

# A Canadian Interfaith Response to the Refugee Crisis

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On Tuesday February 5th, the **Darchei Noam** congregation in partnership with the Intercultural Dialogue Institute held a panel discussion on the Canadian response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis. The master of ceremony for the evening was Debbie Michnick, from the Interfaith Dialogue Committee at Congregation Darchei Noam. Opening remarks were given by Darchei Noam's Rabbi, **Tina Grimberg**, Nuray Gunel of IDI, and John Voorpostel, who is the Steering Committee Chair for the **World Interfaith Harmony week in Toronto**.

Tina Grimberg welcomed "the human, beautiful family" to Darchei Noam, explained that they are committed to social justice, and thanked people for their contributions to the refugee effort. "You were praying with your fingers," she said.

Nuray Gunel explained that she volunteers for IDI because she believes that the only way to love one another, is to know one another. The events in the world currently highlight the importance of interfaith and intercultural work. "We must find the proper ways of learning about each other," she said, directly from the other person.

John Voorpostel gave a welcome address on behalf of the World Interfaith Harmony Week, Toronto chapter. The theme for this year is *Open Hearts, Open Minds*, and it was a good fit for the event, he said. Families coming here want better lives for future generations and this is the collective story of Canada. "In a real way, the strength of our neighbours and their neighbours is our strength, and their success is our success."

## Panelists

**Doug Saunders** of the Globe and Mail was the chair for the evening as well as one of the speakers. He welcomed the very interfaith audience for a very interfaith topic; appropriate for Canada's unique way to settle refugees by drawing on the faith spectrum to do so.

When talking about the Canadian faith response to the Syrian refugee crisis, we can be more interfaith than just Jewish, Muslim, and Catholic, Doug Saunders commented. For the purpose of this panel though, it encompassed a wide enough array. It was appropriate, he said, as all three faiths have historic ties to Syria. Doug Saunders added that he was happy to see a large group of Vietnamese people, who had themselves been refugees, getting involved with the response.

Doug Saunders spoke about Canada's unique way of resettling refugees, a process in which faith communities play a central role. Most other countries have governments directly manage the resettlement process, which allows for greater numbers, but is more removed from communities. Private sponsorship has always been an important way for refugees to be brought into Canada.

There have been many questions raised, Doug Saunders said. Will they be difficult? Should we worry about violence? They are reasonable questions, but one of the purposes for the evening was to give a better understanding of the process and to ease fears.

A point he stressed is that this is a specific crisis that is taking place right now, which is not part of the general refugee crises. "It is not permanent, not overwhelming, not unique."

Doug Saunders expanded on the history of refugee crises and large influxes of displaced people. The Jewish people fleeing Europe were the catalyst for the word refugee to be born, for the United Nations to make a convention in 1951. The Hungarians were the first group to be prominently taken under the 'refugee' moniker in 1956, during the Revolution and subsequent Soviet crackdown.

The Hungarians had fled across the Austrian border and Canada took them in from the refugee camps. There was a lot of distrust and anti-communist, anti-Semitic, and anti-Catholic sentiment at the time. "We remember it as being successful," Doug Saunders said, "but there was an ugly public debate at the time." The Hungarians now make up an important part of the Toronto, and Canadian, community.

In the 1970s, the Ismailis fleeing Idi Amin's dictatorship in Uganda were granted asylum by Canada. They are now a big refugee sponsoring community. The Vietnamese boat people were initially described as "Impossible to integrate and wouldn't be able to stand the weather," by the Toronto Star. "Like any of us can," Doug Saunders joked. Canada took in over sixty thousand in two years, coming to a point where there were more people offering sponsorship than there were Vietnamese wanting to come over.

Canada has consistently taken in refugees and they have become part of the community. Somalis, Yugoslavians, Sri Lankans. We forget there are long periods between these crises related to specific wars. Refugee numbers are usually low and Canada does not take in many—only about five percent of the total number of people coming in to Canada. It is still between five and ten percent even during the larger refugee crises, Doug Saunders explained.

There is a pattern, he said. There is a crisis, it seems overwhelming, Canadians manage to organize to sponsor people, and it is hard in the beginning but it does work out. The refugees that Canada gets are the poorest of the refugees, the ones in most dire need. The refugees that Europe gets have gone through horrors, but they have paid 3000 Euro each to cross the Mediterranean. Canada deliberately sponsors tougher cases. This means that they will need more support and help, and the support of Canadian communities.

Naomi Alboim is the chair of Queen's University's **School of Policy Studies** and on the board of directors at **Lifeline Syria**. She coordinated the movement to help the Vietnamese boat people on behalf of the federal government in Ontario. Naomi Alboim spoke of the Jewish response. The situation in Syria is horrific, she began. "We can't solve the problem alone, but we can be part of the solution." She commended the current government for their decision to take action.

"As Jews, we understand refugee situations only too well. We know what happens when the world ignores crises," Naomi Alboim said. She acknowledged Canada's chequered history of refugee policy. Between 1935 and 1940, Canada accepted few European Jews, with the infamous quote *None is too many*. However, Naomi Alboim explained, following World War Two, Canada accepted thirty-five thousand Jewish refugees, and improved its acceptance of refugees.

Legislation in the past ten years have made obtaining refugee status and private sponsorship of refugees more difficult. The number of government sponsored refugees also declined. Most

importantly, Naomi Alboim emphasized, the discourse led by the past government changed to a negative and accusatory tone. “Sunny days,” she said, gave hope again.

Lifeline Syria is a new organization which only began in the summer, functioning in an ad hoc way and entirely volunteer based. They deliberately reached out to the Syrian community, settlement agencies, different levels of government, and faith organizations to be on their advisory committee. “We wanted to complement the work of the primarily faith-based private sponsors who had been working in the trenches since the late ‘70s, sponsoring refugees from all over the world.” They also wanted to reach out to the non-traditional sponsor groups, such as book clubs or neighbourhood groups.

The goal of Lifeline Syria was to bring in one thousand refugees over two years. They received response from all over Canada and had some help from the province. “Then the picture of little Alan Kurdi changed everything,” Naomi Alboim said. Lifeline Syria is now working with Four Hundred sponsor groups to ensure good settlement plans, training, and putting them in touch with necessary resources. “Lifeline Syria considers itself a matchmaker.”

The Jewish faith community has stepped up as well. Some groups have brought mosques and synagogues together, to sponsor refugee families. “I am proud to say Darchei Noam was the first synagogue to decide to sponsor a Syrian refugee family,” Naomi Alboim said. They sponsored a family of five, currently in Lebanon, with a sister in Toronto. There was an excellent and enthusiastic response.

“We are responding to this crisis as Jews,” she explained. Of the many reasons, the most important is that it is the right thing to do; to put our values into practice. “Tikkun Olam, repairing the world. As children of refugees, we are paying it forward in return for the safety and security that Canada gave to our families.” In light of this, the response in Europe brings back many unpleasant memories, Naomi Alboim explained.

“It is not difficult to substitute the word Syrian or Muslim for the word Jew, to know why we are doing what we are doing.”

Habeeb Alli, of the **International Development and Relief Foundation**, began by explaining that when he was ten, he ran with his family from the violence in Guyana. He thought about his faith and his theology, and over the years he and many of the people in attendance to the have worked to create an interfaith community in Toronto. “Every day it is my challenge as Imam...to recognize that the faith of Islam is not in any way a hindrance to any refugees into Canada. Rather it is a plus.”

He explained that the night before this event, the Council of Imams had welcomed first nations leaders because they recognize that Canadians live upon their land. When someone calls to sponsor a refugees and they ask if they are Sunni or Shia, Habeeb Alli asks, “Aren’t they human beings?”

Many say that there are other minorities in the Middle East that should be brought to Canada and given special attention. Legitimate victims should get help, but without favouritism. When people are afraid that any of these families harbour extremist tendencies it is worth remembering that Canada has a stringent security process.

Martin Mark, who is the Director for the **Office of Refugees** at the **Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto** spoke about the Catholic response to the Syrian refugee crisis. He

began by talking about his trip to Jordan, where one sees many different charities in action, such as CARITAS which is the Pope's charity. "It is important we build on their work," he said. The philosophy of the Archdiocese of Toronto is that successful resettlement starts overseas.

The Archdiocese of Toronto, Martin Mark explained, is one of the most diverse in the world and has an enthusiastic involvement with refugees and helping people. The first Archbishop of Toronto, Michael Power, died from contracting Typhoid fever while helping 'proto-refugees' who had landed in Quebec to escape the Great Famine in 1874.

In 2010, the Office of Refugees was in Damascus interviewing Iraqi refugees, who had been staying in Syria, with numbers of about one million. It was then that they realized that what was happening in the north of Syria was more than just simple conflicts. They left in 2011 because it became too dangerous to stay any longer. However, the Archdiocese was among the first to go to Turkey and begin the sponsorship of Syrian refugees.

When Martin Mark went to the United Nations meeting that year, many ambassadors from resettlement countries, like the United States, said that they did not want to take in any Syrian refugees. The Archdiocese ignored the mainstream view and, "Followed their conscience," he said. Some in Ottawa were not happy with this decision at the time, but now the same people are asking for more Syrians to be taken in by Canada. "It shows that things are changing." Martin Mark's office, which usually settles about one hundred and fifty individuals annually, has reached over two thousand in the last year, mostly from the Middle East.

The Archdiocese has also partnered with Jewish initiatives like Project Abraham, to sponsor Yazidis. There must be a response to ensure that target minorities are not excluded from help, he said, while ensuring that Canada maintains its policy to bring in the most dire cases regardless of religion or culture. However when minorities are underrepresented, that is when more needs to be done to guarantee their safety.

Project Hope was created to select one hundred families from the Middle East who have no connections, friends or relatives in Canada, to be the voice of the voiceless. Different organizations stepped up and helped to sponsor them. One hundred families have been reached and they are now approaching two hundred.

Before the panel moved on to the question and answer portion of the night, Doug Saunders emphasized that being a refugee is a fairly traumatic process. When immigrants and refugees who have been in Canada for years, or their children, remember their journey, they tend to gloss over the times in the middle. The refugees entering Canada now, have to face the middle years of landing and rebuilding their life in an entirely new country. This takes a lot of help and can sometimes take generations.

## Q&A

Canada has a few things it does to help in the in between phase. The sponsorship process does limit the numbers but it also ensures that there are people for newcomers to turn to. Canada ensures a quick path to permanent resident and citizenship, which is something that helps refugees feel like they are more part of a community and encourages them to invest in them. Another helpful aspect is quick integration into the school and employment system, as this will facilitate the way for cultural integration. Finally in Toronto, there is no avoidance of having

people of similar background living in a specific areas, as it is recognized that this helps with integration.

During the Q&A period, Naomi Alboim explained that the two bodies of refugee settlement are private sponsorship and government sponsorship. A combination of the two works well, because the government sponsors give the expert advice, but the private sponsorship helps create strong relationships with refugees, and strong networks that help with integration. Children do well, adults do okay, but the ones who need the most help are the teenagers.

Habeeb Alli spoke on the nuances of understanding where refugees were coming from, to be sensitive to the things they had experienced. It was important to remember that refugees are coming from camps and war zones.

Doug Saunders expanded on why Europe is in such a different position. They have had nearly one million people coming in to only a few countries, with Germany, for example, agreeing to take in one hundred thousand. Of those many, many people cross the Mediterranean into Europe, officials estimate 50–70 percent will not be recognized as refugees. They used to be temporary workers, but the European Union put a ban on travelling back and forth, so many of those paying 3000 Euro to cross are within that group. In contrast some countries have brought in refugees, but have not allowed them to work until they have learned the language which may take a long time for adults and takes them out of the employment system. All of these create image problems. Some countries end up perpetuating the very behaviour that they feared from refugees.

Martin Mark explained that the number of twenty-five thousand Syrian refugees is part of the larger forty thousand number of other refugees, which should also not be abandoned. He also touched on integration as a tool for resettlement. One must realize that “If you want refugees to come to your country, and you expect them to get blonde hair and blue eyes to consider them integrated, it will not work.”

Naomi Alboim finished by explaining that the twenty-five thousand government sponsored refugees were not being displaced by the privately sponsored refugees, which come in addition through these private channels.