

Migrant crisis: Sunnis not frozen out, says Scott Morrison

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Tony Abbott greets Bishop Haigazoun Najarian of the Armenian Church of Australia and New Zealand yesterday. Picture: Kym Smith

Social Services Minister Scott Morrison has downplayed suggestions that Sunni Muslims are being frozen out of the Coalition's refugee resettlement strategy after members of Syria's largest religious sect lacked representation at a conference of community leaders in Canberra.

The meeting of more than 30 ethnic, religious and community sector leaders was led by Tony Abbott, who urged on-the-ground support for his plan to resettle 12,000 refugees fleeing the "diabolical" crisis in Syria.

"This is the kind of thing that Australia has done before, although obviously it is on unprecedented scale because of the nature of this particular conflict and the fact that there are many communities, many ancient communities, in this part of the Middle East which realistically have no hope of returning to their home," the Prime Minister said, affirming his commitment to favour persecuted minorities who had sought refuge in the Middle East.

The meeting included delegates from a plethora of Catholic, Protestant and orthodox churches, plus a representative of Shi'ite ayatollah Mohammad Hussein Al-Ansari.

However, the nation's most prominent Sunni group, the Lebanese Muslim Association, told The Weekend Australian that it was not invited.

Mr Morrison insisted there were Sunnis in attendance, but declined to identify them.

Asked if he worried about Sunnis feeling isolated, Mr Morrison said it was "important to be empathetic to how people feel about these things". "I've met with the Grand Mufti (Ibrahim Abu Mohamed) as well on many matters ... You all know my deep friendships with people like (Lakemba doctor) Jamal Rifi and Samier Dandan from the LMA and other groups; we are in engagement all the time," Mr Morrison said.

"I respect all of these organisations and we will find ways to engage in the best and most effective way."

Mr Morrison said Sunnis were entitled to apply under the government's special humanitarian program, which provides for family reunion rather than the refugee program.

Mr Morrison said face-to-face engagement was being led by parliamentary secretary Concetta Fierravanti-Wells.

Refugee advocate Paris Aristotle, who chairs the Refugee Resettlement Advisory Council, said everybody applauded the government's "incredibly powerful humanitarian gesture".

Mr Aristotle, who has worked for 27 years in the refugee sector, said that Australia had successfully integrated survivors of torture and war crimes in the Balkans, Africa and Asia into society.

"All of those crises bring with it terrible consequences, but in every single one of those situations - Australia as a country has been able to respond, to deal with the terrible trauma that people carry, the incredible sense of loss and help them rebuild new lives in this country," he said.

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton said the government was “breaking every record” to try and receive the first cohort of refugees “well in advance of Christmas”. However, he warned that the government would not “rush” the process.

“Paris has extensive experience on this and we will go as quickly as we can, but we will work the model, we will work the process because that gets the best outcome for the families and people who’ll be affected,” Mr Dutton said.

The Prime Minister opened the conference by seeking a blessing from Maronite Catholic Bishop Antoine-Charbel Tarabay, who prayed for strength to help those who were in need.