

## Syria – the Way of Grief

Reflecting the great concern about Syria, the Friends Meeting House was packed to hear Basel talk about his native country. We were very moved by his personal account of the situation there and the terrible cost of the conflict.

He described happier times when all 9 religious groups lived peacefully side by side under a secular government, albeit a repressive and undemocratic one. Political repression, corruption in the private and public sectors, privatisation which favoured the ruling classes and state violence all contributed to the popular uprising inspired by the ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011. What began as peaceful civilian demonstrations for freedom were countered by pro Assad protests, leading to violence and many civilian deaths. In a calculated move, President Assad released a number of Islamic extremist prisoners, knowing that they would form armed opposition groups and thus give the government a ‘legitimate’ excuse to violently attack civilian opposition protesters and turn the civilian movement into violent one and that what happened.

Intervention from outside states protecting their own interests soon followed, supporting either the regime or opposition groups. This has led to a proxy war in which Syria has become a playground for international conflict involving fighters from up to 40 countries, including other Arab states, Gulf states, Iran, Russia and the West. Radical jihadists have also joined in.

Basel left Syria in 2012 for Lebanon where he met his English wife Rachel . Whilst waiting for his UK spouse visa he moved to work in Dubai, and then to Faringdon 9 months ago to join his wife. His family is still in Syria and a few days before our meeting, their city was attacked by Al Qaida. Two agonising days passed before Basel heard that they were safe with friends in a nearby village, but they have lost their home and everything they spent a lifetime working for.

Basel fears that while all sides still feel they can win, the bloody conflict in Syria will continue. The only solution is for all foreign countries to withdraw their funding and support for the different warring factions and for the UN to initiate peace negotiations.

230,000 people have died since 2011, with 11 million displaced including 2 million children. Neighbouring states have taken in hundreds of thousands of refugees but the camps are overcrowded and unsanitary. Syrians find they are unwelcome in most countries and are treated with suspicion. Some are desperate enough to pay thousands of pounds to be smuggled to Europe. Tragically, Basel lost a good friend this way when the boat in which he was sailing to Greece overturned and he was drowned.

Although the UK has given £800 million to help Syrian victims of the conflict, they have accepted woefully few refugees – around 150. If you would like to join a local group lobbying the government to take more, please email me for details (see address below). If you would like to support local refugees and asylum seekers please go to [www.harbourproject.org.uk](http://www.harbourproject.org.uk) .

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Faringdon Peace Group meets on the first Wednesday of the month at 7.30 in the Friends Meeting House, Lechlade Road. May’s meeting will have a speaker about TTIPs. All welcome.