

CANDLE FACTORY OPENED IN OUR MONASTERY



NEW LIGHTS for SYRIA



Two examples of Syrian youths BEFORE and AFTER the war:

Left, spring - 2010

Boy scouts give an Easter welcome at St Paul's Syrian Catholic Church in old city Damascus

Right, winter - 2015

Aleppo youth warm their hands over a fire in a can on the street

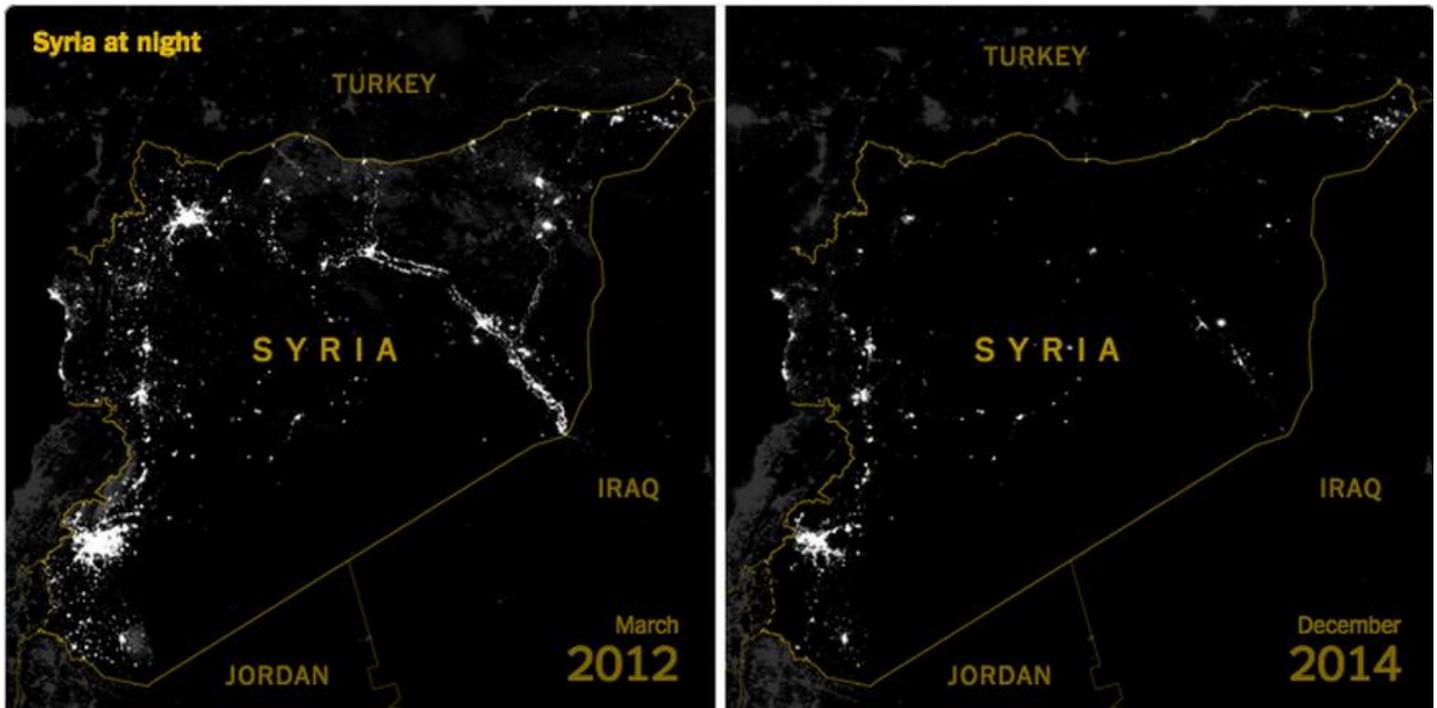
On the road to Damascus, 2000 years ago, the apostle Paul says he was struck by what he describes as “a light from heaven, brighter than the sun” and a voice asking him: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 26:13-14). To which Paul asks: “Who are you, Lord?” and the Lord said: “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise stand on your feet... to the nations I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness into light and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:15-18). Actually Paul had been persecuting followers of Jesus, and wanted to take them as prisoners in Damascus but his plans changed after this amazing vision when he met Jesus “the Lord”. He says: “I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision but declared first to those in Damascus” “the scales fell from Paul’s eyes” and the writer of Acts explains “For some days Paul was with the disciples at Damascus and immediately proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God’” (Acts 26:19-20; 9:19-20). Let’s not forget that the light of the truth of Paul’s mission first shone in Damascus and from there to all the world.

“Darkness covers the nations, thick darkness the peoples” (Isaiah 60)

Undoubtedly St Paul would be horrified to see the darkness and destruction of Damascus, where life was probably better 2000 years ago. Syria’s pain and suffering is clearly visible from outer space, as the blood of her innocents cries out to heaven. Satellite images reveal that during this war Syria has lost 83% of its light and power resources. Repeated attacks on Syria’s power plants and theft of energy resources, the devastation of schools, homes and hospitals, all have made life very hard for the masses who remain in Syria. All this has deepened the refugee crisis and carnage so much so

that the average Syrian life expectancy has dropped from 76 years in 2010 to less than 56 last year. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres said in February 2015 that Syria's humanitarian crisis is the worst the world has encountered since WWII, "We are talking about losing an entire generation of innocents". Millions of Syria's children have been plunged into an unending night.

Satellite images reveal Syria's blackout (source: NYT Graphics):



Millions of Syrians from the north of the country are in total darkness. These images show that 97 percent of electricity has been cut off in Aleppo province, and 96 percent went out in Raqqa, as well as a majority of the lights in Deir Zor, regions under the control of ISIS. "These satellite images help us understand the suffering and fear experienced by ordinary Syrians as their country is destroyed around them," said Dr. Xi Li from China's Wuhan University, the lead researcher on the project investigating Syria's power situation.

In this environment, some of the most basic elements of daily life become very important. In the absence of electricity people will seek light and heat by any means necessary, such as, burning wood or trash to make fire for cooking and heating.

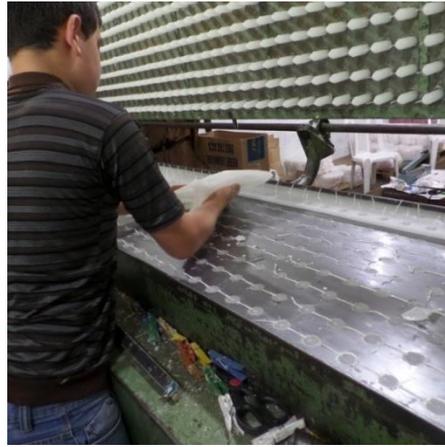


Syrian Armenian Christians light candles in prayer in Aleppo

The Monastery of St James in Qara with its humanitarian assistance team, thought that supplying Syria with candles would be one way to help the Syrian people caught without electricity in this war. Trusting in the Providence of God, the monastery's superior, Mother Agnes, agreed to supply thousands of candles to Syria even though she did not yet have the machines for making candles. After searching for candle machines, one could foresee the difficulty of bringing them to Syria. Then Mother Agnes discovered a candle factory for sale in the mountains of nearby Lebanon.



Mother Agnes and the brothers pay a visit to the candle factory that is for sale, to see the quality of the machines and whether or not we could purchase them for Syria.



The kind seller showed us how these German-made candle machines work great; each is capable of making over 400 candles every 15 minutes. So after considering the deal we signed a contract. The brothers then came to do an internship with him to learn how to operate the machines.



But even if the candle machines now belong to the monastery how can they be transported over the mountains of Lebanon into Syria in the middle of a war?



Palestinian Christians praying for their brothers and sisters in Syria

Transportation of Candle Machines and 30 tons of wax from Lebanon to Syria

The sequence and timing of events – not planned or premeditated by any of us – is nothing less than extraordinary.

September 1: *the feast of Simon the Stylite:* after difficulties with visas the monks are finally able to return with Mother Agnes and Sister Carmel to the monastery in Syria on the feast of one of the greatest Syrian saints. The brothers actually had participated in praying a novena to St Simon the Stylite at St Simon's Maronite Catholic church in Qleiaat, Lebanon. Now they will prepare the monastery's garage to become a candle factory.



30 km N of Aleppo, Syria. Church of St Simon the Stylite built around his famous pillar.
This was the largest church in Antiquity.

September 10-11: our monastery's engineer arrives in Lebanon, begins disengaging the machines from the candle factory. They manage to work on moving the machines (that each weigh almost a ton) to outside building, at the base of a landing.



September 12: Morning, the former factory owner and our engineer load the machines into huge trucks using a crane, it's hard because the landing outside the factor is so steep. But passing carefully over mountain roads of Lebanon they arrive at the Syrian border at about 2 pm. Unable to cross the border right away – the cars must be inspected.



(Left) The mountain roads of Lebanon are notoriously steep and dangerous. (Right) Syrian cargo being transported in trucks

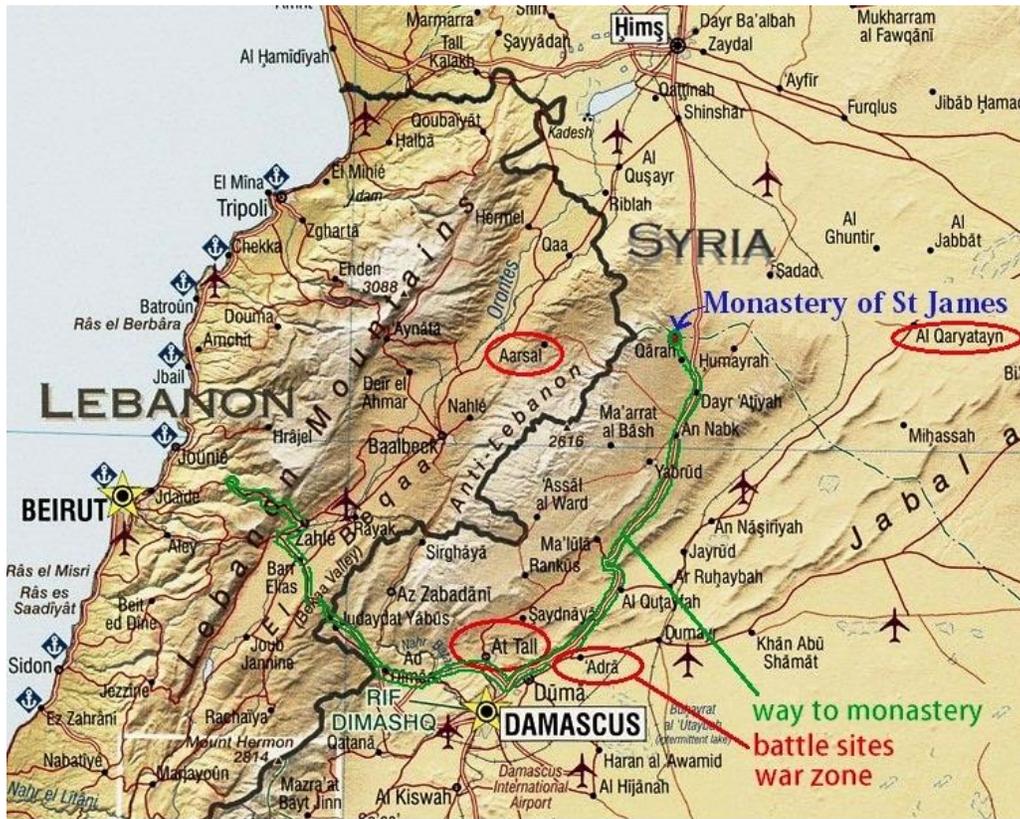
September 13, morning: waiting at the border between Lebanon and Syria. Also arriving at the border are 30 tons of wax acquired from the port city of Tripoli, Lebanon.

September 13, 4 pm: all the trucks are ready & free to enter Syria. But the road is steep and difficult, maximum speed 15-20 km per hour. And our engineer is praying that God protect them from danger of bombing and gunfire as they pass through war zones.



Random roadside destruction has taken the lives of many in Syria

September 13, night, eve of the feast of the Holy Cross: the trucks are passing through a literal war zone. The region is very hot with combat especially the towns of Tell, Marune, and Aadra. In fact the very next day this area was taken by rebels and if our trucks would have passed a few hours later they could have been captured or blown up. Our engineer tells us that he was not worried. He believes in God's protection and he is comforted to know that at that very moment we are praying for him in the monastery, celebrating the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy, Life-giving Cross.



September 14, feast of the Cross – birthday of the Monastery of St James: the trucks finally arrive safely in Qara at 12:30 at night, but they do not come to the monastery until the morning of the 14th. Amazingly as these trucks were passing the danger of war, the community was praising the King of Kings. As the candle machines were passing through battle sites, the monks and nuns of the monastery were walking in a candle-light procession, singing around a bonfire in honor of the suffering and love of Jesus.



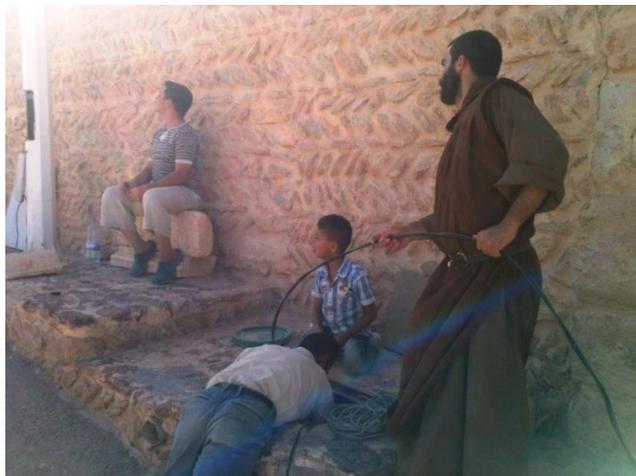
As the candle machines passed through a war zone, children and friends of the monastery from Qara came together to pray and sing on Sept 14th, the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. “But for you who fear my Name, the Sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in his wings.”
Malachi 4:2

September 14, morning: a crane unloads the two candle machines that weigh almost a ton each, and other materials such as the water reservoir.





The people of Qara are very thankful and come to help unload the trucks and the 30 tons of wax.



Electricians and builders come to help install the machines and get the plumbing system working.



Excitement over the hydraulic system that is now working, and the machines are ready. The first workers begin to come from Qara to be trained and work the candle machines. Many local Syrian people are enthusiastic about the project and want to see how the machines work. They also want to work and learn to make candles together.



the monastery decided to name the candles, Star of the Morning, (*Najmat as Sabah*) in the hope of a New Day for all Syrian people, and to benefit them and employ Syrians regardless of race, religion, sex or ethnicity.

October 1st – Feast of St Therese: Some of the first workers to be trained at the candle factory are Naji and Beha from the local town of Qara, along with many others who have started working and expressed interest in being trained.

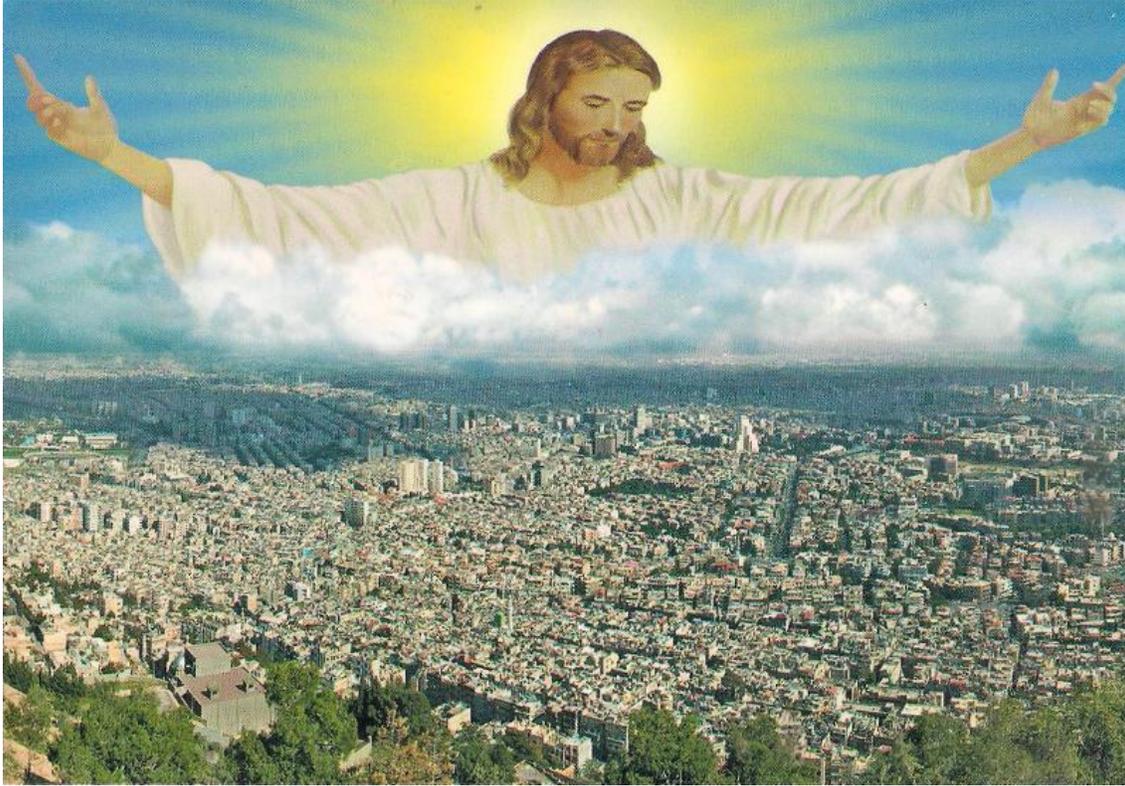


These gentlemen are also members of the Humanitarian Assistance Team (both Muslims and Christians)



At full capacity the two machines should be able to make over 2000 candles an hour. The monastery plans to open the machines to be worked night and day – so as to help the Syrian people in this time of great need! Thank you God, for your protection and the promise of your blessings to all people of good will.

“Because of the tender mercy of our God, the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of Peace” (Lk 1:78-79).



Lord Jesus over Damascus