



American Doctors and Dentists Serve Syrians

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By Amy Kellogg

Crusader castle the Krak des Chevaliers

DAMASCUS, Syria — *The Syrian Ministry of Tourism invited journalists from Tehran to Tunis to check out its top attractions during a trip to the normally reclusive country. Fox News hopped a caravan and went along for the ride.*

We had just huffed and puffed our way up the ramparts of Syria's most important Crusader castle, and once impregnable fortress, Krak des Chevaliers. Its smooth surfaces were intended to make it impossible for intruders to scale the walls. Holes were bored into the fortress for the purpose of pouring hot oil onto the heads of anyone who might dare try to penetrate the castle, which dates back to the 11th century. It belonged to the Emir of Homs before the Crusaders took it over and expanded it. Its scale and heft are breathtaking. Our heads were swimming with visions of medieval battles and Knights Hospitallers, when, suddenly, we were brought back to the here and now as we heard a booming, cheerful voice — with an American accent.

[SLIDESHOW: Americans in Syria.](#)

Turns out, the voice was from Buffalo, New York and belonged to Dr. Robert Stall.

“I am here on the invitation of my friend Dr. Othman Shibly. I am a physician, a geriatrician, specializing in older people. I hope to bring geriatrics to Syria,” Stall told Fox News.

Stall said geriatrics, as a specialty, is not as prevalent as he would like it to be in the United States, and doesn't exist as a field in Syria. He's lobbying for more specialized care for older people, wherever they live.

When we met Stall, he was getting in a bit of sightseeing, but he had come to Syria to attend a conference in Damascus on dentistry. He took advantage of the venue of that conference to spread his medical gospel, and also took several opportunities to visit elderly people in Syria to give his opinion as to how they could improve the quality of their life.

The way he ended up in Syria is one of those stories that sprang from the ashes of the terrorist attacks of September 11th. An interfaith group formed in Buffalo in the aftermath of the attacks, to help promote understanding between religions. Stall happens to be Jewish. But he wasn't initially involved in this interfaith organization. That came a bit later.

Both the Jews and the Muslims in the group took some heat from their respective communities for this outreach which came at a raw time.

But they soldiered on, the Jewish community represented by Cantor Susan Wehle, until another tragedy cut her, and more innocents down. This one was an accident.

It was the crash of the Continental flight 3407 in Buffalo last February. Wehle, along with 49 others, was killed.

Stall moved in to continue Wehle's work, and in so doing met Dr. Othman Shibly, a Syrian Muslim, working as a periodontist in Buffalo with his wife, Dr. Sawsan Tabbaa, an orthodontist.

Out of the friendship came this trip to Syria. Stall says it has been a great thing.

"I hope to bring others back—religious people as well as lay people to see what a wonderful place this is. And by meeting people face to face, you learn that other people are not to be feared. It's just a small minority that ruins it for everyone else."

Stall's interest in other faiths and backgrounds seems now to have morphed into something more tangible and concrete. Improving the quality of peoples' lives, wherever they live.

"I believe the way you bring people together is through apolitical, areligious means. You work together to combat 'the other.' The not being people of other beliefs. The 'other' being poverty, injustice prejudice, things like that," he told Fox News.

Dr. Shibly points out that medical professionals in the United States have an obligation to people in the rest of the world.

"Since America has the best education in dentistry it has a moral responsibility to promote oral health by training dentists who can go back to their countries."

Shibly is involved in a program that does just that at the University of Buffalo, helping to get foreign students placed for training.

At the dental conference in Damascus, he shared the latest recommendations from the American Dental Association and American Heart Association about links between gum and heart disease. He discussed having dentists recommend to patients with gum disease having their doctors check them for signs of heart disease. They discussed plenty of other subjects related to the latest research in America.

Shibly's Syrian-born wife Sawsan Tabbaa, together with some other fellow Muslim Americans living in the United States, sued the Department of Homeland Security in 2005, claiming she and the others were the victims of profiling after being detained several hours at the Canadian border, fingerprinted and interrogated on their way back from an Islamic conference in Toronto, before being released.

The New York Civil Liberties Union said they were "victims once again of our government's overzealous and counterproductive ethnic and religious profiling in the name of national

security.” The courts ruled that the government was acting in its authority to control entry at the border and that the basic rights of the group were not violated.

Meanwhile, Dr. Tabbaa believes Americans have misconceptions about Syrian people.

“The Syrian people would welcome with open arms efforts to build bridges between them and other countries in the world.”

Along for the ride with Stall, Shibly and Tabbaa, was Karen Roncone, a Buffalo dental hygienist, who was contributing tips for preventative oral care at the conference.

“One of the things I am noticing, as a woman, as a Christian, coming to a Muslim community, I wasn’t sure how I would be accepted. It has been incredibly gracious. They have had me in their homes. I have been in mosques where I have been welcomed. Muslim women have put their arms around and pulled me closer to everything going on so that I could possibly understand it better.”

Dr. Shibly said, “We feel we all, Muslims and Jews, are part of the same world because our race and religion share the burden of world suffering,” said Dr. Shibly. “Our parents and grandparents gave us a beautiful world but it is full of conflict. We need to give our children and grandchildren a better world, a world of peace and universal social justice. That can only be accomplished when we join our hands in cooperation.”

Even with the imposing crusader castle, a symbol of inter-religious warfare, as the backdrop to our conversation, we managed to forget for a moment that the conflicts and clashes of cultures which pre-date our grandparents by a long shot, have deep roots.

But, on the other hand, you could say that the crusader castle, with its elaborate systems for keeping “the other” at bay, and doing battle with people of other faiths, is a potent example of how not to live.

This is the third in a series of reports by Fox News Correspondent Amy Kellogg, who recently returned from a 10-day trip to Syria at the invitation of the Syrian government. This report covers Kellogg’s experience with American doctors and dentists in Syria. Tomorrow Kellogg will explore the long Christian heritage in Syria.

Americans in Syria

The Syrian Ministry of Tourism recently invited journalists from around the world to view Syria's treasures from the capital city of Damascus to the ancient cities of Bosra and Palmyra. Fox News went along for the ride.

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Americans in Syria

Dr. Othman Shibly, Dr. Sawsan Tabbaa, Karen Roncone and Dr. Robert Stall, four American health care workers in Syria.

Source: FNC

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House Call

Dr. Robert Stall makes a house call in Damascus, Syria.

Source: FNC

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