

"I Cannot Remain Idle"

The humanitarian response to the Syrian refugee crisis

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By: Alaryss Bosco & Sam Fry

On October 28, 2015, Georgette Bennett and Amin Ahmed from the Multifaith Alliance for Syrian Refugees (MFA) delivered a one-hour lecture in Garber Auditorium of Chan Shun Hall on the humanitarian response to the Syrian refugee crisis.

The MFA is the only interfaith organization in the United States to address the Syrian refugee crisis. Consisting of multiple religious sects and major secular organizations, MFA seeks to galvanize global multifaith support to alleviate the Syrian refugee crisis, and promote awareness of the dangers such regional instability can cause.

Bennett founded the MFA as an effort to “delegitimize the use of religion as a justification for extremism.” Citing her Jewish roots, Bennett claimed, “I cannot remain idle while suffering abounds.”

“You may think it odd that I, as a Jew, would have been motivated to do something about this horrific humanitarian crisis,” said Bennett. “You may be asking yourself, ‘are Syrians your brother as a Jew? Syrians are your enemies.’”

“I think what you are also going to get out of this is an inspirational story about how enemies can rise above politics in order to work together to alleviate horrific human suffering,” said Bennett.

According to Bennett, religion has moral authority and consequently provides a moral imperative to take care of people. Bennett contended that religious groups are easier to mobilize and have inbuilt communication networks.

Bennett concluded her portion of the lecture with a three-part call to action: first, that Andrews’ students counter hateful websites which argue against resettling refugees; second, she suggested that Andrews create a scholarship for refugee students; and finally she encouraged students to host a sleeping bag and blanket drive, as many refugees are heading into winter severely undersupplied.

“I’m not just here to teach,” said Bennett, “I’m an activist now.”

Ahmed’s portion of the lecture focused on his personal experiences in Syria as a hospital administrator. A self-proclaimed member of the “old generation,” it was the atrocities of the Assad regime against unarmed demonstrators that convinced Ahmed to become an activist.

“I was the manager of a hospital located next to a university,” said Ahmed. “I would see these kids going out from university; some of them were caught, and they were beaten in front of us—we couldn’t do anything to help them.”

When demonstrators came seeking medical treatment, Ahmed was forced to report them to the authorities—who would imprison and torture them. This became a moral dilemma for Ahmed, who felt he could not stand by idly, so he mobilized a team of medical staff to supply underground medical assistance.

“We decided, my friends and I, that we should act,” said Ahmed. “We shouldn’t let anything stop us from acting. We organized doctors and medical workers and other professions. We started providing a network of medical supplies and treatment for people who were getting hurt in these demonstrations.

“Of course this was one of the most dangerous professions you could have in Syria. Some of our colleagues got killed—we don’t know where they are now.”

After one and a half years of successfully running the underground operation, Ahmed was forced to leave all his possessions behind and flee Syria with only a small suitcase.

“We continued our work until we were discovered,” said Ahmed. “I had to leave the country and my hometown. All of a sudden I became a refugee. I was planning where I was going to spend

my life and all of a sudden I lost everything. My property was confiscated, and I left with one suitcase. I barely made it out of Syria.”

Ahmed continues to work with MFA to help refugees with stories similar to his own. He repeated Bennett’s call to action and asked Andrews students, staff and faculty to take an active stance in alleviating the suffering of this conflict.

“I felt it was still my duty to do what I could do. I started helping refugees and organizing aid to bring back to Syria,” said Ahmed. “This is the generation we fear we are losing. If we don’t do something for them, we are going to have hundreds of thousands of them who feel abandoned by the whole world.”

Those in attendance were inspired and motivated by Bennett and Ahmed’s presentations.

“Amin Ahmed’s story really touched me,” said junior political science major Laisa Vakaloloma. “I think that as students of Andrews University, we need to get involved in this cause. We, too, have the ability to make a difference in the lives of the refugees.”

“I was lucky that I could travel to safety,” said Ahmed. “It’s my obligation to help my countrymen and others who are in need, because it’s Syria now, but there were lots of countries that were affected before Syria. It was Darfur, it was Somalia, it was Bosnia, and I feel so sorry that I didn’t have the freedom to help those who were in need before. But now, I have the ability. I hope you will join us in this effort to help other refugees throughout the world.”

If you would like to know how you can get involved or contribute to the Multifaith Alliance’s efforts, you can visit their website at www.multifaithalliance.org.

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