

Voices from Syria: Bashar al Assad is Essential for Syria's Unity and Security

Reverend Andrew Ashdown. Part 3

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Syria's triumph over terrorism and maintaining the secular identity of Syria is what will bring back a good relationship with Europe. It will also solve the problem of refugees and it will restore peace. Nothing can be achieved without getting rid of terrorism. ~ Dr Ali Haider

Following my meeting with the Minister of Tourism, I was taken to meet with Dr. Ali Haider, the Minister of Reconciliation.

Dr. Haider is a wise and gentle man who is passionate about the need for reconciliation, peace and reform. He is leader of an internal opposition party, whilst also being in the Government, as Minister of Reconciliation.

In previous visits to Syria, I have seen some of the profound work achieved by local faith leaders working 'on the ground' amongst all parties in the midst of conflict. Several have lost their lives, including a dear Sheikh with whom I spent time in 2014. The Ministry for Reconciliation has been responsible for a significant number of ceasefires around the country, and for the rehabilitation of fighters into their communities, or their peaceful removal if they choose not to stay.

I don't shy away from difficult questions and had a particularly fascinating conversation with the Minister for Reconciliation on the issue of reconciliation initiatives throughout Syria and sieges. The following is a transcription of the recording I made of our conversation [with his permission]. I am not commenting on the truth or otherwise of what is said, but this is a voice and a perspective which should be heard:

I first asked the Minister if he could tell me something about the situation in Aleppo. He replied:

The truth in Aleppo is completely the opposite of what is being reported in the west. The besieged part of the city is in fact the one loyal to the Syrian Government, and this part was under siege for a very long time. The army had to fight many battles to secure an alternative road in order to bring food and other supplies into that part of the city.

[Most of the population remaining in Aleppo are in the Government-controlled area of the city. Most of the population from the remaining part of the city have already fled, mainly to government-controlled areas in Syria].

What is happening now in Aleppo is that the families of the terrorists are

fleeing, and there is an attempt to create a counter propaganda in order to terrify people and make them leave their houses so that they can say that civilians are fleeing the bombing of Syrian and Russian air forces.

The Syrian army in all the battles they fought were aiming to break the siege of many areas. When the Syrian army managed to break the siege of Nubol and Zahara, Aleppo became a bit safer. The army is trying to make the terrorists get away as much as possible from Aleppo. Till now the Syrian army hadn't entered into any area inhabited by civilians and hadn't made any humanitarian mistakes. In the media they speak about people fleeing their houses and they never spoke about massacres committed by the Syrian army because there were not any.

Of course we have heard much about the situation in Madaya, and the *blockade by the Syrian Government*, I asked Dr Haider for his opinion:

The agreement that was known as the Zabadani- Madaya and Kfraya and Foua agreement is nine months old.

[[Kafraya and Foua](#) are two Shia villages under US NATO backed terrorist siege, partially since 2011 and full siege since March 2015.]

The first phase of the agreement was that the terrorists would leave from Zabadani to Beirut in exchange for civilians leaving from Kfraya and Foua into Turkey.

The final exchange of people would take place in the airports of Beirut and Ankara. It was the Turkish government that delayed the first phase for more than 8 months, and that is why the suffering that took place in Kfraya and Foua and Madaya and Zabadani. It was the Turkish Government that delayed the implementation of the agreement.

Despite all of this, the Syrian government in October 2015, delivered food aid which the ICRC acknowledged would be sufficient for the people in Madaya for many months. But the armed group called Al-Shamia Front took control of the distribution of the food items. The Shamia Front Head Quarter is in Idlib and their references are in Turkey. The food items were stored in two main warehouses. One of the warehouses was set in the house of one of the leaders of the front his name is Ziad Darwish; and the second one was set in a house opposite to a medical point in Madaya. It is they who restricted the aid to the residents. And no one was allowed by the fighters to deliver any aids into Kfraya and Foua.

Later on, when we initiated the first phase of the agreement, we managed to achieve the exchange. But when we moved to the second phase which meant to deliver food aids and medical aids and other supplies into the four mentioned towns, all the needed help were successfully delivered into Madaya, but the ICRC and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) were able to deliver aid for one time only.

In Madaya, the UN went in four times and witnessed the situation from within, whereas the terrorists would not allow us to go into Foua. We had an experience yesterday (Wednesday Feb 10 2016), when SARC went into Madaya to bring out three injured civilians. The terrorists targeted the convoy, and the cars and one of the drivers were hit; yet SARC brought out the three civilians and they are now being treated in a Damascus hospital.

Also, Deir Azzor city is completely besieged by ISIS and no one can go there.

Now the Syrian government with the help of Russian Air Force deliver food aids using Parachutes. We have sometimes done the same in Kfraya and Foua.

In areas under the control of armed groups where there are still civilian, the government allows food aids to enter these areas. For example in the past two weeks alone, we have delivered food to Madaya, Tall, Ma'adamia and Douma, which are under the control of armed groups. They all received aids.

The suffering of the civilians inside these areas is caused because the armed groups confiscate the aids and control the distribution. They also control the movement of the civilians and have checkpoints that don't allow the civilians to leave.

Now, there is a campaign against Syria politicizing the humanitarian issue. Why does this campaign always start whenever there is any progress whether politically or militarily? I have to mention here that whenever there have been peace talks, the humanitarian issues (made worse by the terrorists) are highlighted to hinder progress; to gain sympathy. And to justify any intervention in Syrian under the pretext of Humanitarian help.

I then asked Dr Haider for clarification of the much reported upon situation in Yarmouk, the Palestinian suburbs often described as a *Camp* situated to the south of Damascus:

There are about 18,000 people still inside Yarmouk. [It was over 150,000 before the crisis, but most have been allowed to leave and are being looked after safely in areas under Government control.] We are now working on a reconciliation project in Yarmouk. if the project succeeds a big problem will be avoided, and it will have a positive impact on the people in many areas.

The counter propaganda to this project is because it will affect the existence of ISIS and Nusra in these areas. The reconciliation project aims to make 1800 fighters from ISIS and Nusra get out of the area. Some of the fighters have already left in a clandestine agreement. The Syrian forces had to provide protection for their exit because other terrorists did not want them to leave. Our aim is to free people from those fighters.

I asked what Dr. Haider would want to say to British MPs if he could meet them. He said:

My message is still the same: Syria is the wall that protects Europe, I think that the main battle is a battle for civilization, and humanity. Europe has started to feel the threat that is coming because of what is going on in Syria.

My message to all the Europeans is: Syria's triumph over terrorism and maintaining the secular identity of Syria is what will bring back a good relationship with Europe. It will also solve the problem of refugees and it will restore peace. Nothing can be achieved without getting rid of terrorism. Attaching a political demand will make Syria suffer in the same way that Iraq has suffered. Finally, Europe is closer to Syria than the US not only geographically, but in terms of civilization and history.

The Minister for Reconciliation is someone with whom we really ought to be engaging. He is a wise and gentle man and is in every way a moderate. Like most people in the country, he desires the well-being and unity of Syria, unlike the terrorists whom the west euphemistically label 'moderate'.

It is shocking that the West is talking with *leaders* of extremist terrorist groups, and not with people who are genuinely seeking peaceful engagement with all Syrians.



Andrew Ashdown with Ali Haider, Syrian Minister for Reconciliation

Conclusion

I have spent the last 6 weeks in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, the fourth such visit in 2 years – talking to numerous people, including refugees, from all segments of Syrian society. Assad has very strong support within Syria across the whole spectrum of Syrian society, the majority of whom are Sunni.

Sunnis in fact make up the majority of the Syrian Army. Just a few weeks ago, 70 Sunni Syrian Army soldiers were executed by ISIS at Deir Ezzor, largely ignored by the mainstream media. A huge number of the population support Assad personally, though everyone has criticisms of the regime, especially about corruption and the security apparatus.

Many refugees, even if they don't support the regime, say that Assad is better than the chaos that would ensue if the sectarian 'rebels' were to win. Talking to Kurdish Refugees from Syria at a camp in Iraq 2 weeks ago, all of them were united in their belief that though they didn't like the regime they support Assad personally, and do not want to see him defeated.

Even the government's opponents inside Syria acknowledge that Assad did try to undertake reform, and I saw plenty of evidence of this in my travels to Syria immediately prior to the conflict. It is popularly believed that Assad was deeply constrained by the powerful forces within sections of the regime. The regime structure is profoundly complicated, and Assad does not have direct control of every part of it. I have not only experienced aspects of this myself in a small way, but have heard about it from individuals who have been political prisoners as well.

It is true Assad made mistakes at the beginning of the uprising, but the details of the uprising have entered the realms of exaggeration and fiction. I have spoken with people who participated in the uprising and who witnessed the violence perpetrated by armed outsiders against the army very early on. An opposition leader even told me that he was told by an opposition figure in Turkey in 2010:

There is going to be a war in Syria. It is coming soon and has all been planned.

In some cities, the army only opened fire after they had first been attacked. This is now well documented.

I don't think I've met anyone who gives unqualified support to the regime. Barrel bombs and torture chambers are a fact [cf the actions of USA in Iraq and Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia in Yemen, Israel in Gaza, and most of our allies]. However, little has been said of the constant killing and destruction perpetrated against civilians by the *moderate rebels* Hell Cannon mortars and shells that are randomly killing and maiming civilians in large numbers.

As for the refugee crisis. The largest numbers of refugees are within Syria itself, having fled the rebel-controlled areas to the comparative safety of the government-controlled areas. Most that I have spoken to in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq say they did not flee the regime. Rather they were fleeing the violence caused by the conflict on both sides, the brutality of the 'rebels' towards those not of their religious or political persuasion and the bombing of rebel areas by the government, and the economic hopelessness that now exists in the country.

All narratives contain a degree of truth. But in the Syrian war, the truths have been brutally twisted into a narrative to fit the political interests of the west and gulf countries. It is infinitely more complex than the simplistic good-guy-bad-guy western media narrative.

My experience across Syria is that much of the narrative that we are fed is grossly distorted. Incidentally the only places which feel in any way vaguely like the secure pluralistic society that existed before the uprising [many Syrians say they want Syria to be 'safe like it was'] are the government-controlled areas where people live together in comparative safety.

When I walked the streets of Homs in November, people were coming up and saying how glad they were the 'rebels' had been removed, and now the city could begin to recover. As I mentioned previously, two of my friends had to flee their homes in Homs because of the 'rebel' occupation. Their homes were destroyed in the government bombardment, but each of them said:

If it took bombing my home to destroy the terrorists, I accept that.

Now however, the economic situation caused by the war and the sanctions is creating tremendous hardship for all Syrians, and is creating the grounds for a further exodus. Anyone who blindly accepts the media narrative frankly is a bit of political fool! Perhaps my biggest lesson in this past six weeks in the region is just how profoundly complex and multi-layered the situation is.

It is not nearly as clear-cut as the media and politicians are making out and western policies, actions and alliances are without doubt making it infinitely worse. What is contributing to the continuation of the conflict is the refusal of the international community to speak to people within Syria, and to listen to what their wishes are and our on-going support for extremist *Islamic* groups who wish to see the sectarian partitioning of Syria. Most Syrians I have spoken to across the region, have no wish for them to take charge of the country.

Lastly, as Christians, what is our response to the Christian community in the region, whose

very existence is threatened?

The wishes of the Christian communities have been made clear again and again. And every single Church leader in Syria has spoken out against western policies. On the ground, local Christian and Muslim leaders work together to bring healing and reconciliation amongst profoundly fractured and suffering communities. They feel abandoned by the international community.

Their voices are ignored by political and religious leaders alike. In this conflict, there are no innocent parties. And we ourselves must take our share of the blame for the catastrophe that has befallen this country that was a cradle of faith and civilisation. And if western Church leaders are silent in response to the cries of our fellow Christians in the region, then we must share responsibility for their catastrophic demise and the sectarian disaster that could follow.

End of Part III

ALSO READ:

[Part I – Reports from Inside Syria by Rev. Andrew Ashdown](#)

[Part II – Syria’s Secularism and Pluralism Cannot Survive without President Bashar al Assad](#)

Reverend Andrew Ashdown is an Anglican priest in England. He has been visiting and leading groups to the Middle East for over 25 years, and has visited Syria four times since April 2014, both as a member of faith delegations, and more recently independently. Andrew is undertaking research into Christian/Muslim relations in the region.

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