



The International Organization for Migrations's insitutional communication with expatriate groups from the Middle East and North Africa

## Inside this issue:

- 1-2 Preserving the past for the future: Arab American National Musuem
- 3 Little Syria, NY: An immigrant Community's Life & Legacy
- 4 What is new at IOM and Announcements



## Preserving the past for the future

The Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) started in 1971 in Dearborn, Michigan, largely serving immigrants who had left the Levant in the post-1967 war era and Arabs who had already been in the United States. The Lebanese Civil War, starting in 1975-6, prompted large numbers of people from southern Lebanon to come the USA, which grew the organization. Throughout the 1980s, ACCESS started getting inquiries from local governments on the history of local Arabs/history,

and so a small cultural arts museum was created to raise awareness within the broader community—the long term dream was to have a big, stand-alone museum.

In the late 1990s, a national committee was formed to start fundraising for the expanded museum, but then 9/11 happened. Rather than putting a damper on the project, the Arab American community was propelled to action, desiring to show heritages, experiences and contributions that would provide a positive counterpoint to a national rhetoric in which foreigners, particularly from the Middle East and North Africa, were unwelcome.

The [Arab American National Museum](#) (pictured above) opened its doors in 2005 as a result of contributions from private individuals, corporations, foundations and some funding instruments of the state and federal government. The museum is now a Smithsonian Institution affiliate, which means it is involved with curating and hosting traveling exhibits. It can borrow material from other Smithsonian institutions, and are consulted as experts in the field of Arab American history.

The Arab American National Museum faces a variety of challenges, not in the least of which is trying to represent such a diverse group of people. The Museum's working definition of "Arab" is anyone with ancestry in the 22 Arab nations. This means that they will sometimes be representing people who do not primarily identify as Arab, but whose histories are inextricably entwined with those being showcased. "We work hard not to impose an identity

on anyone. We want to allow people to self-identify, and we fully recognize that every exhibit won't appeal to everyone," explained Dr. Matthew Jaber Stiffler, Research and Content Manager at the Museum. "We reach out to different communities depending on the exhibit."

Additionally, the amount of time the Museum covers presents its own set of obstacles. "We are trying to tell the stories of people who came to America two weeks ago, and those who came 150 years ago," says Dr. Stiffler.

Locally, the Museum has had to find ways to engage with the non-Arab community. Being in Dearborn, however, meant that the Museum was playing to a home crowd rather than reaching and educating a different audience. While Dearborn can reach the larger Detroit metropolitan community, the Museum is not in a main center such as New York, DC or Los Angeles where there is more tourist traffic.

For people who are not quite as connected with their ancestry, the Museum is a conduit through which people are able to engage with their past. This has a limited effectiveness in that the Museum is most accessible to people who are physically in Dearborn, but there are significant [online collections and archives](#) for people to access remotely.

"Museums want to be centralized places for history, culture, community. We also want to build an archive to be seen as historical repository. We are, at heart, trying to benefit the Arab American community," says Dr. Stiffler. "We try to be upfront about representing very diverse people and histories by trying to put stories into larger narratives. This means not whitewashing the history of the region, especially because politics in home countries are often reflected in the States."

The museum aims to have both local and national impact. Locally, the museum contextualizes how Arab expatriate communities are intimately woven into the fabric of Detroit and Michigan social and ethnic groups. Global Fridays at the museum is a long-running program, which features musicians who may be part of other ethnic organizations—sometimes they are Arab and sometimes they are not. Additionally, the museum engages with, particularly non-Arab, local citizens through a highly accessible and delicious medium: a walking food tour which illustrates Arab Americans' community and culinary traditions.

Nationally, the museum has traveling exhibits as well as an arts conference and book competition that highlights Arab American literature.

Because of its legal categorization, the museum is circumspect about political activism. However, it speaks to contemporary issues through its exhibits, which attempt to humanize people and show the contexts from which people came to the USA and lived within the States. Dr. Stiffler emphasized, "At the Museum, there's a big push to find threads of unity."

The vast majority of work done by the Museum is in English; even much of the Arabic "speaking" audience in Dearborn does not read or write Arabic. The Museum hosts an Arabic language book collection in the library, but majority of visitors prefer English. As a repository of primary source documents in Arabic, including letters, traveling documents, business records and more, the Museum is a go-to place for researchers.

The Arab American National Museum does not limit itself to what happens within the US border. They have received a federal grant to do a joint project with a museum in Palestine where each institution will find 20 young women who will use technology to tell stories and make short films together. The Museum has done a similar project in the past with a children's museum in Jordan where the topic was environmental issues. Other projects have included meeting with arts organizations in Lebanon, presenting artists at an event in Cairo, and regularly bringing artists from MENA to the USA to perform music or show their art at the museum.





### **Little Syria, NY: An Immigrant Community's Life & Legacy**

Before the construction of the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel and the World Trade Center, Manhattan's lower west side was home to one of the largest and earliest communities of Arab Americans in the nation. Little Syria, NY: An Immigrant Community's Life & Legacy tells the story of this neighborhood from its beginnings in the late 1800s to its legacy in Brooklyn and beyond.

The exhibit can be found at the Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration from October 1, 2016 to January 9, 2017.

Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration  
 Ellis Island, NY, NY 10004  
 212-363-3200 | [website](http://www.ellis-island.org)





As military operations progress to retake territory from ISIL in Iraq, there will be an increasing need to work on livelihoods and resilience activities in communities.  
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## Announcements

- **The Migration Collective** aims to challenge the rhetoric on migration. We do so through the arts and create participative events where migrants, practitioners and the general public have the chance to come together. The [London Migration Film Festival \(LMFF\)](#) is a three days event from **11-13 November** that will include a selection of films focusing on migration, music, informative talks, and spaces for dialogue. LMFF is the first event of its kind within London.
- **Techfugees** is a social enterprise coordinating the international tech community's response to the needs of Refugees. Techfugees organises conferences, workshops, hackathons and meetups in around the world in an effort to generate tech solutions that can help refugees. **On November 19-20, 2016**, Skellefteå in northern Sweden, will host a Hackathon with a difference. Over a day-and-a half, the tech community from the region will come together at Skellefteå's modern new 'start-up' house, to conceive, and develop Apps for society – including immigrants, using open data available from sensors across the city, and from the municipality.
- The World Bank, in collaboration with IOM, will be hosting a series of focus groups with Syrian diaspora interested in investment for development in Syria and neighbouring countries, to be held in the United States, South America (Sao Paola and Buenos Aires), Europe (Geneva, Frankfurt, Paris, and London), and the Middle East (Cairo, Amman, and Dubai) throughout October and November. For those interested in participating, contact IOM's Regional Office in Cairo to learn more about the events and dates.

## What's new at IOM?

- In collaboration with the World Bank, Centre for Mediterranean Integration, GiZ and other organizations, IOM has been working on an initiative to assess the potential of Syrian diaspora engagement in investment and development work to support livelihoods for displaced Syrians and host communities in neighbouring countries as well as, eventually, in the reconstruction and development of post-crisis Syria. The partner organizations are organizing a series of focus group discussions with relevant Syrian diaspora members in cities around the world throughout October and November, culminating in a conference to be held in early 2017.
- IOM participated in a conference on diaspora engagement organized by USAID in Washington DC on October 12th entitled *Diasporas in Development: Moving from Opportunity to Action*. IOM organized and facilitated two breakout sessions: one on diaspora support for entrepreneurship and job creation, and a second on diaspora engagement to support resilience and livelihoods development for displaced & host communities.
- IOM Jordan is currently conducting two studies looking at the impact of diaspora: 1) study seeks to understand the flow and uses of remittances sent from Syrian diaspora to the Syrian community in Jordan; 2) a mapping of the Jordanian diaspora in UAE and assess the role this diaspora group can and does play in Jordan's development.

## Submit to the next issue

Submissions accepted for the following sections:

- Successful project
- Highlighting a Diaspora Group
- Expatriate Success Story
- Announcements

For information and submissions, e-mail [iom-menanews@iom.int](mailto:iom-menanews@iom.int).