

## **‘Without Putin, Syria Would Have Ceased to Exist’: Interview with Flemish Priest Living in Syria**

'It is partly thanks to Hezbollah that so many Christians and other Syrians are still alive. They came to our rescue in our darkest hours. And the same goes for the Syrian army and the Russians. If Putin hadn't come in 2015, Syria certainly would have ceased to exist'

By [Fr Daniel Maes](#) and [Eric van de Beek](#)

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*According to the Flemish Father Daniel Maes, who has lived in Syria since 2010, the coverage of the Syrian war is based on lies. President Bashar al-Assad is not the problem, but our own politicians, who support ISIS and Al Nusra, in order to topple the Syrian government. "The real terrorist leaders are in the West and Saudi Arabia."*

The 79-year-old Father Daniel Maes is back in his native country Belgium. He stays in the Norbertine abbey of the Flemish village Postel, which he left for Syria in 2010, when the country was not yet at war. In Qara he experienced precarious moments, when the village of 25.000 souls was overrun by a rebel army of approximately 60,000 men. He is on holiday now in Belgium to recuperate after he became ill in Syria ('I thought: I'm finished'), and could not tolerate the local cuisine anymore. But also to tell people in the West the "real story" about Syria, since they don't hear it from the mainstream media. In mid-June he returns, his suitcases filled with relief supplies for the needy Syrian population.

I met Father Maes last week in Antwerp. This week he will return to his monastery in Syria.

You live in [a monastery dating to the sixth century AD](#), in a country far from home. How did you get there?

I arrived in Qara at the invitation of Mother superior, Sister Agnes-Mariam. She is quite a character. For years, she has roamed the world as a hippie. And she has the gift to modernise monk life while keeping its authenticity. In the Mar Yakub monastery I found what I had been looking for all my life: charismatic enthusiasm, ecumenical openness, missionary work and care for the poor. The monastery was a ruin when Mother Agnes-Mariam stumbled upon it, and since the year 2000 it was beautifully restored under her leadership. I came as a tourist, and I would have left as a tourist, but Agnes-Mariam asked me if I wanted to organise a propedeutical year, a preparation for priesthood training, the very first Catholic seminar of all Syria and so I stayed.

What was your impression of Syria before the war broke out?

It was a beautiful country. As I expected, it lacked political freedom. But above all I was pleasantly surprised. I very much enjoyed the Eastern hospitality, and I experienced a peaceful and orderly society that I had never experienced before in my own country or elsewhere. Stealing and insolence were virtually non-existent. The many different religious and ethnic groups lived in harmony with one another.



[Photo from Photographer Daniel Demeter's new book 'Lens on Syria' paints life before the 2011 civil war in vivid detail.](#)

The country had no government debt and there were no homeless people. On the contrary, over two million refugees from neighboring countries, such as Iraq, were taken care of and being treated in the same way as native Syrians.

Moreover, daily life was very cheap, such as food. Schools, universities and hospitals were free even for us as foreigners. I spoke to a French surgeon who said the hospitals in Syria were better than those in France.

How did the conflict in Syria begin? The prevailing opinion in the West is that the first protests in Homs started peacefully, and that things escalated because the government reacted violently.

That's complete nonsense. I have seen with my own eyes how this so-called popular uprising arose in Qara. On a Friday evening in November 2011, on my way to the vicarage, where I was invited, I saw a group of about fifteen young people at the central mosque. They shouted Assad was a dictator, and that he had to leave. And I saw other youngsters who took pictures of it. They made such a noise; it gave me the chills. I reported it to the vicar, but he already knew. He said, "For some time now men have been coming from outside Syria, to make noise, and they invite our young people to take pictures and videos. If they deliver these to Al Jazeera, they receive money."

This was around the time when the violence started in Homs?

It must have been around that time. The Dutch father Frans van der Lugt, who lived in Homs and who was later killed there, had also seen and [reported in his letters](#) that it was not the police that started shooting, but the terrorists hiding themselves between the demonstrators.

The Dutch minister of Foreign Affairs Bert Koenders has [declared](#) Assad should be prosecuted by the International Criminal Court in The Hague for war crimes.

Koenders is just like the other so called European leaders. He is a little boy standing there like an emperor, while not being aware he has no clothes on him. Anyone with half a brain can see that he is a puppet of the Americans, telling him exactly what to say and not to say.

He who serves the interests of foreign powers and destroys the lives of people of other nations is a terrorist leader, unworthy of the name of a statesman.

Assad did nothing wrong?

See the poison [gas attack in Goutha](#), near Damascus, in 2013, for which Assad immediately

was accused of. Is it so hard to understand the terrorists were behind this?

One year before the poison gas attack, Obama [said](#), “The use of chemical weapons is a red line.” At that very moment every journalist should have thought: “Doesn’t that sound like President Bush, who said:” Within 48 hours, the weapons of mass destruction of Iraq must come to surface.”

But they let themselves be fooled again.

An international committee of inquiry was sent to Damascus, accompanied by media from all over the world, and just after they arrived, there was this huge poison gas attack, practically under their noses. Some timing, isn’t it? In Ghouta, of all places, an uninhabited region, where people had fled a long time ago. And within two hours pictures popped up of rooms with dying children. Pictures of Hollywood quality. Some proved to’ve been taken long before, others two hours after the attack. And nowhere a mourning mother to be seen.

Nevertheless there were mourning mothers, and fathers. But they did not live in Ghouta. They lived 200 kilometers away, in villages around Latakia. They recognised their children in the pictures. Two weeks before the poison gas attack, their villages had been attacked by terrorists, who had kidnapped their children. So, these children in the pictures were in fact kidnapped children from Latakia, who were killed to pull a media stunt. How is it possible that there are so many stupid journalists who did not see through that? This has all been well documented in the [report](#) of Mother Agnes-Mariam.

You think there are no war crimes committed by the Syrian authorities at all? In February, Amnesty International released a [report](#) on mass executions in a prison near Damascus.

If you, as a journalist, want to know what is really going on in Syria, you must come to Syria and find out for yourself instead of reading Amnesty-reports. And I ask you: How can a president who commits so many war crimes against his own people keep himself from being killed for such a long time stay in a country crowded with terrorists who want to finish him off? And why is it you see so many people in Syria with Assad’s picture on their car’s rear window?



Assad’s face painted in a car parked at a destroyed area in Syria (Source: Business Insider)

The Christians, Shiites, Druzes and Alawites perhaps. But also the Sunnis?

Absolutely. The vast majority of the Sunnis are behind Assad. And if you come to Tartus, where many Sunnis live, you will see not only pictures of Assad, but also of Putin.

For the Amnesty report on the Saydnaya prison, dozens of witnesses have been interviewed.

That’s false. The latest story is that Assad has cremated thousands of people in that prison. This cannot be true. This prison is so small, they could never have done this in such a short period of time.

Amnesty has said that they [cannot confirm](#) the US story of cremations.

But they haven’t refuted it either. And meanwhile, the media have repeated this ridiculous

claim so often that the public has started to believe it's the truth.

How do you see the role of journalism? How is it possible their view on Syria is so different from yours?

For that you have to read this book of the German journalist Udo Ulfkotte, [Bought Journalists](#), that he wrote from his own experience. If you go against the dominant narrative, and don't follow the script, you will inevitably collide with the Powers That Be. They will put you out of business.

In a way I can understand these journalists. They often have a family they need to take care of.

But it's beyond me how an organization like Pax Christi supports the assassination of Syrian Christians. Acting in the name of church communities, they promote these so-called "moderate rebels". By doing so they have totally turned themselves against the Christians in Syria, the bishops and patriarchs there.

I have seen a presentation of a so-called Middle East expert of Pax Christi. At the end of her lecture, she showed her sources. Those were: Al Jazeera, Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera.

Why do you think so many countries want to get rid of Assad?

In 2009, Qatar asked Bashar al-Assad to permit running a [pipeline through Syria](#) to the Mediterranean. Assad said, "We are not going to do that because we are already working on such a pipeline with Russia and Iran."

Then the war began. Not in 2011.

We must not forget: Homs is an important location for the passage of the pipeline. It's no coincidence that the violence started right there, and that Qatar's tv station Al Jazeera was on top of it.

And the other countries? Why do they treat Assad with such hostility?

For the West, it is unacceptable that Syria is still one of the few countries with a central bank that is truly independent and that the country had no state debt and thus did not need to be 'saved'.

And the Turks. They just want to revive the Ottoman empire. It's scandalous what they did in Aleppo. The city of Aleppo was the industrial heart of Syria. The Turks [dismantled all of the factories](#) in a few days and took them to Turkey.

Israel is also a very important motor behind the conflict. The Zionists want [a pure Jewish state from the Nile to the Euphrates](#). They want to chop up Syria into a group of small, weak states, fighting each other. Likewise the old Roman motto: Divide et empera. Divide and rule.

The Israelis are [bombarding](#) Syria, they [treat injured terrorists](#) and they [deliver weapons](#).

I think Zionism is as bad for Judaism as ISIS is for Islam. But let's not say that out loud, for many Protestants might take you for the devil.

The Israelis [say](#) they took part in the conflict because of the presence of Hezbollah's militias.

That's true. But Hezbollah is one of the greatest resistance movements there is. I spoke to young men of Hezbollah, and they say, "We started our organization when the Zionists came chasing and killing our families. And we therefore help those who are suppressed in the same way."

Israel sees Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.

It is partly thanks to Hezbollah that so many Christians and other Syrians are still alive. They came to our rescue in our darkest hours. And the same goes for the Syrian army and the Russians. If Putin hadn't come in 2015, Syria certainly would have ceased to exist.

[It is said](#) that the Russians came to Syria to keep it in their sphere of influence.

There certainly will be some self-interest involved. But Putin is a true Christian, wanting to defend Christianity. And he also wants a multipolar world order, in which no country dominates the rest. It annoys Putin that the Americans do not play by international rules. They overthrew the Ukrainian government, and then had the nerve to say that the Russians responded so aggressively. Syria is a sovereign country. That is what Putin emphasises. He also [says](#): 'We are not there for the protection of Assad, but for the protection of the Syrian statehood.' Russia doesn't want another failed state, like Iraq and Libya. And let's not forget: The Russian military is the only foreign army in Syria with the consent of the Syrian government. What are other countries doing there? The Americans? The French? The Saudis? They have no right to be there. They are working on the destruction of Syria.



Source: New Eastern Outlook

The Western governments say they are fighting ISIS. But you doubt that?

Do you remember these Hollywood-like images of ISIS entering Syria? [An endless column of brand new Toyotas](#). They were moving across the desert like sitting ducks. Wouldn't it have been a piece of cake to have blown them off the face of the earth had the West really wanted? But that did not happen. Why not? And how did they get the Toyotas? Who gave those to them?

The thing we hear time and again is that ISIS accidentally [gets weapons](#) that are meant for the nonexistent moderates, and that by mistake the [Syrian government troops bombarded](#). Here and there the US and its allies kill some ISIS warriors, but these are more exceptions.

Christians are a minority in Syria. How do they see the violence of ISIS, Al Nusra and other groups? As a problem of Islam?

First of all, they regard these terrorist groups as a political tool of the West, to disrupt Syria and bring regime change. And not only the Christians, the Muslims in Syria are of the same opinion. They are ashamed of ISIS and Al Nusra. They say, "That is not Islam."

How do you see violence in Islam?

Islam is ambiguous. The Qur'an contains very beautiful verses about peace. But in the

Qur'an it is also said that the unbelievers, the non-Muslims, must be killed.

The Bible and the Torah are not free of violence either.

That's so. But the imperfections of the Old Testament have evolved in the New Testament. And of the Qur'an, you could say, it's the Old Testament without the spirit of the New Testament.

Jesus said, "I'm not coming to bring peace but the sword."

If you kill or injure someone with the sword, then throughout the Christianity nobody will say, "That man is following the gospel." But if a Muslim blows itself up in a large group of people, then there are Muslims who will say, "I should actually do that too, but I don't have the courage."

But your experiences with Muslims in Syria are predominantly positive?

I have always been treated with the same hospitality by Muslims as Christians. Syria is a secular state. Syrians regard themselves in the first place as Syrians, and secondly as Christians, Sunni, Grape, Alavite or Shiite. It's clearly visible in the Syrian government. There you see ministers of various religions. Everyone can be himself. The harmonious cooperation of populations has always been characteristic of Syria. They see themselves as one family. I even met a colonel from the Syrian army, a Sunni, who asked me if I wanted to bless him before he left for Aleppo.

How do Christians in Syria think about the support of Western governments to jihadi groups?

They suffer from the fact that their fellow-Christians in the West forsake them. They simply do not understand.

Perhaps there are Christians in Syria who welcome the fact that the West supports armed groups?

I do not know such people but if you're looking for them, maybe you'll find them. There are always exceptions to the rule but the average Syrian opposes any Western support to any armed group.

Are you in contact with any politicians in the European Union?

I spoke to Herman van Rompuy, in 2012, when he was President of the European Council. I was under the impression that he barely knew where Syria was. All he knew from Syria was based on reports describing the country as the most terrible dictatorship in the world. That meeting really disappointed me. When I told him that in my experience Assad was supported by a wide majority of the population, also by the Sunni, he looked at me as if I committed a sacrilege. It seemed to me he was mainly concerned with the question: "How not to step on those 28 pairs of toes in the European Council."

I have [read](#) that in the Netherlands, the Christian parties voted in favour of a proposal to stop supporting the Free Syrian Army, but [Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom voted against it](#). Do you understand that? Is that because they are Zionists? If you are against radical Islam, why are you voting for supporting Islamic terrorists in Syria?

Many Syrians have fled to Lebanon and to areas in Syria under the control of the Syrian state. What distinguishes these refugees from those who flee to the West?

Everyone who had the opportunity to flee to areas controlled by the government's army did so, except those who did not see any future in Syria.

Young men leaving Syria for Europe are being criticised. Europeans ask themselves: Why aren't they fighting for their country, and protecting their mothers, sisters and other family members?

It is an organised disruption. Those young men have been lured to Europe because Europe has to be Islamicized.

Can any young man join the Syrian Army? Is there a service obligation?

Yes, The only way to escape the army is to hide or to flee the country. On the other hand, many older men have volunteered.

The West leads a boycott against Syria. How do the Syrians manage to keep themselves alive?

A lot of aid is brought into the country through charity. But, to my surprise, just before my departure from Syria, I saw medications that were made in Aleppo. So despite all the devastation there, they managed to re-start.

In a previous interview, you expressed the hope that President Donald Trump would make changes to US policy. Are you still so hopeful about him?

Trump said during his election campaign what any sane person would have said in his place: "We must [stop delivering weapons to fighting groups](#) in Syria because we do not know who they are. Let's [stop intervening](#) in sovereign countries. And let's [fight terrorism with Russia](#)."

That was hopeful. But in the meantime he has come under attack of the Deep State, the real rulers in the country. [He fired those missiles](#) at that military airport in Syria, probably under pressure from the Deep State. Nevertheless, he informed the Syrians, so little damage has been done. Most aircrafts were already taken away and half of the missiles did not even arrive. The next day the airport was operational again.

You are on holiday in Belgium. Are you going back to Syria with a restful heart? You've been through troublesome times.

In 2013, Qara was taken by a huge army of tens of thousands terrorists. They walked through the streets shooting. We then hid ourselves in the basement of the monastery. After a week, the area was cleared by the Syrian Army. They were only 200 men! They pushed the terrorists back to Lebanon, one group after another. That was because the terrorists did not form a unity. They fought each other. Yet, there is no human explanation for why the terrorists did not take the monastery when they arrived.

You were not afraid at that time?

Most of us had no fear even at the moments we thought: 'We're finished'. We also did not



have time to worry, because there were children, women and handicapped we had to take care of. There was even a child born while we were in hiding. Everyone was very worried about each other. The children had to be kept busy. We played games, we prayed and sang. After a few days, we had no more water, only milk and at the end of the week it started to snow. That was the beginning of the end of the siege.

*Eric van de Beek studied journalism at [Windesheim University](#) in Zwolle, and philosophy at the [University of Amsterdam](#). For years he worked as a journalist for the Dutch leading weekly [Elsevier](#). Now he mainly writes for Holland's one and only geopolitical magazine [Novini](#).*

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