

## ABC NewsRadio

*By: Marius Benson*

**Journalist:** Ambassador, I might begin this interview with a short speech rather than a question, because I was keen to talk to you. I had a holiday in Syria and if you tell Australians you are going to Syria for a holiday they look at you blankly, they ask "why?", and immediately they think "the next time I will see this block is probably in a video with a gun pointed to his head, because people have the most terrifying prejudicial conceptions of your country. You get to Syria and you find it's warm friendly and works well, the roads are good, the people are really nice, it is a very easy place to have a terrific holiday.

**Ambassador:** Yes, what you are saying is exactly what was mentioned in Sydney Morning Herald, in one of the articles published last year, that an Australian journalist was actually criticising the advisory on the DFAT website for cautioning Australians while visiting Syria, and he was saying that this is unfair and it demolishes the Syrian tourism industry, because in reality this is what he was saying: "*This is a country where warmth, warm hospitality is what you see and where crime is rare compared with either the US or Australia*". So, when people go to Syria, they don't know about it, they just know that the region is lumped in with crises and they just assume because of lack of knowledge of what's going on there. They assume that there are wars and problems there.

We receive more and more tourists. I want here to tell you that the level of Australian tourists going to Syria in the last two years increased according to official statistics 70% compared to the year before.

**Journalist:** would not be many Australian tourists in Syria still?

**Ambassador:** The record we have for Australians asking for visas shows a very high number really. Syria received in the last two years 20 Australian delegation, official and non-official, it included agriculture, academics, etc. In Syria now there is a group of 35 excavators and diggers who go to Syria from Melbourne and Sydney and ANU universities. You will be surprised by the number of Australians visiting Syria.

**Journalist:** I want to ask you a reasonably pointed question about Syria and the Syrian role in the world, but I just want to wax lyrical about

how nice the place is, it is historically fascinating and the people couldn't be more helpful; if someone can't speak English they immediately find someone who can speak English, it is unbelievable safe. We dropped cash in the street in Damascus in the evening down by the bazaar, and the first we knew about it was when someone ran up behind us and said "you dropped this cash", about AU\$80, I've never had that experience in my life, I find it a remarkably nice country. I say it is also a preamble to ask these questions.

**Ambassador:** This is the least that people can do.

One of the Australian tourists was interviewed on Syrian TV, and she was saying on the TV that she went to a café and asked for a coffee and people did not take money from her, and this is normal for people in Syria. I do not want to advertise for my country, but this is really very common.

**Journalist:** Another startling thing to me was the level of religious tolerance there, because from a distance Syria looks like the most hardline of Islamic state, but it is a secular state, there is 10% Christian population, there is an absolutely easy tolerance there. It was remarkable.

**Ambassador:** This is very important. People do not know that Damascus is the place from which St. Paul spread Christianity in the East, and I always tell my Australian friends and all officials whom I meet with that the phrase "on the road to Damascus" is a phrase that came from Syria and it is amusing how Australian politics project this phrase onto different images which is interesting to us.

From the Straight Street in Damascus St. Paul spread Christianity to the East, and in Syria you can hardly distinguish a Muslim from a Christian. It is irrelevant issue to us in Syria, and we should mention as you mentioned before that Syria is a secular state and it is very secular to the extent that the Ba'ath ideology which spread from Syria to the Arab World was actually criticised by fundamentalists, because fundamentalists wanted to create a religious state, which we are against. The system in Syria is against religious state and the last Ba'ath conference in Syria last year decided for not having religious parties in Syria. This is something was not picked up by media because people did not really appreciate this in the other countries.

Syria is a secular country and this ideology combines both Muslims and Christians into one principle.

**Journalist:** OK. No more Mr. Nice Guy. When Aussies explaining Syria to people and say "do not go there, it is terrorist. I say: "don't worry about Syria, Syria basically is a police state where terrorism is exported." Would you like to respond to that assessment?

**Ambassador:** Well, first there is no proof for that. When they say "terrorism in exported" there is no ever any recorded proof for that.

**Journalist:** Well, let me interrupt you here. The United Nations investigations in the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri, the former Prime Minister of Lebanon, in February last year, has found clear Syrian involvement in that assassination.

**Ambassador:** Just for correction, so far for this moment, there is no proof of Syria's implications in this assassination.

**Journalist:** But the UN found a definite evidence of Syrian involvement, and the investigations are continuing.

**Ambassador:** The report was talking about involvement, but now there is investigation going on and the investigation did not sum up any conclusion about this. There are talks about this and there are political statements, there are references to this, but there is no proof for this proven. There is no conclusion of this investigation. The investigation is going on and Syria is cooperating with the investigation.

The first target of the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri was Syria's relation with Lebanon. It was a bad choice for those who chose Rafiq al-Hariri. They assassinated someone whose relation with Syria was the best, and for their bad luck al-Hariri said two days before the assassination "*If I am in the opposition, this does not mean that I am against Syria*". So, there is no sane person could ever imagine that Syria would assassinate Rafiq al-Hariri.

**Journalist:** Logic is a bit confused, and the outcome has not been a happy one for Syria, because it had to end a 29-year presence in Lebanon. But let's face it. 29 years of overwhelming military presence in Lebanon, not a whole significance has happened in Lebanon without the OK from Damascus.

**Ambassador:** Well, we have to go back to the basis. The presence of Syria in Lebanon was basically a request from the Lebanese Government, there was an Arab Summit which decided for that. The continuous presence in Lebanon was much welcome by all major powers. The United States, Henry Kissinger in his memoir said: "*I was one of those who advised President Assad to go to Lebanon*". There is an important reason, because we have to look at this in its historical context. The presence of Syria was needed there, there was a civil war in Lebanon.

**Journalist:** But the Western Powers demanded Syria's departure from Lebanon and the Lebanese people themselves.

**Ambassador:** But during all that time they never complained about this, even the United States never complained about Syria's presence in Lebanon.

Journalist: Let me get a couple of impressions on a couple of issues in the domestic situation in Syria, if we want to talk about freedom of the press in Syria. I, myself, find it very puzzling in Syria, the official press in Syria is like a parody of a police state publication full of the President greeting people and things like that; it is really under state's control, but at the same time, everyone's got a satellite dish up there and they all get hundreds of news channels from all around the world.

**Ambassador:** I appreciate your comment. I wish those who comment on this can read Arabic. If you open for example "Syria News" website or "Cham Press" you will be surprised to see the level of criticism to the Syrian Government, something you do not see here in Australia. I have to say this out of fairness. I submit that there is freedom of press in Syria more than in Australia.

Let's put this challenge. If you open the three official newspapers in Syria you will be surprised to see the level of criticism to the way the Government is undertaking its business.

**Journalist:** But I was in Syria and I looked to the English language papers regularly for a week, and every front page was the president greeting various dignitaries, and every story was flattering to the President and the Government.

**Ambassador:** I find this in Australia and the United States.

**Journalist:** You really see no differences in the civil liberty and freedom of press in Australia and in Syria!

Let me give you another anecdote. I was in Aleppo, a beautiful city in Syria, very historic with great restaurants, everything that is typical of all Syria in my brief experience, and typically someone attached himself to myself and my family and became as an informal guide, he was a very helpful block. After sometime I was very bored with the kind of talk we were having and I started talking politics.

I said: "*What do you think of the President? What do you think of the First Family? What do you think of the Government?*" and in about 90

seconds he said: "*Nobody talks like this in the Middle East, we do not talk about these things here.*" That is my direct experience.

**Ambassador:** We should take judgement not from particular instances, we should take judgement from the overall instance. You find the greetings and the functions of the President on the front pages of newspapers in every country. The functions of the president are the first focus in every country.

I am not saying that Syria is a perfect country, of course, there is campaign against corruption, and corruption is in every state of the world. But if you take the assessment overall, people are abiding. But we can say that majority of people are with the President and even the opposition who is criticising the Government is split on many things. There is no one unified opposition, because people are criticising each other.

**Journalist:** Ambassador Sulaiman, it was a great pleasure to talk to you. Can I end on a note of harmony again; I did find Syria remarkably interesting. Is there a particular attraction in Syria that you would point to the Australian traveller? I advise people to go to Palmyra and Aleppo this year is chosen by the Organisation of Islamic States to be the Capital of Islamic Culture and I want to tell you that Syria gave the world Christianity and Islam was very disseminated from Syria. We want them to know that Syria is really truly a secular state that loves countries, and people love foreigners, and all people who go there they change the image they had before about Syria and the Embassy is ready to give them any assistance.

**Journalist:** And the restaurants are terrific too!

**Ambassador:** The Syrian cuisine is very famous there and we encourage them to go and try the taste of the Syrian cuisine.

**Journalist:** Ambassador Sulaiman, thank you very much for your time.

**Ambassador:** Thank you.