

# Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII

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## Operazione Colomba

Nonviolent Peace Corps of Community Papa Giovanni XXIII

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### **Operazione Colomba, a Nonviolent Presence among the Syrian Refugees in Lebanon**

Operazione Colomba is a Nonviolent Peace Corps, part of the Pope John XXIII Community. It is a civilian corps made only of volunteers, which intervenes in zones of conflict, mostly declared unsafe zones, bringing support to the local communities, victim of armed and social conflicts. We base our actions on life sharing among victims, protect them through the nonviolent action, and facilitate the dialogue and mediation of conflicts.

**Since September 2013**, we have been in Lebanon and in April 2014 we settled down **in the refugee camp in the village of Tel Abbas**, Akkar, North Lebanon, 5 kilometers from the Syrian border. The refugees living in that camp had asked us to live and sleep with them, after receiving repeated threats and violent actions from some Lebanese inhabitants. Since then, the volunteers have been living in one of the tent in the camp, sharing everyday life with Syrian refugees. The camp where we live is one among several informal settlements spread in Lebanon.

With our presence in the camp, we stay close to them every day, to support them in daily challenges, and help them defending their dignity. Firstly, we aim to mediate between Syrians and the NGOs which provide material aid. Our intervention can make a difference in an overburden system. We protect them from the abuses and, sometimes, from violent actions of the Lebanese army. Moreover, we facilitate the encounter between Syrians and the Lebanese community.

### **The “Syrian crisis” in Lebanon**

Life for Syrians in camps is very hard. They risk their own lives every day, forced to live in precarious and poor conditions. People often get sick because of the unhealthy conditions; diseases easily spread around, especially among children. Moreover, the tents are made of wood and cardboard shacks covered with nylon, which do not provide a protection from cold temperatures. They can easily burn, because of electric short circuits and the use of heaters and cookers.

The Lebanese government never signed the Geneva Convention of 1951; hence it does not recognize the “refugee” status, it does not provide shelters or protection to Syrians fleeing war. The large majority of Syrians have no documents. It is thus impossible to have a regular job: most of them are subject to exploitation, being forced to work hard every day for few dollars<sup>1</sup>. So far, they could survive thanks to the support of humanitarian organizations which provide them food, money, shelters or medicines. However, the hard work of NGOs can be just a partial solution of a complex situation: in Lebanon the number of Syrian refugees is around 1.5 million<sup>2</sup>, the 25% of the Lebanese population. The economic and logistic capacity of NGOs obliges them to make a selection about whom to help.

In Lebanon the political and economic conditions have been affected by the Syrian crisis for a long time and the situation cannot perpetuate<sup>3</sup>. The lack of resources has particularly deepened<sup>4</sup>. The social pressure on Syrians is increasing, now influenced also by media. Over the last months, demonstrations of Lebanese population took place: they claimed for Syrians going back to their country. Nowadays, life for Syrian refugees in Lebanon is almost impossible and particularly unsafe. However, after six years of war, the situation in Syria, despite news about “the end of conflict” still does not allow Syrians to safely go back to their country. It is now mandatory, more than ever, to find a decisive solution to this situation.

### **The urgency of a solution**

Living with refugees in camps, we witnessed how hard life can be if you have no documents, cannot claim any rights and have no perspectives for the future. In the last month we assisted to the Syrian crisis worsening. Starting from October, 2017, 20.000 Syrian families, depending on the WFP allowance provided by UNHCR, no more receive it. This measure puts thousands of families in serious risk, of deep poverty and hunger, in the absence of any sources of subsistence<sup>5</sup>. This action comes after six years in which any action for Syrian refugees’ economic autonomy lacked, while families finished any saving. Meanwhile Lebanese community feel exhausted and perceive the presence of Syrians as a thread to their fragile balance.

On September, the 26<sup>th</sup> President Aoun met diplomats from the Security Council countries, the European Union and the Arab League, affirming that his country "can no longer cope" with the presence of Syrian refugees, he appealed to the international community for help to organize their return<sup>6</sup>. On October, the Prime Minister Hariri met the Pope in Rome, discussing the need to organize a *safe* return for refugees in Syria and the necessity to find *safe* zones<sup>7</sup>.

- In response to emerging tensions in Lebanon,
- concerned with the violence and conflicts still affecting Syria,
- considering the positions taken also by the highest figures in Lebanon,
- considering also, above all, the requests of all the Syrians we met in Lebanon,

We intend to advance a sustainable solution contributing to the request for a safe and possible return of Syrians in true humanitarian conditions.

We elaborated an answer that would secure the Syrian’s exit from Lebanon, in accordance with specific conditions and criteria that would satisfy all parties. This proposal intends to acknowledge the efforts of the Lebanese government and its people and their contributions in supporting Syrian

refugees in the past years. The Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon could be solved **only** by safely removing Syrians from Lebanon.

### **Humanitarian non-armed zone in Syria.**

Operazione Colomba learned and can witness the relevance of the present proposal, due to its living together with Syrian refugees along four years. This proposal represents the voice of who fled the Syrian war, not to be killed by bombing or by the Regime, and of who refused to fight in the official army, and now cannot re-enter the country without serious injuries. Collecting their words and the hope for a return back home, we realized together the necessity of a humanitarian zone in Syria. Together with an informal network of refugees here in Lebanon, we pointed out the creation of a safe zone as the best possible solution for their safe return: a region where armies do not have access where a pacific Syrian community can go to live.

A heterogeneous network of refugees belonging to different experiences of displacement and living in different Lebanese regions grouped in the last years to share this proposal. So far, no solutions have been advanced regarding the future life of thousands of people. Their voice is fundamental to add a civilian side to the table of negotiations, where up to now the voice of refugees has not been considered, nor represented by anyone.

The proposal refers to the IV Geneva Convention for the Protection for Civilian Persons in Time of War: articles 14 and 15 respectively declare the right to establish “Safety zones” and “Neutralized zones”. The latter in particular affirms that “Any Party to the conflict may, either direct or through a neutral State or some humanitarian organization, propose to the adverse Party to establish ... neutralized zones ... shelter from the effects of war ... for combatants or non-combatants; civilian persons who take no part in hostilities, and who, while they reside in the zones, perform no work of a military character”<sup>8</sup>.

The proposal was formerly inspired by popular examples, first of all the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, which Operazione Colomba directly supports through a constant presence of a group of volunteers. This community, born in 1997, stood up to decades of conflict, resisting in nonviolent way to continuous aggressions. It has been a landmark for the neighbourhood inhabitants, as an example of humanity and dignity in a context of fierce violence and exploitation. The High Court recognized the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó and asked unarmed international protection for them, guaranteed by International Peace Brigades, FOR and Operazione Colomba.

Operazione Colomba, being experienced worldwide with the role of peace Communities and their nonviolent action to survive within conflict scenarios and to promote dignity and rights of victims in undesired conflicts, offered to this Syrian pacific network support to advance and concretize this proposal, also guaranteeing a civilian international presence in the area.

This proposal results from the analysis of the political situation in Lebanon and Syria and looks at the role of the international community.

### **Humanitarian Safe Area proposal (in detail):**

We propose a humanitarian safe area, under international protection, with no military headquarters, and no prosecution from the regime. It is a zone exclusively devoted to civilians who have been displaced by the regime on the Syrian territory.

Since the beginning of the Syrian revolution in 2011, the number of refugees in Lebanon has not exceeded three hundred and fifty thousand Syrians. The same number has been maintained until May 2013, when Syrian forces and allied Hezbollah forces entered the Syrian border into the town of Qusayr. The military operation carried out by the Syrian forces and Hezbollah not only destroyed most of the city, but it also displaced the civilians living there – constituted by its inhabitants and by Syrians originally from Homs countryside, that found refuge there after fleeing from the Syrian regime. These military operations continued along the eastern border of Lebanon expelling residents from their homes and land and confiscating their livelihood. Within few days, the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon has begun. The number of registered Syrian refugees announced by UNHCR has increased to one million, and the number continued to rise with every military operations conduct by the regime's forces and allies from Hezbollah in areas where Syrian protests demanded rights and freedom to the regime. Until nowadays, these areas are under the control of the regime and its allies from Hezbollah, almost empty from any population, forcing landowners to live few kilometers away, in the Lebanese territory, thus causing a crisis of overpopulation for the Lebanese government and its people.

*From a pragmatic point of view, our proposal is so delineated:*

**A – Geographical position:** the establishment of this area on a land stretching from the North of Qusayr to Yabroud, in the South, and from Lebanese border in the west to pre – Homs Damascus highway eastward.

**B – The reasons** behind the selection of this area are:

1- Between 60% and 70% of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon belong to these areas and their lands are almost empty. If those people return to their lands under the authority of the regime, they would not have wait for that time. Therefore, the return to their land would be safe if the regime has not authority in these areas. This return is ultimately the best solution for them, to restore their normal life and raise their children in safe place.

2- These areas are rich in agricultural lands and water, which provides a state of food security for the population.

3- The existence of long borders between this region and Lebanon which has proved a great ability to stand as neutral as possible towards the Syrian situation. Lebanon is thus accepted by the Syrians as a partner, in the common interests for the safeness of this area and the reconstruction of stability. It is as a way to acknowledge Lebanon for what it did during the past years.

4- Building a state of integration between the Lebanese people and the Syrians in the safe area because Lebanon is the only outlet for this region to the world.

5- In terms of security, the Lebanese army finally ended any presence of terrorist organizations through the military operation in the Bekaa and Aarsal. In this way, it realized the areas between Syria and Lebanon's borders, up to the eastern borders of Lebanon. This border is the western limit of the safe area, free from terrorism and protected by one of its sides by the Lebanese army.

6- The establishment of a safe area of civilians in this particular place may build a social, commercial and humanitarian situation between the residents of the safe areas and the people of the Lebanese border areas to restore the confidence and social integration before the Syrian revolution, hoping to bridge the gap and bring back hostility after the military forces operations between both people.

7- The creation of this safe area would limit the migration of Syrians to Europe and their escape from Syria.

*The desired objectives of the safe area are:*

1. The return of a large part of the Syrian refugees from Lebanon to their land, and the other refugees to their country, thanks to the safety granted in this safe space.
2. Reuniting displaced Syrian families and resuming their normal lives.
3. Ending the state of school dropout, child labor and exploitation, and working on the reconstruction of Syrian children on social and moral grounds away from the values of asylum, war and religious extremism.
4. Ending all problems related to civil issues caused by the long duration of the refugee crisis.
5. Start working on the health problems and psychological cases among the refugee community to be able to recover and return to a normal life.
6. To work on the return of refugees from all the countries of asylum, near and far from this areas. Some of them are now living in Europe, because of the poor life conditions in Lebanon and the lack of hope in a return to their land under safe circumstances.
7. To work with the youth on education and awareness-raising, in order to undermine the ideas of extremism, fanaticism, and terrorism, and eliminate the idea that ISIS works on as a promotion for youth.
8. The economic aspect: investing the energies and financial resources on youth, by securing investment projects, contributing to build their safe future, and avoiding illegitimate actions to earn a living.

The above explanations, reasons and objectives stemmed from humanitarian considerations and aimed to end the remains of military conflicts and, simultaneously, to build confidence and return to normal life. This safe area, which is supposed to be away from military conflicts, can provide primary health care as well as schools to educate new generation who believe in peace.

**Since November 2016 Operazione Colomba has spread the proposal and searched for new supporters:**

- On November 2016, the proposal was received by Hans Timmermans, vice-president of EU parliament:

<http://www.michelenicoletti.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Agenzie-stampa-20.06.2017.pdf>

<http://www.vita.it/it/article/2017/06/14/vogliamo-ritornare-in-zone-sicure-della-siria-lappello-dei-profughi-si/143738/>

<https://www.radioradicale.it/scheda/512513/siria-noi-siriani-la-proposta-di-pace-scritta-dai-profughi>

<http://www.piuculture.it/2017/06/proposta-di-pace-dei-profughi-siriani/>

- On February 2017, the proposal was delivered to Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

- A press conference was held in Rome the 20<sup>th</sup> of June 2017, at the Italian House of Representatives Chamber, the presentation and launch of the initiative;

Others links:

<https://ilmanifesto.it/a-ginevra-anche-i-profughi-e-chi-ha-rifiutato-la-guerra/>

<https://www.good.is/features/italian-activists-beirut-passports-protect-syrian-refugees?sid=sst260097uh>

The proposal on the web site:

<http://www.operazionecolomba.it/wethesyrians>

**The coming months will be crucial to push this document to the highest institutional levels possible: We are currently working to bring some refugee Syrians to one of them public hearings at the European Parliament.**

Moreover, it would be very important for us **to meet a representative of the German government**, to present this proposal and to bring you personally the Syrian refugees' voice.

We therefore ask anyone who is interested, to take part in this initiative. We firstly encourage to promote and disseminate the Peace Proposal to all of your contacts; secondly to engage in the forms most appropriate: by organizing public meetings, supporting refugees in Lebanon, by participating to the presence of Operazione Colomba, or, finally, supporting Syrian families welcomed in Italy and Europe.

*Akkar, Lebanon October 2017*

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on behalf of Operazione Colomba

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### Suggested Links

- [1] Amnesty International, *Left Out in the Cold: Syrian refugees abandoned by international community*, DATE.
- [2] UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), *Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan 2015-2016, Regional Strategic Overview, 2015 UNHCR Income as of 7 April 2015*
- [3] UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), *Syria Regional Refugee Response, Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal*, April 15, 2015
- [4] UNOCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, <http://www.unocha.org/syria> ), April 15, 2015.
- [5] UNOCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), *Updated overview: 2015 Syria response plan 2015-2016 and regional refugee and resilience plan*.
- [6] UNOCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), *Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2015-2016*

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<sup>1</sup> Lebanon Support, *Formal Informality, Brokering Mechanisms, and Illegality. The Impact of the Lebanese State's Policies on Syrian Refugees' Daily Lives*, <http://civilsociety-centre.org/resource/formal-informality-brokering-mechanisms-and-illegality-impact-lebanese-state%E2%80%99s-policies>

<sup>2</sup> UN, Government of Lebanon, *Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2017 – 2020, Introduction*, p. 8 <http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Lebanon-Crisis-Response-Plan-2017-2020.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> “The conflict in Syria has significantly impacted Lebanon’s social and economic growth, caused deepening poverty and humanitarian needs, and exacerbated pre-existing development constraints in the country. The World Bank estimates that Lebanon has incurred losses of US\$ 13.1 billion since 2012, of which US\$ 5.6 billion pertains to 2015 alone.” UN, Government of Lebanon, *Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2017 – 2020, Introduction*, p. 8

<sup>4</sup> “Around 170,000 Lebanese citizens has fallen below poverty line by 2015, according to the International Labor Organization, while unemployment rate increased to 20%”, URDA, *Statistics, Number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon*, January 2017, <http://urda.org.lb/en/details.aspx?ID=1426>

<sup>5</sup> Zaman Al Wasl, *UNHCR to cut aid for Syrian refugees in Lebanon*, Zamanalwsl, Sept, 6<sup>th</sup> 2017, <https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/29563.html>

<sup>6</sup> *President: Lebanon 'can no longer cope' with Syrian refugees*, ABC News , Oct, 16<sup>th</sup> 2017 <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/president-lebanon-longer-cope-syrian-refugees-50507063>

<sup>7</sup> OLJ avec AFP, *Le pape à Hariri : Le vivre-ensemble au Liban, un exemple pour toute la region* , L’Orient Le Jour, Oct, 13<sup>th</sup> 2017 <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1078011/hariri-du-vatican-le-pape-reaffirme-le-vivre-ensemble-au-liban-est-un-exemple-pour-toute-la-region.html>

<sup>8</sup> *IV Geneva Convention Relative To The Protection Of Civilian Persons In Time Of War Of 12 August 1949*, p. 175 [http://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.33\\_GC-IV-EN.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.33_GC-IV-EN.pdf)