

History, Religion and Learning: Observations by a Student of Arabic in Damascus

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In October 2008 as I was beginning to read towards my Master's thesis, my supervisor suggested that I pursue Arabic language studies at Damascus University, Syria, for the 2009 academic year. While the initial thought of delaying my thesis and staying away from home for the first time in my life was a nagging worry, the thought of spending a year learning Arabic in one of the earliest inhabited cities of the world filled me with much excitement.

Upon arriving in Damascus in March 2009, I sensed its ancient ambiance and rich religious history. While still settling in, I stayed with some South African students in the area of Ruknuddin. Widely considered to be an area in which the vast majority of inhabitants are very orthodox in Islamic praxis, the streets, flats and markets of Ruknuddin are filled with many foreign students pursuing Islamic studies at Syria's foremost Sunni Islamic seminary, Jami'ah Abu al-Nur, founded by the late Shaykh Ahmad Kaftaro. Kaftaro was the Head Mufti of the country, and an influential leader of the Naqshabandiyya Sufi order. I met students from many countries, the majority of which were from Malaysia, Britain, Nigeria and Chechnya.

My arrival in Damascus coincided with the celebrations of the birth of Prophet Muhammad, Mawlid al-Nabi. The streets of Damascus and the streets of Ruknuddin in particular were decorated with bright green lights and ribbons.

Mosques were hosting daily Mawlid celebration programs wherein poetry in honor of the Prophet Muhammad was recited and sung by youth. I clearly recall attending one such Mawlid in the Ibn Arabi Masjid, the mosque which contains the grave of the famous Sufi scholar and theorist, Muhyiddin Ibn al-Arabi. In addition to the rendition of poetry in honor of the Prophet Muhammad, I witnessed the *hadrah dhikr*, a form of Sufi devotional practice, which is a common sight in many Sunni mosques in Damascus.

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As I settled into my Ottoman-styled house in the heart of the Old City, the cobbled streets, Roman arches, old churches, the citadel of Salah al-Din Ayyubi and the Umayyad Mosque took me centuries back. However, most striking for me throughout my stay in

Damascus were the different religious groups I came across. Followers and families from each religious group in Damascus reside in separate areas in the Old City. For example, Bab Touma and Bab Sharqi are known as the Christian quarters with predominantly Christian residents. These two areas, which are situated next to each other, have many old churches and to the joy of Western tourists and the increasing number of Italian, British, South Korean and American non-Muslim students of Arabic, many shops and night clubs where alcohol is readily available.

The rest of the Old City is divided between the two Muslim groups, Sunni and the Shiah. While

there are more Sunni areas, the most famous one being al-Nofara, where the Umayyad mosque is situated, there are two Shiah areas in the Old city, namely Shaari' al-Amin and Haara al-Ja'fariyyah. Both areas have mosques for prayers and Hussayniahs, halls in which births and deaths of members of Prophet Muhammad's family, (*Ahlul Bayt*) are commemorated.

Given the purely Iranian association with Shiasm often drawn by the popular Western media, the Arab Shiah presence that I saw in Damascus

was quite interesting. The president, Bashar al-Asad, many key officials in the ruling Ba'ath party and army generals are of the Alawi branch of Shiasm. Previously the underclass in Syrian society, the Alawi Shiah makes up a major part of the Syrian population, and are very influential in professional and military circles. Of the non-Alawi *Ithna Ashariyyah* Shiah, the Syrian Shiahs are predominantly of Lebanese origin. Non-Alawi Shiah families that are now considered to be Syrian settled in Damascus when Lebanon was part of "Greater Syria".

The other sizeable Shiah community is the Iraqi refugee community in the town of Sayyidah

Zaynab. These Iraqis settled in this town after Saddam Hussein came into power in Iraq in the late 1970s and the subsequent persecution to which he subjected them. Many exiled Iraqi Shiah clerics were part of this Diaspora. These clerics, most notably the Shirazi and Modarresi families set up Islamic seminaries (*Howzaat*) in the town.

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The presence of seminaries and offices of representation for each major Shiah jurist (Ayatollah) brings about interesting internal Shiah diversity and a cosmopolitan

feel to Sayyidah Zaynab. Due to the presence of Arab-speaking Iraqi clerics at these seminaries, many Shiah youth from around the world, especially from India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and many West African countries pursue Islamic studies there. I would often meet with and have interesting discussions with Howzah students from Burkina Faso, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Gabon. Also, due to the presence of seminaries and offices linked to various Ayatollahs, there is a heated rivalry of religious ideas, with intense debate taking place. Of the most striking rivalries in this regard is that between the supporters of Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Fadhlullah of Lebanon, who delivers a class every Saturday in



The shrine of Sayyida Zainab in Damascus.

Sayyidah Zaynab and the followers of the Sayyid Muhammad Sadiq Shirazi. With his constant attack on popular Shiah rituals and beliefs, Fadhlullah is often condemned by the majority of the scholars and populace in the town as being 'too Wahabi orientated'. This is somehow similar to the Salafi/Sufi debate among Sunni Muslims.

The town of Sayyidah Zaynab is built around the shrine of Zaynab bint Ali ibn Abi Talib, the granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad. Zaynab is the sister of Imam Husayn. Following his revolt and murder at Karbala by the army of the Umayyad caliph Yazid ibn Muawiyah, the women and children of Husayn's family were taken to Damascus, the Umayyad capital at the time, where they were imprisoned and where they later settled after their release. The shrine of Zaynab is one of the many pilgrimage sites in Syria for Shiah worshippers from around the world. The grave of Ruqayyah bint al-Husayn, the four-year-old daughter of Husayn, and the burial place of Husayn's head are also very much frequented by Shiah pilgrims.

On the 21st night of Ramadhan, I attended a street procession, in which people mourned the martyrdom of the first Shiah Imam, Ali ibn Abi Talib in the town of Sayyidah Zaynab. Led by Iraqis loyal to the young Iraqi cleric and politician, Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr, 8000 people, including many foreign pilgrims and Indian and Pakistani students marched in the streets of Sayyidah Zaynab carrying a coffin symbolizing Ali's coffin and beating their chests (*Matam*) and lightly cutting their foreheads until blood appeared, (*Tatbih*). The procession, filled with much emotion, eventually culminated at the shrine of Zaynab, where the coffin was carried around the shrine.

Notwithstanding the religious diversity, I did not come across much open animosity, neither between Sunni and Shiah Muslims nor between Muslims and Christians. It seemed as if all religious groups have their separate religious identities but interact on a social level as Syrian

citizens. Perhaps this 'harmony' may be viewed as government imposed, as the government does not permit much religious debate. This could also be due to the hostility with Israel. In almost every street and shop, including Sunni and Christian areas, I came across portraits of Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of the Shiah resistance movement in Lebanon, Hizbollah. It seemed as if Nasrallah has Che Guevara-like status in Damascus amongst people from the different religious groups.

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Finally, with regards to the study of Arabic, the program that I attended at the Damascus University in Higher Language Academy was most enriching

to the advancement of my Arabic. Classes are intensive, with 20 hours of lessons per week and all classes being taught in Arabic medium. All language skills are focused on, especially grammar, essay writing and speaking. The fact that most Syrians do not communicate in English helps tremendously as far as getting to grips with the Arabic language is concerned. The student of Arabic is constantly exposed to language.

It also helped that in addition to my Arabic studies at the university, I attended classes in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and theology (*aqidah*) at a seminary, Hawzah in Sayyidah Zaynab. With classes conducted in the medium of Arabic and focus placed on early Islamic texts, where knowledge of grammar is essential, this in a sense equipped me more than many of my colleagues who were attending the same course at the Damascus University as far as utilizing the language is concerned. My studies in the Hawzah also exposed me to aspects of the complexity in Islamic legal and theological traditions and to the culture of traditional Islamic scholarship.

Having experienced the history, religious diversity and Arabic and Islamic education that Damascus offers, I would seriously advise any post-graduate students of Islamic Studies who wish to strengthen their command of the Arabic language in a short space of time and who seek to study Muslim societies, to consider spending time in Damascus.