

Doctors flee Syrian civil war

Dr Issam Al Ibraheem, a Syrian obstetrician and gynaecologist, and his wife, an anaesthetist, gave up jobs and family for the safety of an Australian life ...

DR Issam Al Ibraheem remembers the exact moment he and his wife realised they had to flee their homeland, Syria.

"We were expecting our sons to come home from school, about 2:30 pm," he tells the *MJA*. "They were coming by car to our house. My wife and I were standing on the balcony and there was a big explosion close to their school. There was smoke in front of us and Sawsan started screaming.

"The 10 minutes before the boys arrived home ..." Dr Al Ibraheem's excellent English fails him as he recalls the life-changing moment.

"After that Sawsan decided we should flee, and we found a way to escape."

That decision came at the end of 4 years of terror and uncertainty for Dr Al Ibraheem, a obstetrician and gynaecologist, his wife Dr Sawsan Tuhmee, an anaesthetist, and their two sons, Zein and Nour.

The family is now almost 2 years into their new life, settled in Toowoomba, Queensland's largest regional town, 2 hours' drive west of Brisbane, but the journey to safety has been tough. And, for now at least, there is no chance of a return to their homeland.

"My wife worked for a government-run military hospital," says Dr Al Ibraheem. "She will be put in jail for 3 years if we go back, because she fled a government job."

Daily life in Syria was a nightmare, he says. The risk of kidnapping was real, both for Issam and Sawsan, who, as educated professionals in in-demand specialties, would fetch substantial ransoms.

And, with constant skirmishes between government and rebel forces, everyday working life was filled with danger.

"I remember one day I was performing a caesarean and a plane came overhead and started dropping barrel bombs," says Dr Al Ibraheem. "I just wanted to finish my job, you know? Once I had closed her up, the woman I was operating on took her baby and left. I never found out whether they were safe or not. That bothered me."

Dr Al Ibraheem and his family finally escaped to Iraq, via Lebanon, leaving family and friends behind. But even in Iraq, life was "complicated".

As Christians, the Al Ibraheems were in the minority and faced discrimination and backlash. Dr Tuhmee was forced to wear a hijab whenever she was in public. The boys changed school often and were bullied persistently.

"We worked for a year in a government hospital that didn't have a budget to pay us," he says. "We left Syria with some money, so we lived on that, but we were starting to starve. Eventually, we found work in a private hospital, so at least we had some money, but we still struggled."

An attempt was made to reach Canada via friends in a church there, but US\$15 000 and a pile of bureaucratic red tape later, no progress had been made. Enter the Australian Government's 2017 Syrian religious minority intake.

"That saved my family," says Dr Al Ibraheem. "They were honest, too. Within 3 months we were here."

Life still has its challenges even though the family is safe in Toowoomba, among a community of Syrian Christians, many with similar experiences.

Neither Dr Al Ibraheem nor Dr Tuhmee are eligible to practise as doctors in Australia yet. Issam passed his Australian Medical Council (AMC) Part 1 exam with

flying colours and is preparing for his English test, while Sawsan is preparing for her AMC exams.

The traumas of their past 4 years in Syria have taken their toll.

"The problem is, when you are in a stressful situation, maybe the result of that stress and trauma comes out once you have a safe life," says Dr Al Ibraheem. "The boys have had some problems here making friends. Sawsan started to have depression, not wanting to go out, struggling to engage with the community.

"For a long time, our sons refused to speak Arabic, or refused to respond to us if we were speaking Arabic to them. Anything belonging to their past experience will trigger the trauma."

While they save the money for their exams and retraining to join the Australian medical workforce, Dr Al Ibraheem is employed as a carer with an in-home care agency in Toowoomba.

In an interview with the local media, Dr Al Ibraheem said he was more than keen to begin practising again.

"I have a guilty feeling — I want to let them know that we want to participate in the community and help the community the same way that they helped us," he told the *Toowoomba Chronicle*.¹ ■

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1 <https://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/syrian-refugees-what-its-working-war-zone/3611187/> ■



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