

Diaspora in Action International Conference

in Melbourne 27th, Sep 2016

Melbourne University

By, Adibeh Abdo-Attia

Outline:

1. Introduction:
 - Imagery: old Syria vs new Syria
 - Strength of people/ community
2. Current condition of the people:
 - Sponsoring students- Syrian Women Orthodox association
 - Donations that contribute to groceries
3. Settlement:
 - Diaspora: the dispersion or spread of any people from their original homeland.
 - Helping immigrants to find work
 - Helping people with applications- Syrian Women Orthodox association
 - Assistance for mental health
 - Financial burden for Australian Syrian community
 - Policy
4. Factors about Syria that is often overlooked:
 - Syriac Literature & education
 - History of fighting massacres in every decade
5. Conclusion:
 - Strength of Syrian community

*I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we are meeting, and pay tribute to Elders past and present, and acknowledge the unique role they play in the life of the region.

It's a great privilege and honour to speak at this conference, and highlight the great work my Syrian (Aramean)community does, and thank you Diaspora Action Australia, for giving me the opportunity to be part of the conference.

The other day I was having a cup of coffee in a café. Out of curiosity I asked the lady I was sharing the table with, what comes to mind when you think of Syria. She paused for a moment, looked up at me and said: I think about starving children, bombing, war, horrible place where people killing each other for no good reason, and risking their lives and drowning in the sea in order to get out of there.

Her observation wasn't wrong, and I'm sure many of you, in this room may feel the same. However, it is disheartening to call one of the world's greatest civilisations "**A HORRIBLE PLACE**"

It is not fair to call Syria a horrible place to be, and overlook what we have given to the world whether it was in the field of culture, literature, history, medicine, astrology or science. These were our contribution to the world, and now, this is what we have been awarded for that contribution, countries that brought upon us the war have a lot to answer and share responsibility to care for the innocent civilian that were caught in this conflict.

Before I begin my presentation, I must note the Syriac Aramaic is the language of the ancient Syria which is currently still used by the Syrian Aramean around the world. While Syrian Aramean, is the identity of the people who lived in Great Syria since the 11th century before Christ. And that will form the basis of my short Presentation.

In simplistic terms, Syrian Aramean refers to a group of indigenous people of the old Syria. 11 centuries before Christ, this group used to be a part of the 'Big Syria' connecting three continents. It was bounded by the Mediterranean on the west, the Arabian Desert on the south, and the Taurus mountain range to the north, before it was divided by the Western powers, The "*Sykes-Picot Agreement, officially known as the Asia Minor Agreement, was a secret 1916 agreement between Great Britain and France*" , and which comprised of the areas of the Syria Republic, Lebanon, and Palestine, part of Jordan, Iraq, and South East Turkey.

In Australia most Syrian Aramean emigrants settled before 1968, even though "Syrians Born in Victoria was first counted in the 1891 censuses 142"- *Melbourne Museum* , while others arrived in various waves of migration, The most notable of these waves are during the Lebanese Civil War and after the American Invasion of Iraq. Syrian (Aramean) community is as diverse as any other group in Australia, and is made of many emigrants and refugees- Syrian, Iraqi, Lebanese, Palestinian Jordanian, Turkish and Indian who share a common dialogue and many cultural aspects. Even though these refugees and emigrants have a lot of

conviction in their culture, they have integrated and have been strong contributors to the Australian way of life. We are very proud of our valuable contribution whether it was individuals' contribution or organisations contribution into Australian cultural diversity. This is evident from many contributing members of the Syrian Community, such as me who established Australia's first multicultural club at Latrobe University in 1978. Our members come from a broad spectrum of professions: academics, advocates, business entrepreneurs, CEO of top companies in Australia, engineers, financial analysts, medical practitioners, artists, writers and social workers...etc. In terms of demography, there is currently one diocese in Australia, the Syrian Orthodox from the Middle East and India. In contrast to this there are 29 dioceses in India and 35 dioceses in Middle East, Europe and North & South America. Population in Australia both from the Middle East and India are about 12000 people in addition to a few families that will be arriving soon on humanitarian visa. Whilst there are many great community based groups, today I will only make reference to the Syrian Orthodox Women Association in Melbourne, and place emphasis on their general responds to the humanitarian issues in Syria, economic development, and their outstanding approach on settlement in Australia. *"Not to mention our Indian (Syrian Orthodox) community great activities in Melbourne and abroad eg –Raising over \$200,000 for Good Friday appeal, funding Cancer research in Kerala...etc).*

Today, I want to begin by drawing to your attention the current conditions faced by Syrian (Aramean) people. At present, Syria's conflict is the worst humanitarian crisis of our time. Statistics show that just over 11 million people have been forced to flee their homes. According to the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), 4.8 million have fled to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt, and many are internally displaced within Syria, More alarming, is that people-including children do not have access to basic necessities such as food, medicine or education as a consequences of the conflict or largely by the **Economic embargo by the Western block**. There are organisations here in Australia such as the Syrian Orthodox Women's Association which I am very proud to be a Founder and a member of, who try to provide assistance to reduce the suffering of such people. Even before the war commenced in 2011 our association have been supporting the Syrian Orthodox people in Australia and homeland.

- With regards to education, programs have been established through the association such as the sponsoring of a child in Syria (Hassakeh Province). Through various fund raising activities we have also successfully been able to fund libraries for a number of schools in the area.
- Another area of significance in the association is our monthly contribution of groceries for families undergoing extreme hardship.

- And this same community financed a knitting workshop, in Kamishly (Northern Syrian), run and managed exclusively by women, in order to train, develop confidence and encourage women to work independently

Again, this assistance could not be provided if we didn't organise fund raising activities, through church and family functions.

Whilst, such contributions make an impact on the lives of some of our Syrian people, there are still so many without support and not much is being done to rectify this.

My main point for today is to promote the notion of settlement and the fundamental importance of forming a bridge for those individuals or families seeking to migrate to Australia. At present, thousands of Syrians are fleeing their country on a daily basis to get across the Turkish border. The risks of fleeing are high with people walking through the night to avoid being **shot at by snipers or being caught by ISIS, or the Kurdish militia, who will force young men to join them to fight against the Syrian army.** Every year of the conflict has seen an exponential growth in refugees, there are now 4.8 million Syrians scattered throughout the region, thus making them the world's largest refugee population under the United Nations' mandate. It's the worst exodus since the Rwandan genocide 20 years ago.

In Australia the process for immigration is a lengthy one. The Syrian Women's Orthodox association tries to assist by helping Syrian (Aramean) refugees with their applications. We also try to arrange for such refugees to stay with a family when they migrate to Australia. In most instances however, this is almost always the case: that when a refugee migrates here they stay with family for a while. Whilst this ensures their safety, it also proves to be a heavy financial burden on Syrian families.

One of the biggest challenges immigrants undergo is that of finding employment. At present, there are no incentives devised to assist immigrants to find work quickly. Again, this task, of assisting to find work falls upon family members or organisations such as the Syrian Women's Orthodox association.

Another large issue that often goes unnoticed is that of mental health. As many Syrian migrants have been subjected to much abuse, violence, torment and suffering it is inevitable that mental health issues should arise. Whilst there are many facilities in Australia for mental health support, they are very costly and therefore not all refugees can get access to it.

The Australian government can do four main things to improve settlement in Australia:

- Firstly, they can provide funding to organisations such as the Women's Orthodox Association, or SOYGOM

(Syrian Orthodox Youth Group of Melbourne). This funding would not only relieve financial burden, but would allow us to connect and assist more Syrian Orthodox people.

- Secondly, there needs to be better access to mental health care facilities for refugees.
- Thirdly, to include our women & Youth members in the courses provided by

The government agencies, such as; leadership, Media, and Interpreting- Translating Accreditation

- Lastly, there needs to be more Syrian (Aramean) representation in the NGOs. Such as an officer from our community that speaks Syriac that would be able to empathize with the Syrian Refugees.

Furthermore, many historians and researchers gave Syrians the title of “princess of culture, and mother of all civilization.” This title is well deserved given that Syriac speaking communities have suffered persecution and massacres in almost every decade and the most brutal and barbaric was Seyfo 1915 Genocide.

If there’s one thing you take away from today’s presentation, let it be this: that the Syrian(Aramean) community is a strong one that stands by each other throughout times of extreme crisis, and it is for this very reason that they will triumph in the end.

Thank you,

Adibeh Abdo-Attia

Author/Publisher

Radio Commentator

Website: www.aaabooks.org

<https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/606795>

<http://heresheis.org.au/directory-of-women/>

E: aaattia@optusnet.com.au

Mob: +61 405 690 928