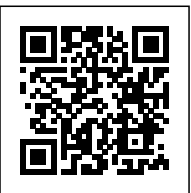


#SAVEKESSAB


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Vahe H. Apelian, Ohio, 8 May 2014

#SaveKessab came about not long after the March 21, 2014 onslaught on Kessab by rebel groups, accompanied by artillery fired from Turkish side. In a few hours the overwhelming majority of some 2,000 Armenian inhabitants of Greater Kessab, along with many other Syrians nationals, who had found refuge in the villages, fled to the coastal city of Latakia, 35 miles away. President Serge Sarkissian of Armenia characterized the tragic event as the third expulsion of Armenians from Kessab, in reference to its 1909 pogrom and ransacking, and the Armenian Genocide in 1915. 

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On that fateful first day of spring, the historic Armenian town of Kessab became the Syrian Civil War's new casualty. It was not the first town in Syria to be depopulated during the war but the far-reaching outcry it created caught most by surprise. For the very first time in the Armenian Diaspora a hashtag was used to publicize the grievances of Armenians, thanks to a younger generation of Armenian North Americans, many of whom were born to parents who have settled in the United States from Kessab.

The #SaveKessab hashtag went viral on social media such as Twitter and Facebook. It soon found resonance among Armenian communities worldwide.

Kessab is the only remnant of historic Armenian Cilicia outside Turkey that is inhabited by Armenians. Its depopulation hit a nerve among Armenians, rekindling in them deep-seated sentiments against past atrocities.

In the recent five or six decades many Kessabtsis have distinguished themselves as professionals, artisans, authors, educators, clergy and community leaders. Their prominence in the Diaspora surely helped stir the emotions of Armenians worldwide. Social celebrities also joined in promoting the hashtag. As a symbol of solidarity, the #SaveKessab hastag became the profile pictures of many in the Facebook coloring social media pages red. These efforts succeeded to draw international attention to the plight of Kessabtis, to the ferocity of the Syrian Civil War and to Turkey as well.

Without the assistance of the Turkish government heavily-armed extremists, many of them not

Syrian, couldn't have crossed the Turkish border. The onslaught on Kessab weeks before Armenian Genocide commemorations on April 24 could not have happened otherwise.

In Latakia the Kessabtsis found refuge in the Armenian Apostolic Church compound comprised of a sanctuary, school, and a housing development. At one time the ancient church compound also served as an overnight stopover for Armenians from Turkey on their way to pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

The Latakia Armenian community immediately came to their aid and offered them food, clothing, and shelter. The suddenness and ferocity of the early morning attack and the need to flee as soon as possible had necessitated that Armenians leave with nothing more than the clothes they were wearing.

Kessabtsis have again become refugees. They have found shelter with families, friends and neighbors. Armenian organizations worldwide have galvanized their efforts and continue to raise funds to assist the Kessabtsis who have organized in a committee comprised of the religious leaders of the three main Armenian denominations--Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical, along with civic leaders. Most Kessabtsis remain in Latakia while some have left or plan to leave. Most of the latter group say their departure is temporary, in search of earning a living. They say they will remain abroad until law and order prevails in their region.

Other than in 1915, Kesabtsis have not been forced out of their villages this long. Much like the one-time slogan "Starving Armenians", #SaveKessab hashtag has come to symbolize another tragic historic event in the life of modern Armenians. It is likely that the hashtag will remain with us for some time. God knows what fate awaits Kessab and the Kessabtsis. Only time will tell the true consequences of this new and unprovoked aggression on Kessab, the tranquil Armenian historic enclave in northern Syria.

