

IDEAS

'The Canadian government and all the major political parties must recognize that the explosion of Syrian refugees is an Arab problem.'

Rather than a homogeneous ethnic group, Syria is actually made up of many different nationalities with a complex and violent history

The myth of the Syrian people

Geoffrey Clarfield
and Salim Mansur

As Canadians are about to vote in an upcoming federal election, the Syrian refugee crisis looms large in the electoral platforms of the three major parties. Yet none of the parties has stopped for a moment to ask a fundamental and historic question, one that should inform all or any policy towards Syria and its explosion of refugees trying to reach our shores: what is Syria and what is a Syrian?

Until 1917, there never was a Syrian state, nor was there an ethnic group that was called Syrians. Yet students of history have always been justly confused when they read about "ancient" Syria, "medieval" Syria or "modern Syria," as if it had a clear historical or ethnic identity. That is because these are academic and political labels invented by academics and politicians and then projected backwards across time. Syria always, however, referred to a territory, not to a people, and certainly not to a Muslim people.

Until the end of the First World War, only a tiny number of Arabic-speaking people in the eastern Mediterranean called themselves Syrians. This was a new thing, and in those days most of them were Christian.

In Old Testament Hebrew, the word "Siryon" is the name for Mount Hermon, a snowy mountain in the Golan Heights. Syria is itself a Greek word. Its first occurrence is in a play by the ancient Greek playwright, Aeschylus. In 440 BC, the Greek writer Herodotus (and the first anthropologist) used the word to describe what is now central Turkey. The Greek-speaking Seleucids, who ruled the east after Alexander the Great, used the word to refer to their territories in southwest Asia.

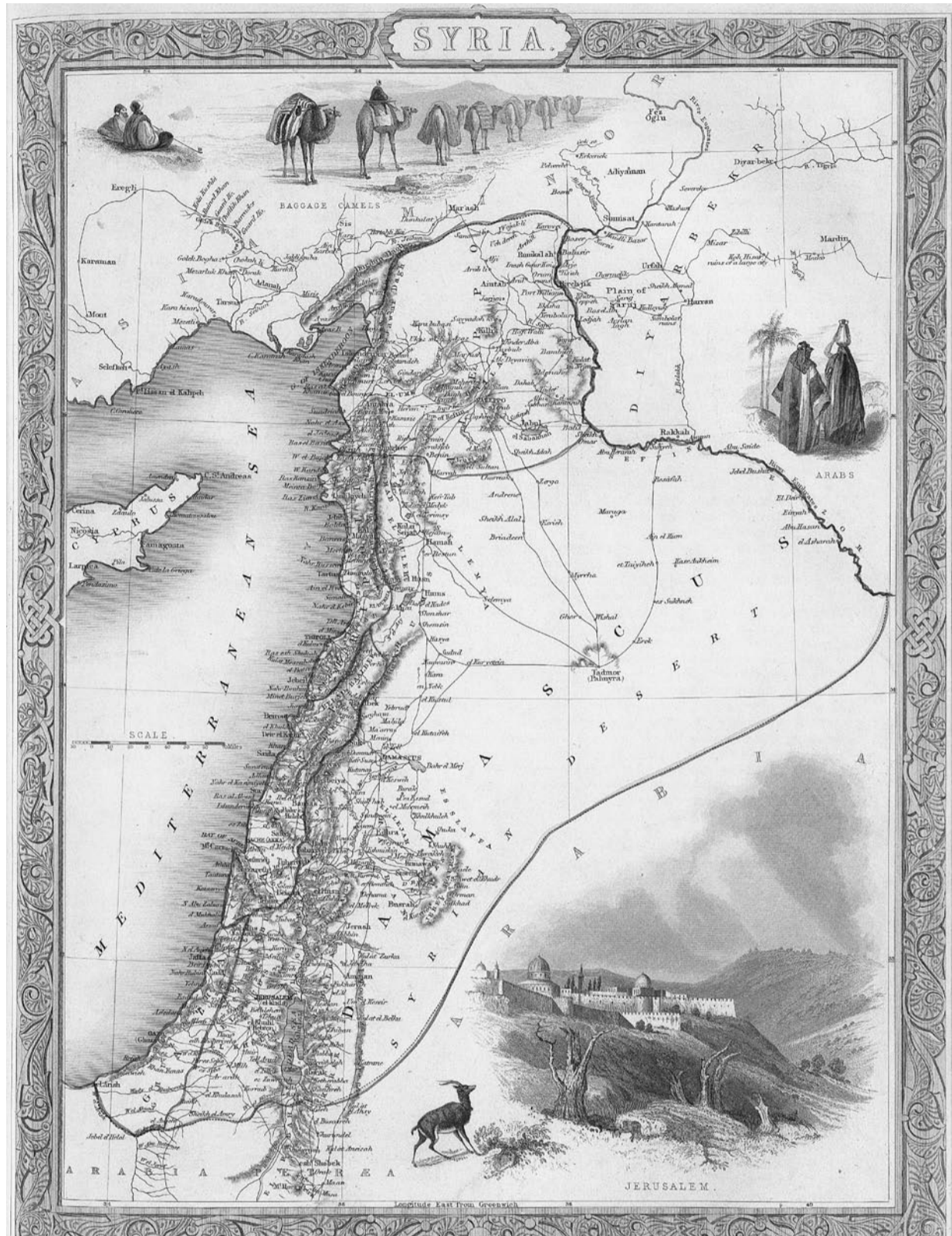
The Romans used the word to describe their territories between Asia Minor (modern Turkey) and Roman Egypt. The Christian Byzantines then adopted the Roman usage. The Muslim Arabs, with their fixation on Mecca and Medina, called the same area "Bilad as Sham," the Land of the North (north of Mecca), as they say in Arabic.

It was American and European Protestant missionaries who, in the 19th century, introduced the word into the area that now bears its name. First, Arabic-speaking Christians adopted the name and only then did local Muslims use the term in their writings. From there, it entered the local historical lexicon in a book called the History of Syria, written by Yurji Janni in 1881. But at that time, what later became the state of Syria was a group of disparate and separately administered districts under the authority of the Ottoman Sultans, who ruled the area from Istanbul.

Interestingly, those who brought the word back into common usage in the late 19th century often used it to refer to what are now Israel, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, mirroring the Greek usage after the break-up of Alexander's empire. Some enthusiasts, both foreign and local, argued that "Greater Syria" even included a territory that extended as far west as the coastal city of El Arish on the Mediterranean coast of the Sinai Desert in Egypt. Simply put, there has never been any agreement as to the geographical nature of Syria or its boundaries.

So it is no surprise that in 1976, the late president of Syria, Hafiz el Assad (the current dictator's father) said to a delegation from the PLO, "You do not represent Palestine as much as we do. Do not forget one thing: there is no Palestinian people, no Palestinian entity, there is only Syria! You are an integral part of the Syrian people and Palestine is an integral part of Syria. Therefore it is we, the Syrian authorities, who are the real representatives of the Palestinian people."

In 1921, that part of the eastern Mediterranean, which was not part of Mandatory Palestine (what was to become Israel and Transjordan) became the League of Nations Mandate for Syria & Lebanon, under French protection. In 1946, the



HENRY WARREN / DAVIDRUMSEY.COM / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

An 1851 map of Ottoman Syria.

French recognized an independent Syrian Arab Republic. Two years later, this newly created State of Syria invaded the newly declared State of Israel, for they believed that it was not Palestine, but part of Syria and, in their estimation, they should rule there.

Who are the people who have lived in Syria since 1920? The most ancient were the Jews, who had lived in Damascus, Aleppo and the villages of Syria since before the Roman Empire. In 1948, many fled the country as the Syrian army attacked Israel from the north. Those Jews who were left behind were often arrested, tortured and executed for the regime for the imagined crime of "Zionism." Eventually, most

not in communion with Rome, and various small groups of Protestants, who were successfully missionized by 19th-century Europeans and who brought the concept of "Syria" to these and other disparate peoples. Then there are the Muslims who are the demographic majority.

Divisions among the Muslims are also complicated. The ruling and secretive Alawi comprise a heterodox Muslim minority who claim to be Shia, but are not quite accepted by other Shia groups, such as those in Iran. The president of Syria is an Alawi, as are most of his government bureaucrats and soldiers. And so, one take on the ongoing Syrian civil war is that it is a war of the Alawi against the rest. But that is

slavery, beheadings and the like), alongside like-minded supporters of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Then there are groups that support no one but themselves and are, in essence, tribally based brigands.

How have these disparate groups interacted with each other during the last century? Not very well at all! In 1912, K.T. Khairallah wrote that:

"Syrian society did not exist in the past. There was nothing but distinct and hostile groups. It was a vast cluster of disparate elements brought together through conquest and held together under one authority by terror and tyranny. Each element jealously retained its traditions, customs and livelihood,

complicated by the Druze, a secretive sect of people who are not quite Muslim, who always support whoever is in power. In Lebanon, they support the government, as they do in Israel. However, in Syria, over the last few months, it looks like they have decoupled themselves from the Alawi. That could change now that the Russians have boots on the ground in Syria.

Syria is also home to Sunni Muslim Kurds who — as Kurdish nationalists first, Muslims second and Syrians last — would prefer an independent state that would merge with the Kurds of eastern Turkey and northern Iraq. Finally, the largest ethnic group in the country are Sunni Arabs who once dreamed of a united Arab world, from Morocco to Iraq, but who are now reduced to warring, clan-based militias, many of whom are fundamentalists and want a Sharia-based state (with

ignoring that of its neighbour... Society was based on despotism of brutal force, modelled on that of the ruler."

This 1912 version of multiculturalism is not to be envied. And sadly, not much has changed since then. In fact, things have gotten worse. There are now large numbers of Syrians — both the perpetrators of, and the victims of, the long-term violence and inter-ethnic persecution that characterizes the country's modern history — who wish to come to our shores. How should our government respond?

First of all, the Canadian government and all the major political parties must recognize that the explosion of Syrian refugees is an Arab problem. The Arab League countries have the money, the space and the resources to absorb, either temporarily or permanently, every Arabic-speaking person who no longer

feels safe in that war torn country. Certainly, a country like Saudi Arabia, with an annual budget of \$229 billion, can afford to take care of its Arab and Muslim "brothers" from Syria. This would be in the spirit of Article Two of the Founding Charter of the Arab League, which clearly states:

"The purpose of the League is to draw closer the relations between member States and co-ordinate their political activities with the aim of realizing a close collaboration between them, to safeguard their independence and sovereignty, and to consider in a general way the affairs and interests of the Arab countries."

NATO states, such as Canada, should call on the member states of the Arab League, especially the oil-rich nations of the Gulf and Saudi Arabia, to shoulder what is clearly an Arab crisis, caused by Arabs. (For example, Qatar alone has given \$3 billion to the Syrian rebels). Were the Arab states to do so and shoulder the burden, the refugees would not have to learn a new language. As Muslims, they will be living and working in a culture where their religion is the state religion and where they can communicate and work effectively. Perhaps one day, they may even go home to Syria. Why this is not happening is anyone's guess. But it is certainly within our rights as Canadians to demand this minimal humanitarian gesture from the Arab League.

Second of all, Canada and the NATO states should open their doors first to the various minorities from Syria who have nowhere to go as they are not welcome in the Arab states, and who fear in any case they would fare no differently than they did in Syria, where they were second class citizens. This is because, as Christians, they have never been granted equal rights by law in the land of their birth, a right that we extend to all citizens and refugees who come to our shores.

Third, Canada should reject anyone who was a high-ranking member of the Syrian Army, who has blood on his or her hands or who has fought in any way with any of the militias or terrorist groups, such as ISIL or Hezbollah, that have massacred civilians and which Canada officially has designated a terror organization.

Finally, the government should match contributions, dollar for dollar, from Canadian community groups that would sponsor innocent families and individuals from any ethnic group or religion — Muslim, Christian, Druze or Alawi — who want to escape this horrible civil war and who are not committed to a stealth Jihad by demanding the application of Sharia law once they get settled here in Canada.

Canada should also assertively demand that the oil rich countries of Arabia and the Gulf provide our government with the funds to assist these kinds of refugees, whether they be Muslim or Christian. The Syrian civil war has been inflamed by the Gulf states, the Saudis, the Iranians and now the Russians. It is only just and fair that they pay their fair share for the human suffering they have created, and which has driven these refugees from their homeland. The recent offer by the Saudi government to build scores of mosques for Syrian refugees in Europe is laughable. Why should the cost of absorbing refugees created by ISIL, which is financed by the Saudis, fall on the shoulders of the ordinary Canadian taxpayer?

Simply put, a multi-ethnic country like Canada needs a multi-ethnic refugee policy that deals with each community in Syria according to its own self-definition, not ours. There is no Syrian people, nor has there ever been — only different ethnic communities, divided and opposed, one against the other. If we do not recognize this bald ethnographic fact, then we are doing those refugees that come from what was once the state of Syria, a grave disservice. They deserve better.

National Post

Geoffrey Clarfield is an anthropologist at large. Salim Mansur teaches political science at Western University in London, Ont.