

A Matter of Honor
An Incident in the Damascus Souk
by
Dr. Ronald R. Stockton



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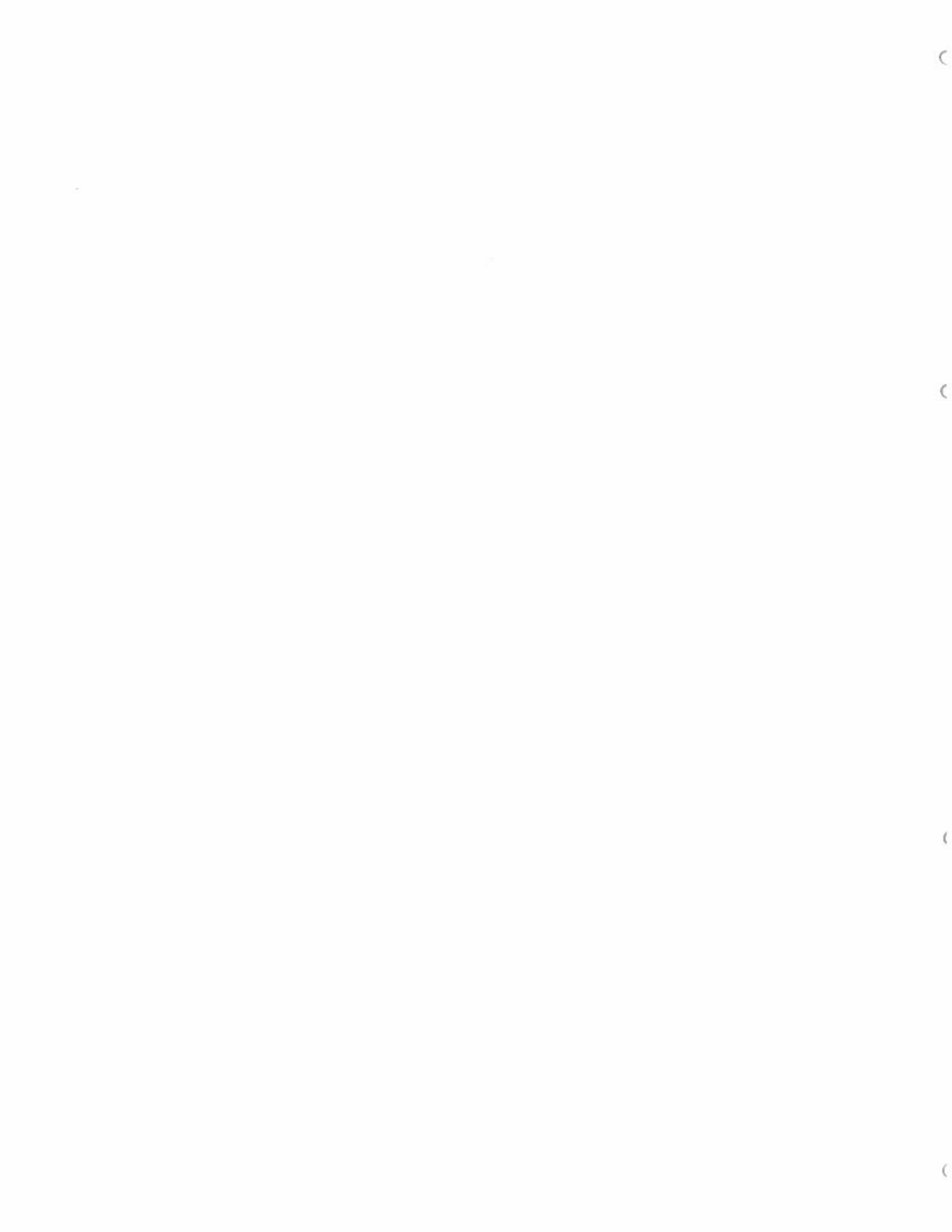
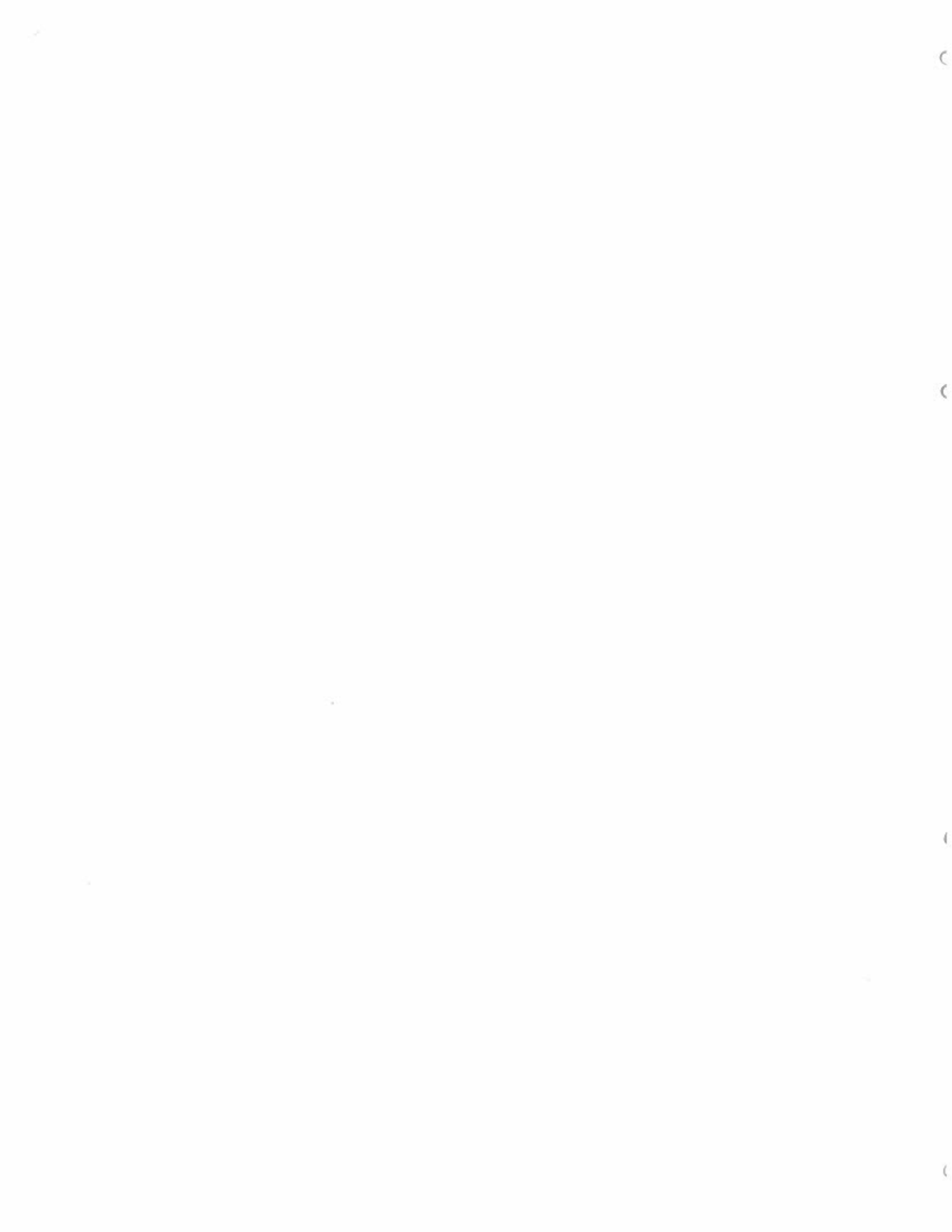


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FOREWORD

It is impossible to explore the Arab world at any length or depth without marvelling at its myriad cultural nuances. No less fascinating are the many societal contrasts and similarities between the United States and the region. For generations, the process of discovering and digesting this diversity has been a source of delight, edification, and, from time to time, disappointment for Arabs and Americans alike. More often than not, personal interaction abroad provides an inducement not only to evaluate and understand the cultural norms and values prevailing in other societies, but also to reflect upon the standards and ideals of one's own country. What strikes many as a phenomenon that is endlessly intriguing is how situations that might, at first glance, seem clear and unequivocal at home can become so ambiguous, perplexing, or even controversial when they occur someplace else.

Perhaps nowhere are such complexities and their ramifications better illustrated than in a particular incident of gender harassment in the open-air market, or *souk*, called Al-Hamadiyyah in Damascus, Syria, that is the subject of this monograph. The author, Dr. Ronald R. Stockton, is Professor of Political Science at the University of Michigan at Dearborn, and founding Director of the National Council's Michigan Committee on U.S.-Arab Relations. Dr. Stockton delves into the impact that the incident wielded not only on the victim and perpetrator, but also on those subsequently involved – the American students, the Syrian law enforcement officials, and others. The reactions of each of these individuals weave an intricate tapestry that not only invites reflection and introspection. They also challenge the reader to examine her or his own beliefs as the "matter of honor" unfolds.

The National Council publishes this work in the spirit of contributing to dialogue on the cultural contrasts and similarities between the United States and the Arab world.

Dr. John Duke Anthony
President and CEO
National Council on
U.S.-Arab Relations





Photograph: Michael S. Lee

Al-Hamadiyyah *Souk* in Damascus, Syria.

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A few years ago I escorted ten gifted high school seniors on a four-week educational program to Syria and Jordan. One of the highlights of the trip was a visit to the famous covered market of Damascus, the Hamadiyyah *souk*. A thousand years old and like something out of the story of Aladdin, the *souk* contains hundreds of tiny shops. Twisting stairs lead up into second and third stories where additional goods are sold. The stranger who wanders into a shop is typically greeted by a merchant who is quick to call forth cups of tea and to chat with the customer about silk cloth, handmade boxes, antique coffee pots, Bedouin jewelry, or whatever topic comes up. To visitors, it is like magic.

But for two of my students, Sonya and Alice, the magic was tarnished by an incident of sexual harassment. This incident, and how it was handled, revealed so many differences between Syrian and American culture and law that it deserves to be told.

Although Syria is a land where women are treated with great respect, Damascus is a metropolis of four million people, some of whom are scoundrels. Rape is very uncommon, but an attractive young woman in the *souk* may have to contend with an occasional pat or other unwelcome approach from a passing youth. I told my female students to protect themselves by projecting an image of propriety: dress modestly, go out only in pairs, and take one of the male students along as a surrogate brother.

Sonya and Alice followed my suggestions and went out with their "brother" Mike to find hand-carved boxes. In a certain store they were welcomed by a young merchant, Nabeel, who was in his early twenties, wore a suit, and spoke passable English. His father had gone home for dinner, leaving him and a younger boy to mind the store. He took them to a room on the second floor where wooden boxes were kept and offered them cups of tea. After a while, Mike found what he wanted and went downstairs to pay for it, leaving the girls with Nabeel.

Then Nabeel made his move. He leaned toward Sonya, grabbed her

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behind the head with both hands, and pulled her forward to kiss her. Sonya put her hands on his chest, pushed him away, and gave an emphatic “no.” Nabeel persisted and grabbed her again. Once again, the startled Sonya pushed him away and said “no.” Nabeel, apparently a slow learner, grabbed her a third time and received a third rebuff.

At this point, the girls, afraid and upset, had had enough. They went downstairs, gave the young boy the money for their boxes, and left.

Some Observations About Culture

Every society has its unwritten rules about body language, physical space, volume of voice, hand motions, touching, gender relations, eye contact, and privacy. This is not to say that there are rigid rules to which all persons conform in all cases, but in every society there are dominant norms.

Before proceeding further, there are some aspects of culture that are worth noting. Every society has its unwritten rules about body language, physical space, volume of voice, hand motions, touching, gender relations, eye contact, and privacy. This is not to say that there are rigid rules to which all persons conform in all cases, but in every society there are dominant norms.

Syria is no different in this regard. Generalizations are risky because it is such a complex country with different religious and ethnic groups and with lifestyles that range from rural village to sprawling city. That said, there are real differences between American and Syrian customs. Four points are worth noting.

First, Syrians are influenced by the belief that men are to be the guardians of women. The Koran (4:34) says, “Men are the protectors of women because of the greater preference that God has given to some of them and because they financially support them.” This does not imply that women are to be kept in a subservient state. Nor does it compromise the rights guaranteed to women under Islamic law.¹ But it does elevate male responsibility to a consciously high level. We might also note that the logic of the protective male is cultural as much as religious and that all males are affected by such thinking, including the 10 to 15 percent of Syrians who are Christian.

Second, Syrian culture is very modest by American standards. Proper Arab girls do not go out alone with boys; they do not kiss, let alone pet. While there are exceptions in practice, the standard is there: intimate contact is reserved for marriage. For the religiously pious, even handshaking between genders may be uncommon. Westerners can be taken aback when a hand extended to someone of the other sex is greeted with a courteous smile but no physical reciprocation.²

Third, there is the concept of honor, a term much misunderstood by Americans. An Arab family exhibits integrity to the world by its standards of behavior. For women, this means showing propriety and receiving respect. As Elizabeth Warnock Fernea and Basima Qattan Bezirgan observe, “the chastity of the woman represents the

honor of the family, and any violation must be punished.”³

The males in the family are expected to make sure that other members behave properly and that outsiders do not commit affronts. A female committing an offense may be punished by her own kin.⁴ Likewise, an outsider insulting a female will have insulted the whole family. While we should not overstate these “rules” or see them in terms of some collective “Arab mindset,” there are cultural norms that can be noted. If a female is insulted, for example, there might be physical harm done to the offending male. Typically, a woman’s brothers or male cousins would be her primary protectors.

Finally, a man asked to protect a female from another male is expected to do so. Syrian scholar Bouthaina Shaaban writes about how this was traditionally done: “According to our Arabic traditions, anyone who enters one’s home and asks for protection should be protected. Traditionally, the host would sacrifice his life rather than let Al Dakhiel (the one who has asked to be protected) be assaulted in his home.”⁵

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Confronting Nabeel

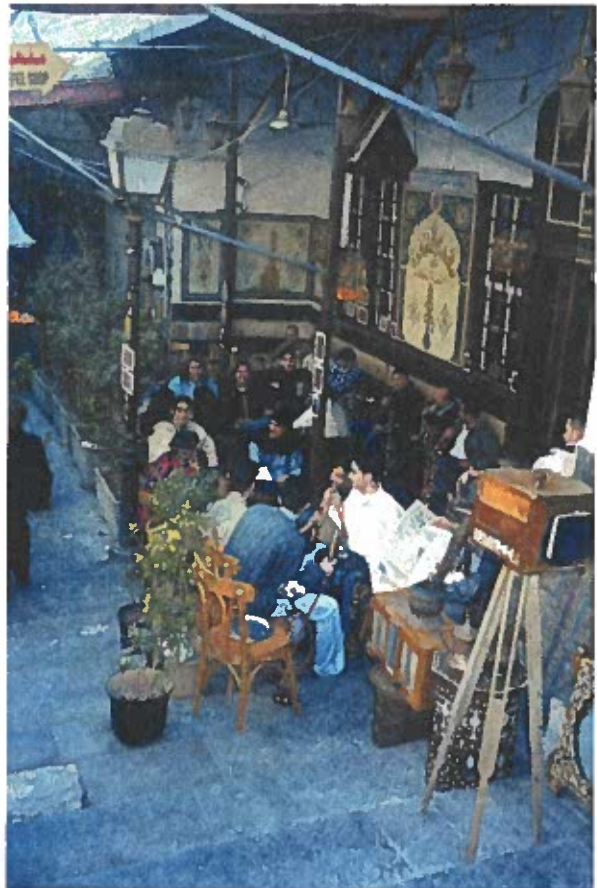
On the evening of the incident, my students had agreed to meet at 8:30 at the entrance to the *souk*. I was the first one there. Two students soon arrived with a new friend, Walid, a 14-year-old they had met when visiting his family’s shop. Walid was learning English and was delighted to practice with new friends. Soon Sonya, Alice, and Mike arrived and told us what had happened.

“You should kill him,” volunteered Walid.

I was not inclined to kill him, but I was certainly not inclined to let the matter pass. I asked Sonya, Alice, and Mike to take me to the shop. When they pointed out Nabeel, standing alone with his young assistant, I told them to wait outside.

My intention was to create a “scene,” to embarrass Nabeel before the nearby merchants. Even though we were in his shop, I accused him in a loud voice of abusing the girls: “Why did you do this? How can you treat young ladies this way?” I was not sure how good his English was, but my target audience in any case was not Nabeel.

When Nabeel acted as if he didn’t know why I was



A coffee shop in the *souk*

upset, I spoke even louder and thumped him with my open hand on his chest.

Having made my point, I walked out. Several merchants were standing in their doors watching with obvious glee. I learned later that Nabeel was notorious for such behavior and my suspicion was that everyone knew exactly what had happened. I also suspected that, by the next morning, scores of other merchants would also know the story, complete with colorful elaboration. In case those standing around were unsure of what had happened, I put my paternal arm around Sonya's shoulder to show comfort.

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As we waited at the *souk* entrance for the last stragglers, Nabeel's father approached and asked me in broken English why I had yelled at his son. The father had been told I was angry over the price Nabeel charged the young women for the wooden boxes. "They agreed to the price," said the father in confused innocence.

By this time a crowd had gathered and all of my students had arrived. I ignored Nabeel's father, who had obviously been misled by his son, and left the *souk* with my students.

A Reaction

Back at the hotel, we attended a discussion led by Mr. Malek, a university official from Syria who helped organize our program. Since his own daughter had recently gotten engaged, he had volunteered to talk to our group about engagements and marriages in Syria.

For thirty minutes Mr. Malek told the students about the main points of courtship: young people have group dates, not single dates; kissing and petting are not allowed; families help arrange marriages, since this is not just two individuals getting married but two families merging their futures; once they are engaged, the couple have a year to get to know each other and to develop a romantic relationship.

Suddenly one of the male students threw out the bombshell: "Sonya had a problem in the *souk*. A shopkeeper tried to kiss her."

I had planned to discuss the incident with Mr. Malek privately, but had not had the opportunity because of the meeting. Mr. Malek jumped from his seat.

"What? Where did this happen? Take me there right now. Come, we are going directly there."

Without delay, Sonya, Alice, Mike, and I were dragged the mile or so to

the *souk* by an enraged Mr. Malek. By the time we arrived, all the shops were closed. Mr. Malek pledged that we would return the next day.

The next morning as the students went sightseeing, Sonya, Alice, and I went with Mr. Malek to the police station to report the incident. Accompanied by two plain-clothes officers, the four of us went to the *souk*. Nabeel was not in his shop.

Not surprisingly, however, the ubiquitous 14-year-old Walid appeared and took us to meet his brother Saleem, who ran the family shop with his sister. Saleem was a charming man in his thirties who spoke good English and who filled us in on *souk* gossip about Nabeel and his shenanigans. He had a relaxed, friendly manner that caused people to like him.

After tea, we went to Nabeel's shop. Apparently, he had disappeared and efforts to contact him were useless. His father was there, however, and had been apprised of his son's activities the night before. Teacups appeared and the father approached Sonya and Alice with gifts of cloth as a peace offering. They were not sure what to do and left the cloth sitting. After waiting for Nabeel for a time, we left.

The girls and I went off that afternoon to pursue our scheduled activities. When we returned we were told that the police had arrested Nabeel and that we had to go to the police station the next day to file a report. The girls were not looking forward to this and were very nervous.

The Police Station

The appearance of a government office in Syria is a shock to the American eye. As Syrians see it, buildings are for function, not beauty. Peeling paint and smudges along the walls are usual. The floors may not be clean and the overall appearance may be of dinginess. Feral cats may lurk in the halls.

At the police station we were sent to a stuffy waiting room with no chairs. In the corner there was a dirty coffeepot and a bicycle missing one wheel. We sat on a bed that was probably for the use of the night shift when things were slow. The noise from the busy street drowned out any attempt to talk.

After a while we were taken to meet the case officer, a major. (Syrian police have military titles.) The Major was a friendly, personable man in his late thirties. His office was small, but air-conditioned. He was a plain-clothes officer and wore a colorful flowered shirt. His relaxed manner made one think he would be a wonderful neighbor. Several times in the hour that followed he made jokes about himself and the bureaucratic process. "We will be through in two minutes. Of course, you know that in Arabic a minute means an hour." His pleasant smile clashed with the realization that he was surely very tough.

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Sonya and Alice sat together on a sofa, holding hands. As I looked at them, I imagined how they would be seen through Syrian eyes. By American norms, Syrian females are modest in dress and manner and these two young women fit the profile perfectly. They are what in American small town culture might have been called “fine Christian girls.” I suspect that to Syrians, they would be “fine Muslim girls.” It was obvious to me that they would have great credibility.

The major asked the girls to tell their story, which they did. After listening to their account of what happened, the Major said the girls would have to identify the suspect. They were not expecting this, and were upset that they would have to confront Nabeel once again. They were told they would be taken to a nearby room where Nabeel would be standing with other men. They should identify him by touching his chest.

Without hesitation, Sonya walked to Nabeel and put her finger on his chest. She told me later that as she touched him she could feel a shudder go through his body.

Sonya went first. We walked through a hallway that suddenly seemed filled with loitering officers. Because all were in street clothes, they looked scruffy. Sonya later said that in spite of their appearance, she sensed from their faces that the officers were concerned about her welfare. Alice concurred. Somehow, walking through that gauntlet of strangers, they felt comforted.

The lineup took place in a bare room. There were five men standing there. There was no dividing wall or one-way mirror. I had been trying desperately to conjure up the image of the man I had confronted just 36-hours before. I had drawn a complete blank. I could not remember if he had a mustache, if he was dark or light, if his hair was straight or curly. The girls told me later they had exactly the same thoughts. They were afraid they would be unable to identify him and would look foolish.

But once we entered the room, there were no doubts. Without hesitation, Sonya walked to Nabeel and put her finger on his chest. She told me later that as she touched him she could feel a shudder go through his body.



Photograph: Michael S. Lee

An entrance to the *souk*

Alice was next. This time the men had been rearranged. Alice, likewise, had no trouble identifying Nabeel. Later she whispered that she could not stand to touch him and instead brought her finger to within an inch of his body and walked away.

It was enough.

When we returned, the Major called in a secretary and took a statement from Sonya. Alice and I had our names taken but nothing else. Then came another surprise: we were to talk to the General.

Meeting the General

The General's office was fitting to his rank. It was neither large nor luxurious, but had nice chairs, a coffee table, a sofa, a strong air conditioner, and clean paint. The General sat behind the desk, bolt upright. He was the very image of professionalism, the only uniformed officer we encountered. He did not smile.

The tea appeared as the Major summarized the case. After the General was satisfied that he understood the facts, he told us that we had two choices. We could treat this simply as a report, in which case he (the General) would put Nabeel in jail for six months. If we wanted to file a formal complaint, he would refer the case to a judge, who would give Nabeel three years.

Surprised by this option, I hesitated. I told the General that in our country, accusers were not asked what they considered an appropriate punishment. He assured us that this was normal practice in Syria and that we should tell him our wishes.

I told the General we would discuss the matter. I asked the girls to caucus with me on the other side of the room, where I reviewed the case: Nabeel had committed an offense, but had not succeeded in doing harm. I summarized what the General had said, even though the girls had just heard it: the sentence could be up to six months in one scenario, three years in another.

The Mediator

By this time there had been an unexpected but not surprising development. The other merchant, Saleem, appeared at the police station and sat in on all our deliberations. Saleem had no standing in the case yet no one seemed to question his presence. Saleem was playing a role common in Arab culture, that of mediator. This phenomenon – which in Arabic is called *wasita* – is an important one.⁶ I sometimes explained it to my students, but this was the first time I had seen it operate.

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To play this role effectively, the mediator has to enjoy the confidence of both sides. The day before, Saleem said Nabeel had committed these offenses before. In the Major's office, he told me Nabeel's father had said he was ashamed of his son and if Nabeel were guilty he would kill him himself. Saleem said that Nabeel's behavior was an embarrassment to the whole *souk* and he deserved to be put away. He sounded like a hanging judge.

At no point did Saleem try to pressure or manipulate us. He was trying to humanize the situation, to point out that there was a range of interests involved, that Nabeel was now exposed and would be watched carefully in the future, and that perhaps a milder sentence might be enough.

But then his tone shifted. Nabeel was an only son and the family depended on him. He was not much of a son, but he was all they had. Nabeel's father had suffered a heart attack last year and was not in good health. Nabeel deserved no mercy, Saleem said, but there was the family to consider.

Saleem also said that before the lineup, the police had given Nabeel several strokes with a cane and the delay in having the lineup was because Nabeel had had to rush to the toilet. I was not sure this had truly happened, but Saleem's words came back with increased credibility when Sonya told me later that Nabeel trembled as she touched him.

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The Mediator: An Earlier Version

Saleem's approach reminded me of a conversation with a Jordanian friend who told what happened when his uncle had joined a coup attempt against King Hussein two decades earlier. When the uncle was arrested, not a single person in his large and powerful family spoke on his behalf. He was given a life sentence and apparently forgotten.

But a few years later, the family elders invited the King to a traditional dinner where men sit around a giant platter of food and talk into the night. The family pulled out all the stops to show the King that they were among his greatest admirers. They told nostalgic stories of his grandfather, King Abdallah, and of how their family history had intertwined with that of the King.

But later in the night the conversation turned, as the King surely knew it would, to the imprisoned relative. One uncle made reference to that scoundrel who had disgraced the family. The men fell silent with shame. Another uncle said the King had been far too merciful, that he should have had him shot. Without dissent, they agreed he was lucky the King had only imprisoned him.

Then, after some silence, came the shift. One of the men said, "I was at his house last week and spoke to his wife." The tone was now sad. Everyone had good things to say about this wonderful woman who had suffered so much and was struggling to keep the family together. Everyone agreed that she and the children did not deserve what her husband had brought upon them.

Finally, a family leader said what everyone knew was coming: "We have nothing good to say for our relative. He deserves whatever punishment he gets, and if Your Majesty decides to keep him in jail for the rest of his life, we will support that decision. But, if Your Majesty could release him – not for his own sake but for the sake of his wife and children – the family would promise to watch him day and night."

As expected, the King pardoned the offender, who was later restored to the good graces of the regime and even allowed to re-enter politics. Call it what you will – mediation, peacemaking, *wasita*, or a suspended sentence for a first-time offender – it had worked for the benefit of the community.

Saleem had not spoken to either Sonya or Alice, but they had decided to recommend to the General that Nabeel be given the minimum sentence. They suggested one month. We heard later that the General had sentenced him to six months.

Dealing With Confusion

My students were having difficulty dealing with the incident. Sonya and Alice were upset at what they thought was an absence of sympathy from some of their peers. As Sonya said, "Those Syrian policemen were more concerned about my welfare than the people who know me."

Two nights later, I called the students together to discuss the incident. I told them that what happened to Sonya would not be considered serious in America. If she told the police a man had tried to kiss her, they would tell her they had more important things to deal with. Nabeel was in jail for what in America might not even warrant an investigation. On top of that, he had been given summary strokes. I reminded them of the Michael Fay case, which had just ended. When a young American in Singapore had been sentenced to six strokes for vandalizing dozens of cars, many Americans had been outraged. The President had personally appealed to the Singapore government against the sentence.

I told the students I wanted to hear their reactions to what had happened. What did they think of how the situation was handled? Was the sentence proper? I asked the girls to speak first.

The discussion was wide-ranging. Two of the students (one male, one

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One of the female students felt that American women had left men with ambiguous messages by demanding their "freedom" but also by wanting to be treated with a respect that is often associated with a more traditional society.

female) thought there might have been an over-reaction and that the sentence was too strong. Others felt otherwise.

Most felt that the offense was real, the case was properly handled, and the punishment was appropriate. One female said the context was important: in Syria, what Nabeel had done was serious and he knew it. Another said she realized for the first time that in America there is little respect for females and that an incident like this would not be treated seriously. Another said she was glad that men would stand up for her, if necessary.

One of the female students felt that American women had left men with ambiguous messages by demanding their "freedom" but also by wanting to be treated with a respect that is often associated with a more traditional society. Should men open doors for women, she asked? Both men and women were unsure. She said she would not trade American women's rights for Arab women's rights, but she wished she could have the best of both cultures.

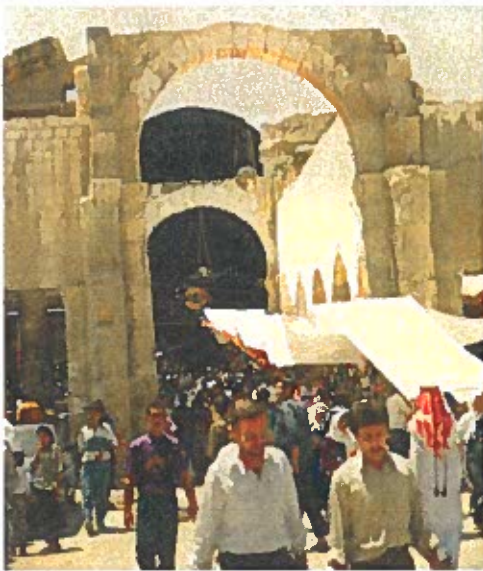
One male said he saw what it meant that Arab men were the protectors of women and that he himself had a responsibility that he had not thought of before. When I said that if this had happened to a Syrian girl, her brothers might have done bodily harm to Nabeel, one girl volunteered that she had several brothers and that if this incident had happened to her at home, her brothers would have behaved in exactly the same way. She did not think America was different from Syria in that regard.

Several females said that if an American girl brought such a situation to the authorities in the United States, she might not be believed and her personal motives might be questioned. She might even be subjected to slander about her morals.

I told the students of a case I knew where several women had accused their pastor of sexual misconduct. These were women with good reputations and years of loyal service in their church. Two had accused him of brushing against their breasts, one accused him of showing her dirty pictures, and another had accused him of making vulgar comments to her teenage daughter.

The minister had denied everything and the charges were referred to a church court made up of two ministers and three lay people. The court not only rejected the complaints but also issued a report accusing the women of fabricating the stories. The identities of the women were leaked to the congregation and they were subjected to hostility and retaliation. All left the church.

The different handling of the two cases spoke for itself.



Leaving the *souk*

Photograph: Michael S. Lee

Special Treatment?

After the incident was behind us, I began to have second thoughts. Had we over-reacted? Had the matter been handled differently because we were a foreign study group whose program was being hosted by a major university? Maybe Nabeel had been sacrificed in some diplomatic maneuver. I decided to consult two academic colleagues who had grown up in the region. One confirmed my fears: "Forget that 'culture' stuff. You were given special treatment because you were Americans. The Syrian authorities were disgustingly subservient to their American visitors."

The second, a Syrian-American, saw a more complex set of issues. He agreed that foreigners would be treated differently, especially a foreign delegation, but he felt there was more to it than that:

"These things would ordinarily be handled by the families – first the brothers, then the father. Once the father gets involved, it is serious and everyone in the family is involved, uncles, cousins, everyone. It would be unusual for a Syrian to go to the police because they are strangers, but once the police got involved, they would treat it very seriously. They would not file it away as might happen in the United States. If they did treat it lightly, and the matter were not resolved to the satisfaction of the offended family, the next step might be for someone to get out knives or guns."

After the incident had passed, I had also asked my friend, Mr. Malek, how he would have handled the matter if it had happened to his own daughter.

"I would have killed him," said my gentle friend.

"Really? You would have killed him," I asked?

"No, not really. But I would have gone into that shop and dragged him to the police station with my own hands."

This was the third time someone had spoken of killing Nabeel. I knew from experience that the words were idiomatic hyperbole to express outrage and were not to be taken literally. No one was going to kill anyone. But putting aside styles of expression, Mr. Malek convinced me that he was being absolutely candid and that Nabeel was, in fact, lucky that the four males in my group had been "surrogate" brothers rather than actual brothers.

A second incident also shed some light on what had happened. My students and I were in Jordan two weeks later on the final leg of our journey. We were visiting a crusader-era castle and had with us a 25-year-old Jordanian teacher. At a certain point, I realized she was having a serious conversation

After the incident was behind us, I began to have second thoughts. Had we over-reacted? Had the matter been handled differently because we were a foreign study group whose program was being hosted by a major university?

It would be unusual for a Syrian to go to the police because they are strangers, but once the police got involved, they would treat it very seriously. They would not file it away as might happen in the United States.

with the bus driver and a Jordanian college student also with us. After their conversation ended, the three of them went off to another section of the castle. Later they talked intensely to the castle Director.

When the castle Director learned of the incident, he wanted to fire the man on the spot. The teacher said she was satisfied to have him accused before the other workers, and for the sake of his wife and family she did not want further action.

After we left the castle I asked what had happened. Had one of my students created a problem? What she told me showed how sexual harassment is handled when foreigners are not involved.

She told me that a worker doing repairs on one of the walls had touched her arm. She believed it was intentional, but decided to ignore it. Later he walked past her again and “brushed against” her back, as she put it. This time there was no mistake. She told the bus driver, who went with the student to confront the worker with his offense. When the castle Director learned of the incident, he wanted to fire the man on the spot. The teacher said she was satisfied to have him accused before the other workers, and for the sake of his wife and family she did not want further action.

By the time we reached our next destination – the Roman city of Jerash a few miles away – the regional security director had learned of the incident and had driven down from his headquarters to investigate. As in Syria, where the General personally took charge, the Jordanian security chief was not content to let a junior officer handle the problem. He learned we were going to Jerash and made his way there to conduct his own investigation. He was not convinced that a reprimand was sufficient punishment and he wanted to interview the offended woman personally.

I am not sure what happened after we left. I do know that this was entirely a Jordanian affair and that its handling was based on local norms, without diplomatic considerations. I also know that in America, it is almost inconceivable that a police chief would take personal charge of a sexual harassment case.

The teacher was surprised. “Here they would never ask for proof or witnesses,” she said. “They would assume that the woman was telling the truth. Why would anyone make up such a story?”

When the teacher finished her story, I told her of the incident in Syria. I told her that in America it is unlikely that the police would do anything. They would ask for witnesses and proof of the incident and might even question the motives of the woman. She was surprised. “Here they would never ask for proof or witnesses,” she said. “They would assume that the woman was telling the truth. Why would anyone make up such a story?”

Reflections

In retrospect, the incident in the *souk* left me with mixed feelings. Part of this ambiguity has to do with the tension between procedural rights and the ends of justice.

Syria is a country whose judicial system has raised serious concerns

among human rights groups. Just a few days after Nabeel was sentenced, our group interviewed an American embassy official in Damascus. In summarizing the points of discussion (and sometimes tension) between the United States and Syria, the official mentioned the absence of procedural rights. He also mentioned the exceptional power of the Syrian police, as if underscoring Nabeel's case.

As a civil libertarian, I was concerned from the beginning with how Nabeel was treated. It shocked me that he was given strokes even before Sonya's testimony. I was upset that a police official could sentence him without letting him see an attorney, confront his accuser, or have a trial before a jury. Where was the assumption that Nabeel was innocent until proven guilty?

At the same time, in my own country, careful adherence to Nabeel's procedural rights would have made conviction difficult. I am still uneasy with the specifics, but I would not have wanted Sonya subjected to hostile and humiliating cross-examination.

A second concern was crystallized by a feminist colleague who listened to the story and said, "It sounds as if men made all the decisions." And right she was. As is often the case with sexual harassment, men were offenders, defenders, and judges. The dual faces of patriarchy are protection and control, and this was patriarchy at its best and its worst. The very idea that women must be protected by men grows out of a sense that they *should* be protected, almost as children are protected. And, like children, they must be monitored, lest they make wrong judgements.

In Syria, a man who does not protect a woman under his care has brought shame upon himself. But Syria is not alone in this. Readers may recall in *Gone With the Wind* how Scarlet O'Hara, in post-Civil War Atlanta, went out in her buggy and was sexually accosted by riffraff from a squatter camp. When she reported the incident, her angry husband organized a punitive raid on the camp. When he was killed, sentiment turned against Scarlet. People said she had put herself at risk by going out alone and had left her husband with no choice but to risk his life to avenge her. Had the raid succeeded, the praise would have gone to him. It failed, and the blame went to her.

Some observers have also noted an irony in the practice of honor in that many Arab girls would not tell their fathers or brothers about such an incident. The men would feel obligated to act and might put themselves at risk if they did serious harm to the offender. Hence, the women protect the men by absorbing the assault in silence.

In a situation like this, whether in Atlanta or Damascus, it is never

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completely clear whose honor is being protected – the male or the female – or from what.

Some Final Thoughts

Anyone who has visited Syria knows it is a dazzling country. My students were enchanted by the *souks*, the castles, and the ancient ruins. True learning, however, lies not just in seeing stones and artifacts but in the encounter with real, living people. Syria is not perfect, and in many ways our civilization is so different from theirs that our interactions are sometimes less dialogue than shouts across a chasm.

But unpleasant as this incident was, it also was a profound learning experience. My students were forced to confront a value system and an approach to gender relations different from their own. In engaging Syria, we had to examine ourselves, our own country, our values, and our way of handling problems.

But unpleasant as this incident was, it was also a profound learning experience. My students were forced to confront a value system and an approach to gender relations different from their own. In engaging Syria, we had to examine ourselves, our own country, our values, and *our* way of handling problems.

All of us came away with an increased awareness of the logic and worth of Arab values. As one female student wrote in her journal, “Arab culture cannot be evaluated as better or worse than our own; instead we must strive to understand it as a society whose strengths have the potential to improve our own lives.”

My students reached different conclusions about what happened in the Damascus *souk*, but they all learned certain lessons: They will never again assume that a woman with head cover is oppressed; they will never again remain silent when someone says, “Arab men don’t respect women;” and they will never again view an unwelcome advance as simply a minor irritation.

As we all learned in Syria, it’s a matter of honor.



Photograph: Michael S. Lee

Main entrance to the Hamadiyyah *Souk*.

Footnotes

¹ For a range of female perspectives and experiences, including those of Arab feminists, see Fernea and Bezirgan, 1977.

² The law book of tenth century Islamic scholar al-Marghinani of the Hanafi school commented on touching between non-married persons. He was particularly concerned about how righteous men should behave around females outside their family, females for whom they might feel romantic passion. He advised that a man “not look needlessly even at the face or hands, to avoid sin. He is not allowed to touch her face or hands with his hands even if he is secure from lust, whether he be young or old” (Williams, 99-100). While this is certainly not the norm in modern Syria, it does show a perspective that has no parallel in American tradition.

³ Fernea and Bezirgan, 1977, p. xx.

⁴ The concept of “honor” (*sharaf*) is written into the Syrian legal code, a secular civil law. According to Syrian scholar Zouhair Ghazzal (1995, see also 1996), half the murders in Aleppo are linked to honor and these are treated much more leniently than regular homicides. Bouthaina Shaaban (1991: 1-27) discusses the concept in terms of a case in her hometown. While the law is gender neutral Shaaban and Ghazzal both see negative implications for women’s interests. As Shaaban (p. 27) puts it, “The crime of honour is a legal term covering the murder of women suspected of having had premarital sexual relations. The killers are usually male next of kin. The legislation is non-religious but panders to some of the most backward male chauvinist sentiments that still exist in certain rural areas. The word ‘honour’ is used because Arab men relate their personal and family honour to the premarital sexual behavior of their nearest women kin.”

⁵ Shaaban, 1991, p. 4.

⁶ See Huxley, 1978.

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