



IOM's insitutional communication with expatriate groups from the Middle East and North Africa

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Syrian Businesses Building a Better Future

Syrian business men and women are coming together from around the world to build a better future for themselves, their compatriots, and eventually their country as a whole. From a simple idea, the initiative has quickly evolved and grown through the tireless work of a few dedicated individuals. The initiative seeks to form a non-political forum for Syrian business owners living outside of Syria to collaborate on issues of common interest. To this end, the first steps have been taken to establish the Syrian International Business Association (SIBA).

The initiative was spearheaded by the World Bank and partners like International Organization for Migration (IOM), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the Center for Mediterranean Integration (CMI), and the UK Department for International Development (DFID), and entailed over a year of preparation and field work, including over eighteen consultations in 10 countries. These consultations included in-depth one-on-one interviews with business leaders, focus group discussions and survey questionnaires administered to Syrian businesses and other stakeholders. The result of this work was confirmation of the potential and desire of the Syrian business community to impact the lives of those affected by the ongoing conflict.

Based on these results, the 1st Syrian Diaspora Business Forum was organized on 27 and 28 February, 2017 at GIZ headquarters in Eschborn Germany. The event convened approximately 100 stakeholders including representatives of the Syrian business community, multilateral organizations including the World Bank and IOM, bilateral development institutions such as GIZ and DFID, academics, policy makers, NGOs and think tanks. During the event Syrian business owners discussed their challenges but also how they have given back and would like to further support those displaced by the conflict in their country.

The outcome of the event was an action plan that outlined various priorities for collaborative work including: reducing regulatory barriers, empowering youth and women, and finding solutions for financial sector. Amongst these, the group identified their first priority as the creation of SIBA as a means to achieving the others and thus a small group of dedicated individuals committed to volunteer their time to develop a mission, vision, and statutes for the organization.

After five months of research and consultation, the group presented the fruit of their efforts during the first meeting of SIBA hosted by CMI in Marseille on 12 and 13 July which included more than 80 participating Syrian business owners. After intensive discussions on SIBA's founding documents the participants unanimously voted to adopt the statutes and selected a seven person interim board to lead the process of legal establishment of the organization over the next two years. In addition, country level focal points were identified to lead the formation of national chapters of SIBA that will be the driving force for operationalizing SIBA's vision on the ground. Though the road ahead remains long, the dedication of this group of successful and innovative business leaders to work together for a greater good shines a light of hope that helps illuminate the way to a better future.

For more information about SIBA please see their website at: <http://siba.world/>

Innovating Education: An Entrepreneur Invests in the Future of Syrian Children

- *What is your link to the Syrian expatriate community and to Syria?*

Since change is the only constant in life, I have been always a big believer in change and development in every area of my personal and public life, which can be achieved through scientific, gradual, organized and peaceful means. After graduating from the United States (US) in 1991, I worked as an employee for eight years and then opened my own business in the US. Next thing was to use my knowledge and experience in Syria, so I started several lines of business in the country although I moved to the United Arab Emirates and established a bigger business there. My dream was always to support education in Syria, because it's a known fact that it is the cornerstone of any positive change in the society. Before 2011, my work was charity through established organizations in Damascus.

- *What has been the trajectory for your success? Do you think being an expatriate has contributed to your career? If so, how?*

In fact, being an expatriate was the biggest success factor I had in my life. Unfortunately during the past decades, the system in Syria, and the education system in particular, did not provide ambitious and creative people neither the tools to polish their raw skills nor the opportunities to execute their ideas. This reality forced me to leave Syria to find the opportunities and tools that I was looking for.

I studied electronic engineering just as the world of computers was presenting its potential. So, given my personality from the one side, and the business culture and opportunities from the other, I decided to start my own business. However, this meant that I had to work in the area of sales, which I never thought will fit my education as an engineer. Still, only because I was the product of diaspora, I managed eventually to combine all my dreams and create several businesses; something that would have been impossible for me to do had I stayed in Syria.

- *Have you been involved in any projects related to Syria or the MENA region (humanitarian, development, business, research, etc)?*

As stated above, I tried my best to work for the Syrian people in the areas of education, humanitarian work and development/management. Because of the limited space here I will focus on education. After the events of 2011, I worked in two lines. First, I knew that educating the millions of Syrian children in refugee camps will be the most challenging task. Hence, I assembled a team to put the Syrian education curriculum from grades 1-12 in a small tablet that can work without the Internet. The idea was simple: it was impossible to print any curriculum in book form and distribute it to millions, instead, we would provide the tablet to Syrian children everywhere. The project proved to be a success in principle but required the cooperation of camp management, which was a challenge we dealt with in some areas and are still working on in other areas. Secondly, I have been consulting charity organizations to move from the one-time help model to a model of sustainable help, i.e. teaching the needy people how to help themselves.

- *What are your views on how the Syrian expatriates can best maintain links and support Syrian communities within and outside the country, especially refugees?*

Nothing and no one can and will help Syrians inside and outside the country more than the expatriate community. However, here are some specific things that are essential: 1) organization, 2) prioritization, 3) evaluation of the vast, but mostly haphazard, efforts of the past five years, 4) using scientific rules and research as the base of the work, 5) emphasizing work in the areas of media and education in order to maintain the original Syrian peaceful culture and create conditions and environment that defeats extremism and radical thinking, 6) cooperating with the international community so that the new Syria that we, as Syrians, aspire for is constituted by the values of modernity.



Empowering Conflict Impacted Youth in the MENA Region through Disruptive Technologies



The Very Important Projects Fund (VIP.fund) was co-founded by Rama Chakaki, one of the board members of SIBA, in 2015 as a US-based non-profit organization with 501c(3) status focused on youth education. The vision of the VIP.fund is to empower the majority and effectuate entrepreneurial programmes to orient Opportunity Youth ages 14-24 impacted by conflict or economic disparity (regardless of gender, race, ethnicity or religion) toward ideation and innovation of disruptive social impact solutions with a focus on social media, data science and blockchain technologies. The conflict in Iraq and Palestine, and the unfolding of the Arab uprisings of 2011, and eventual displacement of Syrian Youth, created a sense of urgency to focus on offering youth education that has relevance to the job market, nurtured entrepreneurial skills and enabled “out of the box” entrepreneurial thinking.

The Fund’s programmes are at the intersection of social entrepreneurship and disruptive technologies and look at how the two work together to create high impact entrepreneurship skills for the programme beneficiaries. The focus is on new disruptive technologies or high growth sectors; areas participants have a high chance of employment or starting up a business that can attract investors and customers. To date, building a social publishing business and crowdfunding have been two popular programmes.

Initially, programmes were delivered in the field and they ranged between a half day workshop and a week-long course. Today, 90 per cent of the programmes are delivered online using interactive conferencing tools and aided by VIP.fund’s learning platform. Candidates take part in an orientation webinar, and sign up if they like the concept. Once enrolled, participants go through a series of one hour webinars, and use the learning platform and other digital tools to work on assignments and co-create content. Participants build their startups during the programme. Private sector partners take part in the training, and offer internships. To date, the programme has trained over 280 youth and facilitated employment for 20 with commitment for an additional 20 internships, and thus far the programme approval ratings have been over 90 per cent. The aim is to engage an additional 240 youth in 2017/2018 and grow the Fund’s partner network.

Today, partners include private sector companies, universities and field nonprofits. For the current programmes, private sector partners included media companies, publishers, software companies and high profile entrepreneurs from the Middle East and the USA. VIP.fund collaborated with Universities in the USA to develop the training and others in the Middle East to deliver it. Field nonprofits and youth organizations enable the Fund to reach conflict impacted student groups.

The VIP.fund leverages philanthropy dollars to invest in a few startups annually that are deemed to have potential to grow and have high social impact on the target beneficiaries. One example of such a startup is edSeed, a crowdfunding platform for higher education delivered on Android and iOS. edSeed allows students to run fundraising campaigns for university tuition and university related expenses. Funds are directed to the educational institution supporting them to ensure donors that students get fully funded. edSeed is in a pilot phase but was already recognized as a SOLVER in the MIT SOLVE community.

The VIP.fund’s programmes thrive on the generosity of donors (institutional and individual). Anyone can donate to help expand programmes and reach more youth. In addition, the Fund is seeking partners to reach opportunity youth across the MENA region and private sector partners offering internships and employment opportunities.

Announcements

- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lebanon will be holding region Lebanese Diaspora Energy events for North America and Latin American in Las Vegas in September 2017 and in Cancun Mexico in November 2017, respectively. For more information please see the following [link](#).
- The Syrian American Medical Society will be holding its 4th Annual National Symposium to address the question “What does the future of medicine, education and research look like for Syria?” from 6 – 8 October. The Symposium will take place at the Andaz Hotel on 75 Wall Street in New York City, with the participation of SAMS leadership, global health experts and members of the SAMS community. To register please follow this [link](#).

What’s new at IOM?

Within the New York Declaration on Migrants and Refugees, migrants and expatriate communities are recognized by the United Nations as important contributors to development and set the stage for a Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration which is set to be signed in 2018. During 2017 consultations are being conducted to collect inputs from various stakeholders for the Global Compact and IOM has create a moderated online platform, called iDiaspora, for individual expatriates to contribute their opinions on and be involved in these consultations. Through iDiaspora, countries that are negotiating the Global Compact will be made aware of the key concerns that have, the important contributions that they make to development and some key recommendations that they would like to see incorporated. Beyond the Global Compact, the platform provides a mechanism for expatriate communities and networks to engage with agencies and organizations that can advocate their views to local and national governments. The platform was launched on the 24 July during the Thematic Session #4 on the Contributions of migrants and diasporas to all dimensions of sustainable development, including remittances and portability of earned benefits and can be accessed [here](#).

- For more information, please contact us at idiapora@iom.int

Submit to the next issue

Submissions accepted for the following sections:

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

For more information and submissions, please email iommenanews@iom.int.

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