

Challenges continue after war ends, says Syrian priest and peacemaker Alexi Chehadeh

Chehadeh leads the largest local NGO in Syria, serving 2.5 million people a year.

by [Marianne Ejdersten](#) in the [January 30, 2019](#) issue



Alexi Chehadeh, a Syrian Orthodox priest and peacemaker, speaking at Cumberland Lodge in the U.K. Photo by Albin Hillert/WCC.

With the fighting having ended in many areas in Syria, said Orthodox priest and peacemaker Alexi Chehadeh of Damascus, aid organizations such as the one he leads face the challenge of helping people rebuild their lives.

“People in liberated and hard-to-reach areas are in huge need of humanitarian support,” he said while visiting the United Kingdom in mid-December for an ecumenical conference on human rights and the Middle East. “They need basic services, livelihood support, and medical services, to say the least, in order to be able to remain in their local communities.”

Chehadeh heads the Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development for the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East—the largest independent local nongovernmental organization operating inside Syria, serving 2.5 million people a year.

After seven years of civil war, 13.5 million people need aid—a majority of the population—among them more than 6 million Syrians who are internally displaced. Another 5 million people fled Syria to seek refuge in neighboring countries and around the world.

“The displaced and refugees should be able to return,” he said. “It’s important for people to return to their daily lives. They need support in different ways to establish a new life in their own country.”

Established in 1994, the Orthodox organization has been operating its emergency and rapid-response programs since the beginning of the conflict in Syria. With 44 offices and 38 community centers across Syria and 1,600 staff and volunteers, the organization offers comprehensive support, including vocational training, sanitation, and psychosocial care.

Chehadeh began leading the organization in 2015, collaborating with its 22 international partners and connecting with various civil society groups.

“I joined the team at a very crucial time, with fires everywhere,” he said. “We need the grace of God to do this work. . . . The current situation has to come to an end, and we must find ways to motivate people to reconcile and heal together.” —World Council of Churches; Christian Century staff

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “People: Alexi Chehadeh.”