

# Will the West Take the Damascus Road?

by Stockholm Correspondent Ulf Sandmark

STOCKHOLM, Nov. 20—Entering the Syrian capital of Damascus, we saw people in the streets, bustling traffic, open shops, and long rows of apartment houses. The scene was not much different from Beirut, from which we had set off by car the same morning. Or, for that matter, any southern European city with palm trees along the streets. The contrast with the Western media pictures from Syria was astounding. This was a functioning society. And the streets were, especially compared to Lebanon, tidy.

Later, as we walked the streets, I saw bakeries full of bread and food shops full of vegetables, olives, spices, fish, meat, or candy. People were walking around, shopping for clothes and other things, just as they do at home. A pile of bread still cost USD 15 cents at the old state-subsidized price. I asked the baker, if he lacked anything. “No,” he said. “I have all the ingredients I need. It’s good now.” I got the same answer from one after the other. Some replied that they hoped “it would

become like it was before.” They talked without hysteria or aggressiveness. There was a calm determination and confidence that the nation would prevail.

What I saw was how to really organize a victory over the terrorist Islamic State (IS). The national defense forces, the Syrian Arab Army, with the help of Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia, are pushing back the thousands of international terrorists that have been sent into the country, as well as their Syrian collaborators. However, it is not enough to bomb the terrorists or even to seize the ground they hold. To defeat the terrorists, a functioning social and economic society must be reestablished. This way to fight the war is what I saw during our week-long visit at the beginning of November.

## The Swedish Delegation to Damascus

My visit was as a part of a delegation from a Swedish organization called the Syrian Support Committee for Democracy, under the leadership of its chairman,



*Delegates meet with engineer Hala Gazal, director of the Syrian Investment Agency. Left: Author Ulf Sandmark hands her a copy of EIR's Eurasian Land-Bridge Report (1997), as architect Greger Ahlberg (left) and physician Dr. Ibrahim Ibrahim look on. Right: Ahlberg, Gazal, and Sandmark. The poster behind them shows Syria as the node of Silk Road networks.*





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*A busy Damascus street.*

George Makdesi Elias. The group is organizing demonstrations defending Syria against the foreign aggression, rallies which I had addressed. The trip was aimed to develop relations between the civilian institutions and businesses of the two countries. The 13 persons in the delegation were mainly Syrian-Swedish activists from the 100,000-person Syrian community that has lived in Sweden for decades. Among European nations, Sweden receives, in relation to its population, the largest number of refugees from Syria.

We were two native Swedes in the delegation: I represented the Schiller Institute and political side of Sweden; Greger Ahlberg, a renowned architect, city planner, and artist, wanted to establish contacts for a reconstruction project in cooperation with Syrian professionals in both Sweden and Syria. He had done such projects before for the war-ravaged cities of Sarajevo and Baghdad. He is known in Sweden for initiating the most famous building in the country, the Globe Arena in Stockholm, with features borrowed from a future space city. He is also well known to the LaRouche



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*A vegetable shop in the modern shopping district.*

movement, from the time of his presentation to the 1980 conference in Paris on African development, organized by the Fusion Energy Foundation. Another prominent member of the delegation was businessman Tomas Abda, who linked up the Swedish business community to the economic needs of Syria. Dr. Ibrahim Ibrahim provided his expertise for the shipping of containers of medical aid, which the Syrian Support Committee is doing in cooperation with a Syrian NGO.

Syria appeared to have been a well-organized society since a long time before the war. Entering the country along the bad road in Lebanon, we merged onto a four-lane, well-maintained highway. There were street lights all the way to Damascus,

and electrical power towers alongside. The communities we passed had rows of apartment houses, very much like the projects back home. Coming from Sweden, I saw similarities to a socialist-oriented society.

Soon we were to see that there also were other, much more profound dimensions. As the first day we were there was a Friday, the Muslim holy day, we guests were sent into town to see the sights. We were part of an exchange of

friendship, so the government had provided us with full protection as soon as we crossed the border and continued to do so throughout the visit. We were driven into the old town with its ancient bazaars. Most of the shops were closed for the holiday, but barber shops and restaurants were open and also some shops run by Christians.

### **The Heritage of All Mankind**

Then the historical perspectives hit home. The streets we walked were from long before Christ. I was brought into the very old house of Ananias, where St. Paul had been brought when he was blinded by God

along the Damascus Road Here is where he had been converted to Christianity and started the Christian mission to the rest of the world. The streets and houses have been preserved. They were not allowed to be changed, only repaired, using the ancient techniques. The main mosque, the marvelous Umayyad Mosque, was originally constructed as a temple by the Aramean King Hazael in 805 B.C., and then destroyed by the Assyrians and reconstructed as a Roman temple of Jupiter, then converted into the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist. After the Muslim conquest in 634 A.D., for 72 years it housed both Muslims and Christians, in separate halls, until it was rebuilt as the greatest monument of the Umayyad period of Islam (661-750 A.D.). It still houses the relics of St. John the Baptist.

At the ancient Gate of St. Thomas, Bab Tuma, about 100 meters from the Ananias house, I came the closest to the war during the whole trip. There the grenades from the nearby occupied city district of Jobar had reached the old town. I could see traces of bullet marks on the cupola of a church. Alongside the church, a grenade had destroyed a nursery.

In our meeting with Minister of Tourism and Parliamentarian Beshar Yazji, the delegation viewed a slide show of the damage to the ancient monuments around the country, the heritage of all mankind. And the damage was not from stray bullets, but the result of willful destruction, similar to that wrought by the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Four of the ten oldest cities in the world are in Syria. In the desert at Palmyra, the Temple of Bel (also called Baal) had been hit with grenades and more 200 holes in the ground had been found, made by looters digging into the sites. All the religions that populate the area have been hit by the deliberate destruction, including ancient Sunni mosques. The worst damage was inflicted on the 12,000-year-old city of Aleppo, one of the oldest still-inhabited cities in the world. There, the citadel and large parts the old city are damaged. The Aleppo Great Umayyad Mosque from the Eighth Century is badly damaged and the square and minaret are blown away and cannot be repaired.

On a visit to the Minister of Health, Dr. Nizar Yazigi, we were shown the damage to hospitals, including 74 large ones, which amounts to 60-70% of hospitals with more than 300 beds. Thirty of these are totally destroyed, including national hospitals such as the maternity hospital in Damascus. Eighteen pharmaceutical factories have been destroyed or dismantled and their

contents stolen. The embargo by the Western nations hits especially hard against the procurement of medicines, especially medicines for cancer treatment.

A Syrian I met in the evening at the hotel had come directly from a big funeral of a 12-year-old girl who had passed away from leukemia. He could not understand how anyone could deny children the right to medicine. His embitterment was a black hole, even though he knew the West as a Canadian citizen and was living part time in Canada. I assume that his strong emotions were shared among the other relatives and their friends at the girl's funeral.

The Grand Mufti of Syria, Badr al-Din Hasson, told us the next day that "the destruction of churches or mosques means nothing, compared to the life of a child." He is a very learned man with a broad smile, knowledgeable about all religions, and he brought forward the perspectives of thousands of years of human history to universal levels. One of the Muslims in our delegation joked with him and said that the Christians among us had come to be converted to Islam. He replied that that was totally unnecessary, as "we Muslims are also Christians." This man, who has direct access to President Bashar al-Assad, is a living example of the ecumenical traditions of Syria where the mosques and churches have stood side by side.

## **Rebuilding, Step by Step**

What impressed me particularly are the reconciliation efforts in the style of South Africa and Rwanda, but in Syria these have been initiated even while the war is ongoing. Syrian news reported that one group of rebels after another, consisting of 50, 100, or several hundred soldiers, were laying down their arms and returning to civilian life. The government has named a Minister for Reconciliation with rebels of Syrian origin. For each rebel group, the minister assembles special advisors to explore possible channels to reach out to them. These could be old schoolmates, elders, parents, or other relatives. After very sensitive negotiations, a rebel group agrees to put down their weapons and its members are channeled to jobs to get them away from the fighting (and IS). Those who have committed crimes are sentenced and put in prison, but are not given death sentences. Even criminals give themselves up and go to prison, rather than continuing to fight their countrymen.

We met Minister of Social Affairs and Work Kinda Shabat, an energetic woman wearing a head scarf. She works closely with the reconciliation minister to in-



volve women as crucial participants. “In the future, the mother of the martyr and the mother of his murderer must be able to sit together,” she said. “It is hard work which takes time. The reconstruction of human beings must come first. Before there will be peace, we have to answer many questions about the causes of the war. If civilian life is not stabilized, we will not be able to stop the warring.”

Shabat stressed that the embargo hits the poor hardest, as the rich and powerful always manage for themselves. Syrian women were the most educated in the Arab world, she said. Now women are taken by the Islamic State and sold as slaves. She said that tens of thousands of Syrian women have committed suicide, so as not to fall into the hands of IS, in the city of Raqqa. IS bans girls from school, so the government is working hard to convince those who are afraid of IS to send their daughters to school or to receive education at home. The IS forces people to take up guns, but the government is struggling to keep children away from weapons. “This is a red line for us,” she said.

The Syrian government is aiming reconciliation efforts in all directions, including at its own faults. Shabat told us how the Kurdish population before had not been treated in a just way and not been allowed to teach their own language in schools. She said that “it is time for all children in Syria to learn more about the Kurds.” It was clear that the government is trying to reach out to all groups, in a systematic effort to solve old problems and unify the country, step by step.

In comparison with Tunisia and Egypt, when Syria was hit by the (Western-backed) color revolutions, it had a youthful President who has brought several young ministers into his government. They have made many reforms to meet the demands of the opposition.

As Col. Alain Corvez (ret.) said at the Schiller Institute’s Oct. 18-19 conference in Germany (see *EIR*, Nov. 7, 2014), “We have to stop referring to a dictatorship and untruthfully equating the current regime with the previous regime.... The Constitution voted up in the middle of the crisis in 2012 by the Syrians is totally democratic; it preserves fundamental freedoms, and the government, while fighting the jihadist fanatics, is trying to reconcile all moderate tendencies in the nation, and successfully so, since many opposition forces now support the legal government, knowing that it is the last



*The delegation meets with Minister of Information Omran Ahed Al-Zouabi (second from right).*

bastion against the terrorists.”

The delegation also met Minister of Information Omran Ahed al-Zouabi, who said, “The rebels got what they wanted, but still they want to topple the government.” His conclusion was that “they were not aiming for reforms.”

## **Economic Development and the BRICS**

In the economic field, this clearly socialistic country is opening up for foreign investment, especially from small and middle sized enterprises. The Syrian Investment Agency (SIA) had been set up before the war directly under the office of the President. Our delegation had a meeting with its young general director, the engineer Hala Gazal, and her impressive staff for all branches of the economy. Just as the government is reaching out to all groups of citizens, the SIA is promoting their economic activities and starting businesses. The SIA is especially out to Syrians in exile, and is simplifying the procedures for investments from abroad, with the concept of “the one-stop shop,” to get their assistance in the reconstruction of the country.

In every meeting at the five ministries, I brought up the new world situation that is emerging because of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and China’s New Silk Road project for Eurasian cooperation. The answer at the Foreign Ministry

was that the government “is 100% with the BRICS.” This country is situated at the crossroads of the old Silk Road, and yearly Silk Road Festivals were held in many cities before the war started. The optimism of the New Silk Road can become the means to organize the youth away from terrorism, just as the Chinese President Xi Jinping has said, I pointed out. With the enormous development projects, science, and space exploration, the youth can find an exciting mission, working for the common aims of mankind. The New Silk Road global project is also the tool to convince the government’s enemies that they would be better off losing the war against Syria, as they would have a much better situation than if they “won.”

President Bashar al-Assad has indicated that he has such a plan to reconcile potentially friendly forces in regional countries that are attacking Syria with the terrorists. He calls this the Five Seas Plan, aiming at connecting the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea, and the Caspian Sea—through Syria. This is clearly the same conception as the New Silk Road. If this plan is pursued, it would put Syria at the center of the New Silk Road perspective, and would provide the BRICS with a way to apply their economic might against the enemies of Syria.

At the SIA, I had the opportunity to touch on how the future orientation of the BRICS, can inspire the youth, and define new economic conceptions. Starting not with counting the money you have, as in the liberal British system, such planning and intention for future projects defines the value for which credit can be issued. This credit can be created based on the sovereignty of the nation and can put the nation to work. This is the revolutionary American System applied by Franklin Roosevelt, I said, and as long as the credit is issued for real infrastructure projects, a physical value is created that more than balances the new money created.

I pointed to the article “Proposal for an Egyptian Declaration of Economic Independence,” by Hussein Askary ([EIR](#), July 26, 2013). The proposal for mobilizing the national credit resources, instead of going into foreign debt, has been partly applied by the Egyptian government in their giant effort to build the New Suez Canal and other infrastructure projects. I said, “This is the policy we also propose for Sweden, to put our



*Minister of Social Affairs and Work Kinda Shabat (center), with delegation members Dr. Ibrahim Ibrahim, Samar Rajab, and Mariam Daweed.*

people to work, and it could be applied by Syria.” The article, as well as the 1997 Eurasian Land-Bridge Report, was delivered, together with the latest *EIRs*, and all were well received.

## The War

While we were in Damascus, some of us occasionally heard distant sounds of war. At nighttime, there were no such explosions, as the terrorists avoided open fire so as not to reveal their positions, we were told. One day an official at a ministry said that that day was the first time that there had been no explosions in 24 hours. There were a lot of road blocks and soldiers in the Old Town, but fewer elsewhere in the city, except for at the ministries, TV station, and especially at the garrisons. We saw soldiers on the border with Lebanon and at a few road blocks along the way. Leaving Syria, we saw the lights from a distant military camp. There were no traces of war along the road from the border, and we were kept away from the destroyed areas around the city.

We were told that the terrorists mostly stayed underground. A captured soldier had told the Syrian Army that he had not seen the sky for six months. The well-financed terrorists have brought in special tunnel-boring machines, digging out enormous tunnel systems. In the tunnels, three men can walk side by side, and trucks can be brought into some of them. It is doubtful that the U.S. Air Force could achieve much against these terror-

ists, who already have adapted their war tactics to the air superiority of the Syrian Air Force.

A Syrian Kurdish parliamentarian, Omar Ossy, head of the National Initiative for Syrian Kurds, told me that there are 8,000 IS terrorists outside the northern city of Kobani. They were fighting the 2,000 Kurdish defenders of the city, including 500 women fighters, including the woman commander. Ossy told me that IS had brought up 15 American-made Abrams tanks, captured in Mosul, Iraq. They had been transported hundreds of kilometers on trailers. "They must have been seen by the American satellites, but were never attacked," he said. Ossy did not believe the U.S. war against IS was for real.

Minister of Information Ahed presented us with documentation about the thousands of terrorists who had been attacking Syria, in the form of books with the documentation and picture of each terrorist. Different books were for different countries and the book with the Saudis was the thickest. One book had the flags of most European nations, as well as the U.S., Canada, and Australia. All the books formed a pile 0.4 meters high. They had been presented at the UN Security Council, but were pushed aside and not mentioned in the Western media.

For anyone wanting to fight IS, this information is invaluable, as it allows mapping out the whole international IS and al-Qaeda terrorist apparatus. The refusal of the West to use this material shows that there is no earnest crackdown against these terrorist networks, even domestically in the Western countries.

For instance, the Swedish government is currently supporting the "Syrian opposition" in many ways. The claim is that the now almost nonexistent Syrian National Council is only being provided with humanitarian aid. However, the aid goes to an organization and its refugee camps that is conducting an armed rebellion and is working with the most barbaric terrorists. The Swedish government has also supported the terrorists in Syria for four years, while not using the available information to stop young Swedes from joining the war. This means that these young people are part of the



*George Makdesi Elias, the head of the Swedish delegation, speaks to the press in Damascus.*

country's foreign policy and are being used as cannon fodder.

In the Swedish suburbs, parents and local officials are forming groups to stop their young people from joining IS. Parents who call the police get no help, even if their son is at the airport about to board a plane to Turkey. Local officials are trying to organize activities and jobs to keep the youth away from the new "jihadist" sub-culture. Most such efforts, without the optimistic visions of the BRICS, are futile, for these suburban youth are enmeshed in Western nihilistic culture. One form of organizing young people now being set up in Sweden is an organization for dropouts from the terrorist milieu, much in the same way that former drug addicts bring anti-drug information to the younger genera-

tion. However, the names of those that possibly could be part of such a program are in those books that we saw lying there in Syria, and that information has for years been kept away from the Swedish authorities who desperately needed it.

The IS and al-Qaeda cannot be stopped without Syria, which stands on the front line, and its allies Russia and China. Both Syria and Iraq must be supported as nations. Iran and Egypt are necessary to stabilize the situation; and Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, which have been the tools of the British geopolitical policy to use terrorism as an instrument of warfare, must be told to stop.

Syria has lived through 60 documented invasions in the period of written history. The people and the government officials I met are convinced they will not only endure the ongoing war, but will defeat the aggressors. Calmly and confidently, people are carrying out their daily activities, and young families I met are giving birth to children, in full confidence that the nation and its government will prevail. They see themselves as carrying forward a civilization thousands of years old.

Compared to what I have seen in the Western media, the city life I saw in Damascus was a wonder of stability and order. I took the Damascus Road to see this. It is time for Western political leaders to do that too.