


HELPING SYRIAN-ARMENIAN REFUGEES IN TORONTO

Posted on March 23, 2016 by Keghart

keghart.com

Category: [Opinions](#)




 **Interview**, 23 March 2016

Keghart interviews Aris Babikian, retired citizenship judge, founder and chairman, Levant Settlement Centre (LSC). The LSC is a non-profit organization which serves, guides, and helps resettle newly-arrived Syrians to Toronto, specially persecuted ethnic and faith-based minorities of the Levant (Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan). It is also dedicated to orienting the newcomers to their new home. The LSC is inter-denominational.

**Volunteers offload furniture****KEGHART: When did the Levant Settlement Centre of Toronto start its work of helping Syrian refugees?**

ARIS BABIKIAN: We started our work in September of last year.

 **Interview**, 23 March 2016

Keghart interviews Aris Babikian, retired citizenship judge, founder and chairman, Levant Settlement Centre (LSC). The LSC is a non-profit organization which serves, guides, and helps resettle newly-arrived Syrians to Toronto, specially persecuted ethnic and faith-based minorities of the Levant (Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan). It is also dedicated to orienting the newcomers to their new home. The LSC is inter-denominational.

**Volunteers offload furniture****KEGHART: When did the Levant Settlement Centre of Toronto start its work of helping Syrian refugees?**

ARIS BABIKIAN: We started our work in September of last year.

KEGHART: Can you provide a capsule statistics of Syrian refugees in Canada?

AB: As of March 20, 2016, of the 26,202 refugees, 8,976 were privately-sponsored; 2,225 were sponsored in a blended program and 15,001 were government-assisted refugees. Of the 8,792 privately-sponsored refugees, around 1,800 are Armenians who landed in Toronto. In contrast to the government-sponsored refugees, the privately-sponsored refugees do not receive financial assistance other than airline tickets for those who arrived between Nov. 4, 2015 and Feb. 29, 2016. Thus, the privately-sponsored refugees are dependent on their sponsors, friends, faith-based groups, and resettlement organizations. The refugees are arriving with a few suitcases. They have lost everything. They have to build a new life in a new country from almost zero.

KEGHART: Why did you feel you had to take part in assisting Syrian-Armenians to Toronto?

AB: I came to Canada as a refugee. I know what it means to lose your loved ones, your home, business, friends and to relocate in a new country to start a new life where people have different values and culture. Accordingly, helping refugees and newcomers has been a lifelong cause for me. My associates and I are trying to ease the Syrian-Armenians' transition and make it as comfortable and as dignified as possible. By helping newcomers we speed up the process of their integration to the Canadian social society and rendering them a productive members of their new country. By our involvement we are investing in the future of Canada and the Armenian community of Toronto.

KEGHART: Since the Toronto Armenian Centre and the Holy Trinity Armenian Church are also facilitating the settlement of Syrian-Armenians, why did you think another refugee assistance organization was necessary? What are you doing that they're not doing?

AB: The Holy Trinity Church Family Support office and the Armenian Community Centre Sponsorship Agreement Holder (SAH) are mainly involved in processing refugee applications. Furthermore, the two organizations were overwhelmed by the speed of the refugee airlift due to the government's determination to uphold its promise of bringing 25,000 refugees by the end of 2015. Thus, there was a need for an organization such as the LSC. We extended our hand of cooperation to all Armenian organizations. We are serving the refugees of both SAHs without any prejudice.

The LSC team's unparalleled experience in the resettlement of newcomers, knowledge of a wide array of government, and community settlement services and programs available to refugees and families with special needs and challenges, helped LSC members perform their task in a more professional and result oriented manner. The contribution of the LSC was more substantial and meaningful than any other service available to the newcomers. The testimonies of the refugees are best evidence of the success and the importance of LSC's methodical approach to fulfil the needs of the newcomers. The praise of the refugees, elected officials, the media, and resettlement agencies of the work of LSC are a badge of honor to our team.

KEGHART: Can you provide details of what the LSC does to facilitate the resettlement of the refugees?

AB: Our team provides transportation to the refugees for appointments and meetings. We find accommodation, secure guarantors to lease apartments, acquire and deliver furniture and other essential household items, assist in finding jobs, counsel them on educational matters, attend to their medical needs, translate documents from Arabic and Armenian into English, co-organize orientation sessions and job-guidance seminars, provide legal advice, interpret government policies and provide the refugees with information regarding their status vis-à-vis the immigration department, in addition to miscellaneous services. Our centre also liaises with non-Armenian and faith-based groups which have sponsored Armenians.



**(L-R) Hon. John McCallum, Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship
and Mr. Aris Babikian**

The LRC also provides media outlets, Canadian agencies and settlement organizations objective analysis and up-to-date information on the Syrian Crisis and the refugees. Furthermore, we facilitate refugee interviews with the media so that the newcomers can tell their heart-wrenching experiences and their feelings about the Canadian government's and people's initiative to provide them a safe haven.

In the past six months the LSC and its volunteers have been working relentlessly to resettle our compatriots who have arrived from Syria. The needs of our newcomers are diverse and numerous.

The above support was provided to close to 450 Syrian-Armenian and non-Armenian newcomers. We also matched refugees with prospective sponsors in Canada.

KEGHART: Is there anything more that needs to be done to assist the refugees?

AB: Our most urgent need is to find employment for them. The refugees are hardworking, highly-educated, and proud individuals. They don't want to be a burden on anyone. Furthermore, we are working with the Hon. John McCallum, Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship, and his staff to waive the airline tickets loan program for refugees who arrived before Nov. 4. This is an important initiative because many refugee families are agonizing over this issue instead of concentrating on improving their English language or finding a job. They do not need additional stress.

KEGHART: How many more Armenian refugees are expected this year?

AB: According to unconfirmed reports, there are around 500 privately-sponsored refugee applications in process. Furthermore, the government has allotted 18,000 spots for privately-sponsored refugees in its current year forecast. There are large numbers of Syrian refugees who are lingering in Lebanon waiting for their sponsors to process the applications. Our work is not finished. We have a long road ahead of us to provide, to care, and to look after our brothers and sisters.

KEGHART: How have you financed LSC operations?

AB: Our operation is voluntary. We have many individual benefactors and Canadian resettlement agencies contributing substantially to our work.



At Our Lady of Lebanon Parish

KEGHART: Can you tell us more about organizations and people who have supported the LSC initiative?

AB: Many partners and benefactors joined in this noble project to settle our newcomers in a gracious way. Without them our team would not have been able to continue this mission. Our heartfelt

appreciation goes to Rev. Majed El Shafie, One Free World International; Vahan Kololian, Mosaic Institute; MP Peter Kent, Catch the Fire Church, Rev. Steve Long, Rev. Hany Boghossian, The Well on Bayview Church; Morning Star Christian Fellowship Church, Pastor Mario Villeneuve; Senior Rabbi Yoseph Zaltzman, Rabbi Mendel Zaltzman, the Jewish Russian Community Centre; COSTI Immigration Services, PCPI, Dan Kershaw, Natasha Hynes, the Furniture Bank, Catholic Cross-cultural Services, ORAT (Office for Refugees Archdiocese of Toronto), Dr. Martin Mark, Sistema Toronto; Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture, Our Lady of Lebanon Parish, Pastor Youssef Chedid; Father Elie Abou Assaf, Jesus The King Melkite Catholic Church, Access Employment Agency, the Arab Immigrant Centre, Jirair Tutunjian, Jerrahi Sufi Order of Canada, Serj Iskandaryan and many others.

There are no words to express the gratitude of the refugees, that of my associates, and my own, about the humanism and solidarity of the above. The warmth they extended means so much to the refugees. They will never forget that Canadians extended their goodwill to ease their transition and make their resettlement with the least amount of stress.

KEGHART: What should the government do to improve any stage of the process?

AB: The government should waive the loan program of the refugees who came before Nov. 4, 2015. The government should also pay more attention to the privately-sponsored refugees and their resettlement. Try to cooperate with the private sector to initiate employment opportunities and sensitize the educational institutions and professional governing bodies to ease the requirements for the professional refugees or provide them financial grants to upgrade their skills to be able to practice their own professions. Furthermore, the government should allocate additional funding to resettlement organizations.

