



always been. It's a sharp contrast to centuries-young American culture, which holds sacrosanct the notion that citizens can make change. Tourist literature claims Damascus as the world's oldest continuously inhabited city, dating back some 4,000 years.

Walks through urban streets revealed endless juxtapositions: the ancient and modern, traditional and globalized, conservative and liberal, alternately romancing and repelling my Western sensibilities. I tried not to judge as I took it in: Circles of light falling through holes left by French artillery in the roof of the historic marketplace. A group of fully veiled women at a lingerie store, one of them asking the price of a strappy red leather getup. A brown-eyed child standing in a cloud of noxious smoke as a trash heap burned on the sidewalk.

From an environmental perspective, Syria both appalled and impressed me. Garbage, much of it plastic, littered the countryside and burned in the open. Cigarette smoke filled restaurants and buses, diesel fumes choked city streets and the once-mighty Barada River sludged through a concrete channel. When I told vendors I didn't need a bag, they insisted on giving me one anyway. Reza translated one vegetable seller's explanation: "If you walk away from my store with the lemons in your hands, the neighbors will say, 'Look, he doesn't take care of his customers.'"

Yet I also saw the eco-logic inherent in poverty. Many apartments featured open-air courtyards with no central heating or air conditioning and few electric appliances. (Think laundry lines.) A majority of people crammed into buses, mini-buses and trains to get around. There were virtually no fast food franchises junking up commercial districts though Reza told me Damascus recently welcomed its first KFC. I got the general impression that Syrians have fewer toys than Americans — one exception being "Fulla," the Muslim world's Barbie, with her extensive wardrobe of modest clothes. And I was happy to see evidence of local environmental groups working for change: the Syrian Environment Association office in Damascus, an agro-biodiversity movement in Sufita and Syrian Society for the Conservation of Wildlife posters in the Mar Musa monastery.

**A** part of Syrians' national identity is tolerance of cultural diversity, a dynamic most obvious in women's dress. I saw a few conservative Muslim women in black *abayas*, their faces completely obscured by matching veils, and more frequently, ladies with *hejabs* over their hair and loose clothes from neck to ankle. Then there were the college students who paired their headscarves with stylish, form-flattering business

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suits and long denim skirts and uncovered women — generally assumed to be Christian, Druze, Alawi or foreign — in tight blouses and butt-gripping stonewashed jeans. All females seemed to adhere to Syria's unofficial dress code: no bare shoulders, bellies, backs or legs above the knee. It struck me as a bit restrictive on hot days when I was tempted to sport a tank top, but relative to fundamentalist Muslim countries, Syria's quite liberal. Too much skin may be frowned upon in Syria, but it's not criminalized.

The genders seemed integrated in most aspects of Syrian society, sharing company virtually everywhere but in mosques and bath houses. I was rattled by one exception: a rooftop café in Damascus that sequestered women behind a wall while men enjoyed fresh air on the balcony. My male friends encouraged me to join them at their table — an unusual but permissible move, they said, because I am a foreigner. I felt conspicuous and a bit rebellious, but the waiters were courteous. Reza's Syrian buddy was only mildly shocked when I paid for my own coffee.

I felt helpless at times, with only a couple dozen badly butchered Arabic words in my vocabulary and an infant's understanding of the culture. When I took people too literally, Reza reminded me that Syrian customs are inherently melodramatic. A man might greet a casual acquaintance with phrases as gushy as "Dear one! My eyes, my heart, my head!" I watched Shiite women make sobbing sounds at the tomb of the Imam Ali's daughter Zaynab, and then turn around dry-eyed and call to their children. And when strangers beckoned, inviting me to sit and eat with them, Reza instructed me to respectfully decline. They were just being polite, he explained.

The line between the language and the law became literal as Reza and I started down a steep path to a beach near Kesseb. A Syrian policeman emerged from his concrete station and warned us not to explore a come-hither stretch of coast about 150 yards away. "That's Turkey. It's forbidden," he said.

We were right on the edge of the Hatay Province, a mitten-shaped chunk of land that includes the historic city of Antioch, which France carved off like a cut of colonial sirloin and gave to Turkey in 1939. The general Syrian public still refuses to accept the loss; in fact, most Syrian maps show the province to be within national boundaries. Yet here was a Syrian policeman warning us not to enter the Turkish beach — a de facto acknowledgement of a border that patriotic pride denies.

**S**yria may be full of contradictions, but the country's demographics also hold a mirror to American hypocrisy. Millions of refugees from U.S.-funded occupations now live in Syria — albeit as second-class citizens — while America refuses them entry. According to the U.N., Syria has taken in roughly 400,000 of more than 2 million Palestinian refugees and 1.2 million of more than two million Iraqi refugees. By comparison, the U.S. has allowed entry to about 800 Iraqis since the start of the Iraq War in 2003, though the State Department recently announced plans to bump the number up to 7,000, and too few Palestinian refugees for the U.N. to bother counting.

And while America criticizes Syria for allowing torture in its prisons — never mind Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo — in 2002 U.S. officials shipped Canadian software engineer Maher Arar to a Syrian prison precisely in order to be tortured. He was held there for a year though suspicions that he was involved in terrorist activity proved to be unfounded.

Bashar al-Assad won the recent "election," of course, with some 97.6 percent voting "yes," a quarter-million casting invalid ballots and a ballsy 0.2 percent voting "no." Syrian officials claimed that 95 percent of the nation's 12 million voters turned out, but U.S. State Department spokesman Tom Casey took a sarcastic tone, saying, "I'm sure President Assad is basking in the glow of his ability to have defeated exactly zero other candidates."

An unspeakable quote in Syria, but this is America, where we're allowed to say that kind of thing. As soon as I passed through passport control at the San Francisco Airport, I couldn't resist exclaiming — not crazy-loudly, but audibly — "George Bush sucks!"

Men in uniform did not swoop down on me. Heads didn't even turn. I felt giddy with love for my country.

**EW**