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## “The People of Aram Shall Go into Exile”: Practical and Theological Dilemmas of Middle Eastern Churches since the Beginning of the Syrian War

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**“The People of Aram Shall Go into Exile”:  
Practical and Theological Dilemmas of Middle Eastern Churches  
since the Beginning of the Syrian War**

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*This paper discusses the way in which Christian churches in the Middle East have responded to the Syrian War. It signals some practical and theological dilemmas that these churches have faced since the conflict in Syria broke out. The description of these dilemmas is primarily based on interviews with a representative sample of church leaders. Analysis of these dilemmas sheds light on the way the churches of the Middle East have contributed to peaceful resolutions of the Syrian conflict, or failed to do so. Before going into the practical and theological dilemmas of the churches, the article provides a short sketch of the socio-political situation in Syria prior to the war. It also offers a brief overview of the war and the way it has impacted the Christian communities in the region.*

**Introduction**

The title of this article was chosen to demonstrate that war and displacement have a long history in the Middle East, and have always prompted theological reflection. As recent contributions of Syrian Bible scholars demonstrate (Ghantous, 2018; Kassis, 2016), there are parallels between the theological struggles of the writers of the Hebrew Scriptures and those of today’s Christian communities. This is especially true for the prophetic literature in the Hebrew Bible deals which deals with the reality of exile. The Hebrew prophets witnessed and tried to come to terms with violence, displacement and exile in light of their faith in God. How could they reconcile the catastrophes they experienced with their image of God as compassionate and faithful? As will be argued, similar questions vex contemporary Christian communities of the Middle East and their leaders.

One of the ancient prophetic books, Amos, which was written in the eighth century B.C. just before the Assyrian invasion, contains an oracle about ancient Syria, which was then called Aram. Amos prophesied that “the people of Aram will go into exile” (Amos 1:5). These ancient words accurately describe the situation of numerous Syrians who have been displaced and forced to leave their country during the past decade. As I will argue, it is especially this massive displacement that is a source of challenges and dilemmas for the churches.

In this article, I will first give a rough sketch of the situation in Syria before the war. Next, I will offer a brief overview of the war and its impact on the Christian communities of the region. Against this background I will outline and analyze some practical and theological dilemmas that the churches and especially their leaders face as a result of the war and the displacement it caused.

**Syria before the War**

Syria is a relatively young nation state; it became independent in 1946 after the French Mandate, which had begun after the 1919 Versailles Peace Treaty. Prior to the French Mandate, Syria was

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a province of the Ottoman Empire. Syria’s urban culture is characterised by commerce and cultural refinement. The largest cities, Damascus and Aleppo, are home to ancient bazaars, fine museums, and exquisite culinary traditions. While Syria’s countryside is rich in orchards, the central desert harbours modest oil reserves. Some of Syria’s archaeological sites are part of world heritage.

Before the civil war, Syrian society was characterized by ethnic and religious diversity. As historian Philip Hitti argued in his monumental history of Syria (1957, first edition 1951), Syria has been a bridge for transmitting cultural and religious values since antiquity. This was still the case on the eve of the civil war. Although the majority of the population spoke Arabic, there were substantial minorities that spoke other languages, such as Assyrian, Aramaic, Armenian, Turkish, and Kurdish. Sunni Muslims formed the largest group (70-74%), about 13% were Muslims of other convictions, 6-8% were Christians of various denominations, and 3 % Druze.

For the past fifty years, Syria has been ruled by the Ba’th Party, which was established in the 1940s. The Arabic word *ba’th* means renaissance. The founders chose this name to refer to the renaissance of the Arabs after western imperialism. While the Ba’th Party accepted Islam as the common and predominant culture of the region, it also advocated religious freedom and secularism.

In 1963, the Ba’th Party seized exclusive power in Syria. The leadership of Ba’th was predominantly drawn from the Alawi sect, which is one of Syria’s ethno-religious minorities. During the French Protectorate over Syria, many officers had been selected from rural backgrounds and ethnic minorities, including the Alawis, while not many had been drawn from the Sunni majority. This had been a deliberate policy of the French governors of Syria. Since the establishment of the Syrian nation in 1945, more Alawis had joined the army and risen to high positions. In the 1950s, these military leaders gained the upper hand in Ba’th and marginalized the civilian leaders of the party, including its founder Michel Aflaq. The fact that many high-ranking officers were Alawite and supportive of Ba’th helped the party to stage a successful coup in 1963 (Seale, 1988). This coup ended the chaotic aftermath of the collapse of the Syrian Arab Republic, which united Egypt and Syria politically. After an internal power struggle in the Ba’th Party, General Hafiz al-Asad claimed the presidency in 1970. He remained Syria’s leader for three decades. Upon his death, Hafiz’ son Bashar al-Asad succeeded him as the President of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Both Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad ruled Syria with the help of a small group of loyal army commanders and politicians, most of whom were drawn from the Alawi sect. They also built up an elaborate network of secret services (*mukhabarat*), which instilled a culture of fear among the population, the army and the political order. Whereas the early success of the party was partly built on its anti-colonial agenda and partly on its influence in the military, its unrelenting retention of power after the military coup of 1963 was largely due to Ba’th’s grip on the military and police apparatuses.

Because of the pre-eminence of one ethno-religious group in the Ba’th regime, the power struggle in Syria could, even before the war, easily be construed as a sectarian conflict. However, the fact that a number of high-ranking officials in the governments of both Hafiz and Bashar al-

Asad were Sunnis and Christians demonstrates that sectarianism was not the major concerns of the Ba’th Party, as Van Dam (2017) points out. This is an important observation because it gives a clue to the sources and the resolutions of the conflict.

### **A brief overview of the Syrian War**

The Syrian War started as a popular uprising in the spring of 2011. The immediate trigger for the protests in Syria was the torture and killing of a thirteen-year-old boy who had sprayed anti-government graffiti on a wall in the southern town of Daraa. When protesters took to the streets in the Syrian capital of Damascus in March 2011, they demanded reforms and the release of anti-regime political prisoners. In the three months that followed, the demonstrations intensified and spread all over Syria. The Syrian police and the army suppressed the demonstrations with increasing violence, arresting thousands and killing many. [reference]

The revolution morphed into a civil war when, in July 2011, large numbers of servicemen defected from the national security forces and the army and formed oppositional militias. The most notable among these was the Free Syrian Army, which was formed on 29 July 2011. By now, the aim of the insurgents was to overthrow President Assad and his government.

The involvement of jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) complicated and perpetuated the Syrian War. Historians agree that jihadist groups joined the war later on and had no part in the popular uprising of the first few months. In other words: they used the chaotic situation as an opportunity to intervene and push their own agenda – the re-establishment of the caliphate in Iraq and Syria – thereby destabilizing the country further (Burke, 2015).

Regional and international political dynamics were another factor in the Syrian War. A discussion of these dynamics goes beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it here to say that several Middle Eastern and European countries, Russia and the United States of America have all been involved indirectly – by backing the Syrian government or opposition groups and supplying them with weapons – or directly through military intervention. From the vantage point of 2019, it appears that the Russian military intervention, which began in September 2015, has decided the war in favour of the Syrian government.

In spite of international politics and the rise of jihadist groups, the Syrian War can be traced back to internal tensions, as Van Dam (2017) argues. These internal tensions were not primarily caused by sectarianism, but rather by what one observer calls a class conflict (Rahimah, 2016). Large segments of society, especially among the majority Sunni population, felt disenfranchised in Asad’s Syria. Political, military and economic power was in the hands of a relatively small segment of the population. Dissension was not tolerated and often nipped in the bud with repressive means. The Syrian secret services were especially feared for their shrewdness and cruelty. These circumstances were a fertile seedbed for revolution and, eventually, armed conflict. It should be noted that this analysis is not shared by the Syrian government and its supporters, who have consistently justified their policies and military actions as a defence against terrorist groups. The regime’s use of an “Islamist threat” as a legitimation for its use of violence has been called into question by the Syrian theologian Najib Awad (2012), who argues that the

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Syrian government’s policies should not be built on fear, but on a courageous effort to bring all segments of Syrian society together.

The humanitarian cost of the Syrian War is staggering. In April 2016, the UN special envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, estimated that 400,000 people had been killed since the beginning of the war. Since April 2016, the death toll rose significantly, especially during the assault on Eastern Ghouta, which took place in the winter of 2017-2018. According to UNHCR estimates of July 2017, the war has caused the internal displacement of 7,500,000 people, while over 5,000,000 have fled the country.

### **The Syrian War and the Christian communities**

This section provides a general sketch of the impact of the war on the churches of Syria and, by extension, the surrounding countries. Prior to 2011, the Christian population of Syria was estimated at 1.5 million, or 6-8% of the population (Siriani, 2018). This number has fallen dramatically since the beginning of the war. Before offering more details, I will first shed light on the attachment of the churches to their ancestral lands. I will focus on the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Armenian Catholic Church and the Presbyterian Church of Syria and Lebanon, because the interviewed leaders were from these churches.

Many Syrian churches trace their lineage back to the very first centuries of Christianity and have had an uninterrupted presence in the land. As a result, they are not geographically limited to Syria. This is not surprising if we keep in mind that the Syrian Republic is a relatively young state. The attachment of these churches to their ancestral lands runs much deeper than their attachment to the modern nation states of the Middle East. The Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch, which is located in Damascus, for instance, comprises not only the Syrian Orthodox parishes in Syria, but also in Lebanon, Iraq and southeast Turkey. The Armenian Catholic Patriarchate of Cilicia, whose headquarters are in Bzommar in Lebanon, comprises all parishes in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran. The Synod of the Presbyterian Church is a gathering of all congregations in Syria and Lebanon.

During the second decade of the twentieth century, the attachment of Syriac, Assyrian and Armenian Christians to their ancestral lands was given a deeper dimension during the Armenian Genocide and the *Sayfo*, as the mass murder of the Syriac and Assyrian Christians is called. During these horrendous events, hundreds of thousands were killed and the Syriacs, Assyrians and Armenians were driven away from their ancestral lands in southern Turkey.

Ninety years on, the first decade of the twenty-first century did not bode well for Middle Eastern Christianity, for in the wake of the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq, thousands of Iraqi Christians were forced to leave their country. Before the United States, the United Kingdom and their allies intervened in Iraq in 2003, there were an estimated 700,000 Christians in Iraq. Due to the violence in the country that followed the intervention, that number was drastically reduced. The World Christian Database estimated the number of Christians at 336,000 in 2015 (cited in Teule, 2018). According to a report by the World Council of Churches and Norwegian Church Aid (2016) the number of Christians in Iraq is less than 250,000.

The beginning of the twenty-first century was, by contrast, a period of relative peace for Christians in Syria. The Syrian Orthodox, for example, were able to build new churches, schools and monasteries (Murre-van den Berg, 2018, Teule, 2018). Little did they expect that the same fate awaited them that had befallen their Iraqi sisters and brothers.

The war has profoundly affected the Syrian Christian communities. The Syrian scholar Razek Siriani (2018) gives a glimpse of the impact of the Syrian War by listing the following figures. The Syrian Christian population has dwindled from 6-8% to about 4%. That means 700,000-800,000 Christians have fled the country. He provides details of the impact of the war on the religious institutions and leaders.

At least 82 churches have been targeted by Islamist terrorists and destroyed either completely or partially. Six priests of different denominations were assassinated in cold blood by terrorists during 2013 and 2015. Two bishops of Aleppo were abducted by unknown armed insurgents in April 2013. Two priests were kidnapped by Al-Nusra Front in October 2012 (Siriani, 108).

Siriani tells two dramatic stories of Christian communities that were forcibly removed from their cities and villages. The first is the story of the 5,000 strong Christian population of Raqqa, a city halfway Aleppo and the Iraqi borders. Raqqa was occupied by ISIS in March 2013. Christians were given one day to choose between submitting to Shari'a law and converting to Islam or to leave the city. Virtually all left. The second story is that of the Assyrian population of the Hassakeh area, in the northeast of the country. Assyrian Christians were living in villages near the Khabour River. Their community was decimated due to an invasion by ISIS in late 2015 and early 2016. Around 210 Assyrian Christians were kidnapped, which prompted almost the entire community to evacuate the area. Almost all hostages were released in 2016 after painstaking negotiations and the payment of high ransoms.

### **Practical dilemmas of the churches**

The devastations of the war have confronted the Christian churches with a number of new practical and theological dilemmas. I will first outline the dilemmas of a more practical kind and then move on to the deeper-lying theological dilemmas. I base this sketch on the voices of Syrian Christian leaders. Syrian Christianity is very diverse and includes Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches. In preparation for this paper, three church leaders were interviewed: Bishop George Saliba of the Syrian-Orthodox Diocese of Mount Lebanon and Tripoli; the Armenian Catholic Monsignor George Assadourian, who serves as Auxiliary to the Armenian Catholic Patriarch of Cilicia; and Reverend Joseph Kassab, who is the General Secretary of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon (Presbyterian). Although no leader from the Eastern Orthodox family of churches was interviewed, these three represent Middle Eastern Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Protestantism.

The first dilemma of the churches is related to the mass exodus of Syrian Christians. As was noted, an estimated 700,000 Christians have left the country, which means that the Christian population has halved since the beginning of the conflict. The interviewed church leaders confirm this or sketch an even bleaker picture. Reverend Kassab confirmed that at least 50% of Presbyterians have left, and said that, in some locations, it may be as high as 70%. Bishop

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Assadourian estimated that 60% of Armenian Catholics have emigrated from the country. Bishop Saliba did not give figures, but simply stated that “the majority of our people left”.

Like other Syrian citizens, Christians have chosen to leave the country for a number of reasons. Many of them were directly affected by the war: homes, shops and workshops were hit by rockets; business declined; schools closed; security was no longer guaranteed; and, sadly, in many cases members of their families were injured or killed. As a result, they concluded that they did no longer had a future in Syria and fled to other countries.

Why do the church leaders view the departure of their members as a problem? The first and most obvious reason is that they fear that there will no longer be church members, church leaders and churches in Syria. Monsignor Assadourian expressed his exasperation when he said: “Everyone is thinking about emigration! It is very difficult to find new people for the priesthood!” However, the church leaders are concerned about more than just the perpetuation of their ecclesiastical institutions. All three interviewed leaders expressed that they believe Syria needs its minorities. Without the Christian minorities, post-war Syria cannot return to its multicultural identity. It can no longer be the ethno-religious mosaic it has been for centuries. Bishop Saliba conveyed this longing to a return to the pre-war state: “I was born in Qamishli. We used to have Jews, Muslims, Kurds and Christians there. All lived together in harmony. In recent years, things changed, when the terrorists came. By the good will of good people everything could be changed for the better.” On yet another level, the church leaders fear that faith and ecclesial life will not flourish in the diaspora as it has in Syria. In other words: Syria needs Christians, but the Christians also need Syria. Assadourian articulated his concern about the faith of the members of his church who have left the country. According to him, in Syria, Syrian Christians are like fish in the water. But once they leave Syria their faith is at risk because they are no longer part of their religious communities; they no longer speak their language; and they may not have regular contact with a priest.

In light of this, the Syrian church leaders face a dilemma as to what to advise church members who are considering emigration. The word of a religious leader has considerable weight in the Middle East. Religious leaders are also involved in the practical process of emigration, because they supply their members with necessary papers such as birth and wedding certificates. Bishop Saliba poignantly said: “We do not wish for our people to leave to Europe. But we cannot stop them. This is their life. People try to do the best for their families and children.”

The second practical challenge relates to the widespread destruction and the resulting poverty of the Syrian population. Throughout Syria, homes, factories, schools and economic centres have been damaged or destroyed. The interviewed church leaders testified to the destruction of sanctuaries and schools. Armenian Catholic buildings in Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, Aleppo and Kassab have been damaged or destroyed. Syrian Orthodox sanctuaries in Deir ez-Zor and Homs suffered the same fate, while Syrian Orthodox schools in Deir ez-Zor, the Khabour region and Homs had to close temporarily due to damage. The Presbyterian Church lost sanctuaries in Idlib and Aleppo. Its school in Aleppo was temporarily occupied by militias. The churches have spent considerable resources on the reconstruction of their properties. Some of the cost of reconstruction has been borne by the members of the churches, while other churches, ecumenical organizations and NGOs have also come to their aid. The upshot of the nationwide destruction is

a sharp increase in poverty. A compounding factor is the devaluation of the Syrian currency to one-tenth of its pre-war value. As poverty has increased, church members have not been able to donate as much to the churches as they did before the war. Meanwhile, more people have depended on the churches for support.

Most Syrian church leaders have become involved in the alleviation of poverty and in more general relief work. Reverend Kassab explained that 1,500 families depend on the extensive relief programme of the Presbyterian Church. The Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate also carries out a sizeable relief programme.

The dilemma that church leaders faced in this respect was whether to help only members of their own denomination or to make the funds available to a wider circle of people in need. The Syrian Orthodox and the Presbyterian relief programmes intentionally benefit Muslims as well as Christians. Indeed, this seems to be the trend across the spectrum of church-based relief work. There are pragmatic reasons for this, as Kassab explained. “Our churches need to create a safety zone. They cannot be isolationist. They need to build peace with other religious groups. Sharing is a way of building peace. The other communities will remember this.” Saliba echoed this: “We eat the same food. We drink the same water. We breathe the same air. What is good for them is also good for us and vice versa.”

The relief programmes bring a third dilemma into focus that concerns the relationships with other faith communities. What is the extent of the mission of the churches among vulnerable people? Many Syrians are so needy that they will gladly accept food parcels, medical assistance, hygiene products, financial aid towards education and the like from other faith communities. But what do the churches expect from them in return? This is a dilemma that does not only occur inside Syria, but also in the neighbouring countries, where churches and faith-based NGOs are involved in relief work and educational projects among refugee communities. Reverend Kassab explained that, although many Presbyterians have left Syria, church attendance has increased since the beginning of the war. “People who have received aid have felt that, while everybody betrayed them, this church has stood by their side. So they have come and worshipped with us. Even some Muslims came to our churches and found comfort.” Kassab is, however, adamant that there are no strings attached to the Presbyterian relief programme. He contrasts the Presbyterians, who are ecumenically-minded, with other evangelical groups, who focus on conversion and baptism. “We do not offer assistance on the condition that people come to church. We do not push.” All three church leaders emphasized the importance of interfaith relations. Saliba: “We do not call anybody an enemy. We call them our partners. Muslims in Syria are our partners in the country.”

Monsignor Assadourian touched on a very sensitive point in the relation with other faith communities. Should Christians take up arms in order to defend themselves? He explained that, initially, the Armenian Catholics refused to carry arms, but that the attacks of jihadist groups forced them to use weapons in self-defence. In both Iraq and Syria, Christian communities have formed militias to protect their neighbourhood and villages against jihadist groups.

### **Theological dilemmas**



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By and large, Syrian Christians have consistently supported the government. That is not to say that there have been no Christian voices in support of the opposition. Nor is it accurate to claim that Christians have not shared the concern for political and social reform. However, the majority of Syria’s Christians has taken the view that the removal of the Assad-regime would be much costlier than its preservation. This view is based on the conviction that the regime will safeguard the security and the rights of religious minorities better than any opposition group.

This ambivalence towards both government and opposition immediately brings a political-theological dilemma of Syrian Christians into focus. While they are supportive of the regime and while they dismiss the available political alternatives, to what extent can they voice constructive criticism? Bishop Saliba repeatedly stated that the Syrian Orthodox are loyal supporters of the regime: “We are Christians. We worship God. We respect the king, the president, or whoever is responsible. And we love others. This is the teaching of our gospel and our church.” Reverend Kassab admitted the country’s shortcomings as far as democratic structures is concerned, but also expressed that, during a certain period of the war, Christians feared the alternative, which was the rise of an Islamic State in Syria, in which “not one Christian would be ready to live”.

At several stages of the war, Christian groups and churches have released statements in which they commented on the political situation. These statements have generally expressed support for the government. Even though a group of Jesuit priests from Aleppo released a call for political reforms by peaceful means early on in the war (June 2011), the churches have since produced several statements that have condemned the uprising and international interference in the Syrian conflict. It is notable that these statements have questioned neither the policies of the Syrian government nor Russian military interference. According to the analysis of the Lebanese Protestant theologian Johnny Awwad (2018), the statements of the churches include some notions from liberation theology and anti-colonial rhetoric. Awwad also notes that the statements are “rather thin” when it comes to their theological content.

In a recent essay, Danish scholar Andreas Bandak (2015) has analysed the inability of Syrian Christians to respond to the crisis in a more critical way in terms of fear, more precisely the fear of extinction. Bandak compares the response of Syrian Christians to that of the Copts in Egypt and argues that it is a deep-seated fear that translated into the Syrian Christians’ support for the regime and precluded more nuanced responses on their part. He points out that the Christians have perceived the uprising as a serious existential threat. Bandak’s views accord with the theory of Jonathan Fox (1999), who contends that religions will be quietist and only support political protest and violent opposition to a regime in case of a perceived threat to their existence.

The Syrian Christians’ fear of extinction is closely related to a deep attachment to the land. It is, in other words, a fear of permanent exile from Syria. The current exile of Christians has shaken the churches to the core and poses the pertinent question whether Syria as a territory is essential to these faith communities. Should they hold on to the ancestral lands with religious zeal or do they view the faith community as mobile and flexible, having a new future in other lands?

This dilemma is especially pressing for the Syrian Orthodox Church, whose very name testifies to its indissoluble attachment to the land. “Syria is our motherland,” proclaimed Bishop Saliba. It is almost impossible to imagine the Syrian Orthodox Church without a significant presence in

Syria. Yet Bishop Saliba was pragmatic and understanding when it came to individuals and families who wished to leave the country.

Monsignor Assadourian also expressed a deep connection to the land and made a strong reference to the ancient presence of Christians in Syria, which predates the presence of Muslims. “We want to be a witness to the whole world that we are Christians and that the land is ours. The land is ours; the others are outsiders or foreigners, be they Kurds or Arabs!” As was argued above, Assadourian fears the loss of faith and identity, when members of his church move to western countries and feels that this identity is safeguarded in the Middle East.

The anxiety about the disappearance of the churches from the land is about more than just keeping specific denominations alive within the current Syrian Republic; it is about more than just safeguarding the faith of their members. It is about something that concerns the church universal. Middle Eastern Christians perceive a risk that Christianity will be cut off from its historic origins and become a wanderer on earth. The connection with the Holy Land and Syria as “the cradle of Christianity” (Mikhael, 2015) is, in their view, essential. This connection appears to be especially important for churches that interpret apostolic succession as a historical chain.

Protestant churches care less about this historical-geographical rootedness of Christianity. Reverend Kassab said this explicitly: “We want to be the church for Muslims. What other interpretation can we give to the church of the Middle East? This may be the cradle of Christianity and the Holy Land? So what? If you are not the church for the present society, what kind of church are you?”

This takes us, finally, into the deep theological dilemma – or paradox – of God’s presence amidst human suffering. It is here that the dilemmas bear a close resemblance with those of the ancient Hebrew prophets who witnessed the exile to Assyria and Babylon. Where is God in this crisis? Can we continue claiming that God is compassionate and faithful? “How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:4) That is the deepest dilemma of exile.

The answers of the church leaders reflect theological diversity. Monsignor Assadourian counselled submission to the will of God as the way towards an as yet incomprehensible future. He almost sounded like Job from the Bible as he says: “I am Armenian. We have always been persecuted and killed by others. But we always resurrect. God is the one who gives life and who takes it away. We will always glorify God’s will.” For Assadourian, God is present in suffering and pain as well as in prosperity and joy.

Reverend Kassab emphatically defended a different view. He explained that the young people of his denomination are demanding answers. “The church cannot say: we do not know the wisdom of God behind all this. There is no wisdom of God here! Only Satan is at work here! God is at work fighting this evil somewhere else. Traditional theologies ascribe this to God, stressing that God is omnipotent. But we need other answers.”

Closely related to the question of the divine presence in crisis is the question whether security is a sign of God’s favour and blessing. Bishop Saliba appeared to answer this question

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affirmatively. He testified: “I myself passed through many dangers. God kept me until now.” Assadourian, on the other hand, spoke of suffering in connection with the acceptance of the will of God. Reverend Kassab was ambivalent: while he refused to attribute the crisis in any way to the divine will or power, he also stressed that it is important to remind the Syrian Christians of the cross of Christ.

### **Conclusion**

“The people of Aram shall go into exile,” prophesied Amos in the eighth century BC. Today the pervasive reality of exile is confronting the churches of the Middle East with both practical and theological dilemmas. They continue to grapple with these dilemmas of emigration and connection to the land; of care for the needy and the preservation of their communities; of a constructive role in society and a belief in God’s providence. The church leaders believe that the continuing presence of Christian communities in Syria is essential for a just and peaceful coexistence in the country. They also regard the presence of Syrian Christian churches in their homeland as an essential contribution to world Christianity. That is why the threat of a permanent exile of Christians from Syria causes such anxiety among their leaders. This existential threat explains why the majority of Syrian Christians have chosen a pro-government stance. However, while their political stance has often not been nuanced, Christian relief efforts have benefited all, regardless of political, ethnic, and religious affiliations. In their selfless actions, Christians have contributed to healing and peace in Syrian society. There are, thankfully, signs of hope for the Christian community in Syria. Churches are being reconstructed. Weddings are celebrated again. Slowly the country’s economic, social and political structures will have to be rebuilt. The Christian community – now smaller than before the war – will have an important role to play in that process.

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### **Interviews**

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Bishop George Saliba (Syrian Orthodox), Beirut, 11 September 2018