus-Kurds-Armenia-SYRIA](#), 15 Oct, 2012, TRANSCEND Media Service.

[iii] Galtung, [Syria](#), TRANSCEND Media Service, 29 April, 2013.

Antonio Carlos Silva Rosa is the editor of the Peace Journalism website, [TRANSCEND Media Service](#), and the Eurolatina Convener for the [TRANSCEND Network for Peace, Development and Environment](#). He has a Masters (Ph.D. incomplete) in Political Science-Peace Studies from the University of Hawaii, is originally from Brazil, and presently lives in Porto, Portugal. He was educated in the USA, where he lived for 20 years, and lives in Europe for the last 20.

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