# Roundtable discussion of joint humanitarian initiatives of the Russian religious communities takes place in Beirut



On 23 June 2017, members of the working group for rendering humanitarian aid to the population of Syria of Russia's Presidential Council for Cooperation with Religious Organizations arrived in Beirut to hold consultations with representatives of the Syrian and Lebanese religious communities. The working group was established in March 2017 on the proposal of the Presidential Council's Commission for International Cooperation headed by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations.

The participants in the roundtable meeting noted with satisfaction the successful implementation of the Russian religious communities' first joint project aimed at providing aid to the population of Syria (the first consignment of humanitarian aid was delivered from Moscow to Latakia on June 22, by an aircraft of Russian Ministry of Defence and was distributed among the population in the next few days), and discussed prospects of cooperation within this initiative.

As the members of the working group pointed out, the aid is being collected by the Russian religious communities at the call of their leaders; yet, it is not being distributed on confessional grounds. The

major goal is to provide aid to those who need it most, regardless of their religious beliefs. That is why, in order to distribute the aid, the most efficient way is being used – by the means of the Russian centre for the reconciliation of conflicting parties in Syria, which has a considerable experience in such targeted work.

The Syrian participants expressed their gratitude to the Russian believers for showing concern over the tragedy in Syria and for taking care of the needs of its suffering population. The Syrians also thanked the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation for its assistance in implementing the project. As the representatives of the Syrian religious communities noted, Russia's actions have turned the tide of the events in their country, giving hope to people for the complete liberation from terrorists and for the restoration of peaceful life.

Special gratitude was expressed to the Russian Orthodox Church and His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia who tirelessly raises his voice in support of the suffering Syrian people and who is the major inspirer of the projects aimed at providing them with humanitarian assistance. The Syrian hierarchs mentioned His Holiness's visit to Syria and Lebanon in November 2011 and said they appreciated the prayers and aid of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The roundtable meeting was organized, among other things, to exchange opinions on the current humanitarian situation in Syria and to get the first-hand information about the pressing needs of its population. The Syrian participants asked the believers in Russia to continue rendering aid to their Syrian brothers and sisters, since refugees from the regions controlled by terrorist organizations are often in need of foodstuffs and medicaments. At the same time the Syrians noted that as more and more cities, towns and villages in their country are being liberated, the critical problem is that of restoring their infrastructure, including religious objects, such as houses, churches, and mosques, and of providing facilities for enabling people to find job and receive education. The participants in the meeting also discussed the situation of the Syrian refugees in the territory of Lebanon and the possibilities to render them the necessary assistance.

Representing Russia at the meeting were Hieromonk Stefan (Igumnov), secretary for inter-Christian relations of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, head of the working group; Hegumen Arseniy (Sokolov), representative of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia to the Patriarch of Antioch and All the East; Mufti Ildar Ziganshin, a member of the Presidium of the Central Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia; Mr. Sergei Ryakhovsky, presiding bishop of the Russian Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith (Pentecostals); Priest Gevorg Vardanyan, representative of the Novo-Nakhichevan and Russian diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church; Abbyas-khazrat Shlyaposhnikov, representative of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia; and Hegumen Serafim (Kravchenko), executive secretary of the Department for Church Charity and Social Ministry of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Syria and Lebanon were represented by the delegates from the Orthodox Church of Antioch, the Maronite, Syrian Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Melkite, Syrian Catholic, and Armenian Catholic Churches, as well as from the Protestant and Muslim organizations.

*DECR Communication Service*

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