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“Transcultural Impacts and Perspectives on the Future”

Perspectives from Canada, Italy, South Africa, Southeast Asia, Southwest Asia (Middle East), the United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

Syria – an Inside Look

by Wendy Keslick, Executive Director, Children Creating Bridges

An account of a recent humanitarian delegation visit to Syria, sponsored by Common Humanity.¹ Participating organizations included Children Creating Bridges. To learn more about Children Creating Bridges, see companion article this issue.



When you say that you are embarking on a trip to Syria, you witness many different reactions. "Why would you want to go there?" "Is it safe?" "Aren't they all extremists over there?" When you tell people that that you are taking your 4-year-old daughter along on the trip, you immediately hear the gasps and the whispers of "What kind of mother is she?"

But even as a mother, my perspective was different. Here was an opportunity to bridge cultural gaps and begin educating my daughter about the different peoples of the world. In keeping with the mission of the delegation – to identify ways to help with the Iraqi refugee crisis in Syria – we met with doctors, experts on the refugee crisis, religious leaders, and Iraqi refugee families. However, as we kept our busy schedules of meetings, we were also able to immerse ourselves in the culture of Syria along the way. We ate the local food, spoke with the local people, strolled about the souq (market), and even attended an evening concert. We toured the Museum of Arab Medicine and Sciences to educate ourselves about the significant contributions that Arabs have made in the field of medicine. Another highlight was our visit to the Umayyad mosque, where we stood in awe of its grandeur, beauty, tranquility and sacredness.

¹ Other members of this humanitarian delegation, organized by Common Humanity in New York City, included Mr. Mel Lehman (Director of Common Humanity), Dr. Elizabeth Dorn (Attending Physician and Clinical Instructor in Emergency Medicine at University of Washington in Seattle), and Dr. Mazhar Rishi (President of the Medical Staff, St. Francis Hospital, Wilmington, Delaware and President, Council on American-Islamic Relations – Pennsylvania, Philadelphia Chapter).

CULTURAL OBSERVATIONS

One thing that I found most pleasant on our trip to Syria was the break from the fast-paced life of the West. If you enter a shop, you will be offered to sit for a cup of tea with the shop owner. You are never made to feel rushed or as though you were a burden to someone else's time. In the day to day dealings with people, it seems as though there is a strong desire to connect with one another on a level deeper than just doing business.

Many parts of Syrian life seemed very traditional. People dressed with modesty and did not appear to be as obsessed with the youth-oriented culture as are many people in the West. I have to admit that my both female colleague, Dr. Dorn, and I found it interesting, and actually quite refreshing, to be immersed in this culture that we observed as having much less of an obsession with body image.

A salient observation was the Syrians' warm hospitality, which was extended to us wherever we went during our visit. Welcoming others seems to come naturally in their culture, and it no longer surprises me that Syria opens its borders to an estimated 1.5 million Iraqi refugees, the impact on their national economy notwithstanding. The Iraqi refugee crisis is the largest issue facing the people living in Syria. As a result of the massive increase in population, all government systems are being stretched to its limits. The Syrian government subsidizes water, sewage, gas and electricity, and having an additional 1.5 million people utilizing these resources has had a tremendous impact on the Syrian economy. In May 2008, gas prices increased 300% and the cost of public transportation doubled. Within the past year the cost of rent and housing has also doubled.

When one considers the economic challenges that have been placed on Syria as a result of welcoming the Iraqi refugees, it becomes so clear how big the peoples' hearts are. In conversation with the Syrian people, not once did I hear anyone speak negatively about the refugees. It seemed to me that they regarded their efforts as a normal response to people in need. Even the introduction of the Internet in 2001 and ready access to the rest of the world from Internet cafes in Damascus have not been at the expense of person-to-person connection at the local level.

Indeed, there seemed to be very little tension between people of different religions or different sects. Syria is a secular country, and according to US State Department statistics,² approximately 74% of the population consists of Sunni Muslims. Another 16% belong to other Muslim groups, while 10% are from a variety of Christian denominations. Of the denominations making up the Christian population, the largest percentage is that of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, whose history in Syria dates back to the earliest days of Christianity.

OUTLOOKS FROM THE INSIDE

The future of the Iraqi refugee children living in Syria is profoundly bleak. They are facing drastic changes to their former realities and are experiencing hardships that were previously unimaginable to them. According to UNICEF estimates, 80% of the Iraqi children living in Syria do not attend school.³ The literacy rate within this population of school-aged children has dropped substantially. This is a profound cultural shift for the Iraqi refugees,

² <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm#people> (accessed May 20, 2008)

³ <http://www.worldpress.org/Mideast/3034.cfm> (accessed May 20, 2008)

because Iraq had previously been proud of a high-quality education system. Child labor has risen sharply among Iraqi refugee children, as often it is necessary for the children to earn money to support their families. While visiting an Iraqi refugee family, we met a teenage boy who instead of attending school is working long shifts so that he can support his family and enable his younger sisters to go to school. I asked him what he would do if he didn't have to work to support his family. "Become a doctor," he replied.

Lack of access to more than just the basic healthcare provided by clinics is another reality facing many Iraqi refugee children, with many treatable and manageable diseases progressing into more serious and sometimes life-threatening situations. The plight for handicapped children is especially difficult. Having a handicapped child can put a financial and psychological strain on any family, but when the family is an Iraqi refugee family the strains are magnified considerably. There is limited access not only to medicine and therapies but also to professional psychological support.

At times our trip was painfully heartbreaking. We visited with Iraqi refugees in their homes, typically small rented rooms, often furnished with nothing more than air mattresses, and we listened as they told their stories of the violence that caused them to flee Iraq. Unfortunately, their suffering continues in Syria as they bring with them the memories of the violence they have witnessed and of the breakup of families and communities. As a result of the enormous influx of Iraqi refugees, Syria's economy is overburdened. It is estimated that Syria is spending one billion dollars annually to tackle the refugee crisis, but they are still coming up short in being able to meet all the needs of the refugees. Even so, we found the Syrians to be a welcoming people.

One must ponder how these challenges in meeting basic survival needs, and in providing access to healthcare and education, will impact the future of these Iraqi refugee children. These children are the future doctors, lawyers, and political leaders of tomorrow, but only if they are provided today with opportunities to reach their highest potential.

One more observation. As we listened to both Syrians and Iraqis, it became apparent that they have a much greater knowledge of the United States than the average US citizen has about either Syria or Iraq. I would also take the chance to say that some of the people know more about various impacts of US foreign policy than the average US citizen knows.

And what was my 4-year-old daughter doing while our delegation was attending meetings and visiting refugees in Iraq? She was out touring the Syrian countryside with her father (who was not part of the delegation). Her sightseeing included ancient Roman ruins and a theater in Basra as well as a camel ride.

BACK HOME

I am thrilled that I now can confidentially answer those questions that I was asked prior to my travels and lay to rest the many misguided cultural assumptions regarding both the Syrian people and the Iraqi refugees. There are many reasons why one would want to go to Syria. My advice – just go! It *is* a safe place to visit. Oh, and they are "extremists" indeed – extremists in hospitality.

And what kind of mother am I? One that can only imagine what it would be like to be an Iraqi refugee mother struggling everyday to provide her children with the most basic human needs and to hold on to the hope that her children will have access to an education. I am the

kind of mother who wants my child to have the opportunity to experience people of other cultures and experience the sense of oneness that connects all of us.

As I look at the many pictures that capture the special moments of our trip to Syria, there is one picture that beautifully reflects the mission and vision of Children Creating Bridges. That picture is of my daughter, once an orphan from Ethiopia, reaching out to nurture an Iraqi refugee child and giving her a stuffed animal. This picture reminds me that the potential for peace lies in the children of today and that the future can be different if all of our children are given the opportunity to see things through one another's eyes – that is, through new eyes.

As for me, I desire to experience something different, something extraordinary when I travel. I always hope that I don't see things that have become so familiar and pervasive around the world as a result of globalization. Our humanitarian delegation's visit to Syria gave me this experience.

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POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

- *Keslick states that a majority of the Iraqi refugee children living in Syria do not attend school and that there is a drastic decrease in literacy among this population. How will this effect the future of Iraq, should the violence subside, thus allowing a large number of the refugee population to return to their home country?*
- *Syria, a country of 18 million people, has allowed an estimated 1.5 million Iraqi refugees to cross their border. Considering the massive strain this has put on the Syrian government and its people, what is culturally inherent to the Syrian people that they did not react to this burden with protest or hostility? Can we say that other countries would have had the same reaction to an influx of roughly 1.5 million refugees?*
- *Keslick observed that Syria offered a break from the fast-paced life of the West. Do you think that it is inevitable with the increase in globalization that there will be a greater amount of Western influence that will affect the culture of Syria?*
- *The author observed “a strong desire to connect with one another on a level deeper than doing business” among the Syrian people – a characteristic that has survived even the Internet. Indeed, relationships have also been an integral part of business transactions in parts of Asia. It has been argued that elsewhere, entertainment such as Web surfing and TV have been at the expense of family life. In addition, there exist in other parts of the world in which people are more aloof while relationships more superficial and transient. Transport yourself to 2018. How have friendships, family life, business relationships, and other interpersonal relationships changed during these ten years?*
- *Keslick describes in depth the Syrians' warm hospitality, especially to those in need (in this case, the Iraqi refugees), the challenges to the Syrian economy notwithstanding. As noted in Aguilar-Millan's article (this issue), various other parts of the world are less receptive to immigrants. How do you account for this difference – and how will the spirit or hospitality change in the coming years?*

- *In contact with Syria and various traditional Asian cultures, parts of the West are youth-oriented, extending to preoccupation with body image. Will youth-oriented cultures and the more traditional cultures continue to co-exist in 2020 as they exist now, or is the trend toward one or the other?*