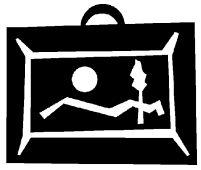
QUICK STUDIES



AS YOU SEE IT

Peasants into Syrians

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Cartoon from the Syrian Ministry of Defense magazine *Al-Jundi*, 1 September 1955.

Like much of the "developing world," Syria experienced urban population growth at historically unprecedented rates in the 1950s.[1] Such rapid urbanization, like all transformative historical phenomena, animates (and, to a certain extent, reifies) a host of dreams and anxieties in those who experience

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it. To get an inkling of how "Syrians"—as individuals, groups, or representatives of institutions—felt about these changes, one has to look beyond the ubiquitous and frequent pronouncements of intellectuals and government officials extolling the virtues of modernity and the liberating effects of science and technology.

One place to seek such insights is the press, particularly those features located outside the conventional boundaries of "straight" news. As one of a series, the cartoon shown previously constitutes an excellent example.[2] Entitled "Those Whom the People Scorn," these panels depict an oafish character engaging in a variety of behaviors that arouse horror in "the people," that is to say, his more refined fellow urbanites. He dresses and grooms himself in unseemly or absurd fashion, chooses particularly inappropriate settings in which to spread gossip, scolds his wife and uses foul language in public, and in numerous other ways displays a complete lack of "manners" as understood by those around him.

One question comes immediately to mind. What, beyond mere entertainment, was the purpose of this cartoon's publication? The answer is best sought by analyzing the context of its appearance in print. The journal in which these cartoons appeared was *Al-Jundi*, the Defense Ministry's publication for enlisted men. The army was one of the most visible agents of Syria's rapid urbanization during the 1950s as its postindependence expansion continued to bring increasing numbers of military personnel into the cities. The overwhelming majority of these personnel were new enlistees from rural areas, a fact that did not go unnoticed by long-term residents of Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs. Damascenes, in particular, were often alarmed by this influx of "country people," as these generally less well-educated and less sophisticated recruits, many of whom were also members of religious and ethnic minority groups, were euphemistically known. Although the cartoon's main character is dressed in civilian rather than military garb, he is clearly a parvenu and one who is as yet incapable of properly enacting the identity to which he aspires—the "man about town" sporting a Western-style business suit and fez, that passé symbol of social status. Furthermore, his ignorance of proper deportment and speech is such that he is perfectly unaware of the revulsion he is causing. The parallel with the wide-eyed, often coarse young men in uniform then roaming the city's streets would have been obvious to most readers.

Yet the issue of the cartoon's ultimate purpose remains unresolved. Is it an artifact of the Syrian state's exercise of subtle "disciplinary power"? In other words, was the Ministry of Defense chiding its young soldiers to behave more decorously around their social betters, the urban elites and bourgeoisie, or was the ministry signaling to those betters that it was aware of and was responding to the distress they experienced during daily exposure to public indiscretions committed by erstwhile peasants in the process of becoming soldier-citizens?

Yet another possibility is suggested by the timing of the cartoon's publication. For at least two reasons, September 1955 was a period of particularly acute regime and elite anxiety. The second Damascus International Exposition was

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held from 1 to 30 September.[3] The press was replete with expressions of angst about traffic, street crime, vagrancy, substandard public hygiene, various issues of public safety and security, and countless other presumed "blemishes" on Syria's image before the world.[4] The unstated question lurking just beneath the surface of this body of discourse is, "What will the foreigners think of us?" To gauge the scope and intensity of this regime apprehension, one need only recall the extraordinary state into which China's government worked itself prior to and during the recent Beijing Olympics.

In addition, September 1955 also witnessed the climax of the most lurid political spectacle in post World War II Syrian history, the "show trial" of those charged with conspiring to assassinate the army's deputy chief of staff, Lt. Col. ʿAdnan al-Malki, five months before. This ongoing psychodrama kept regime nerves strained to the breaking point throughout the summer and fall of 1955. The daily vilification of the tribunal's unlucky defendants, many of whom were both members of religious minorities and army noncommissioned officers and junior officers, served to remind readers of the sensitive issues outlined previously.[5] Furthermore, both the exposition and the military tribunal brought even more soldiers and security personnel into the streets of Damascus.

Thus, perhaps the regime was more concerned that people from other countries would scorn its still undisciplined military and security-service personnel. Truly definitive answers to such questions are rarely possible. However, features like "Those Whom the People Scorn" can, when properly contextualized, prompt interesting research questions and thereby reveal the value of the press as a source for cultural history.

NOTES

[1]For example, the population of Damascus increased by 47.6 percent between 1950 and 1960. Kingsley Davis, *World Urbanization 1950–1970, Vol. 1*: *Basic Data for Cities, Countries, and Regions* (Berkeley, Calif.: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1969), 74, 154, 201.

[2]*Al-Jundi* 220 (1 September 1955), 6. A similar panel appeared in *Al-Jundi* 223 (22 September 1955), 42.

[3]*Al-Anba*ʾ 204–50 (21 July 1955), 2; *Al-Jumhur* 225 (27 September 1955), 14; *Al-Raqib* 287 (29 September 1955), 18–21; and so forth.

[4]See, for example, *Al-Mukhtar* 15 (8 July 1954), 3; *Al-Nas* 1 (18 July 1954), 2; *Al-Mukhtar* 19 (17 August 1954), 3; *Al-Nas* 31 (27 August 1954), 2; *Al-Jamiʿa* 36 (29 August 1954), 20–21; *Al-Raqib* 234 (4 September 1954), 28; *Al-Jamiʿa* (25 September 1955), 11; and so forth.

[5]See, for example, *Al-Anba*ʾ 213–59 (5 August 1955), 1; *Al-Anba*ʾ 230–76 (26 August 1955), 1; *Al-Jundi* 221 (8 September 1955), 6–7; *Al-Anba*ʾ 242–88 (9 September 1955), 1; *Al-Anba*ʾ 246–96 (15 September 1955), 1; *Al-Jumhur* 225 (27 September 1955), 19; *Al-Raqib* 287 (29 September 1955), 3; *Al-Jundi* 225 (6 October 1955), 4–5, 6; and so forth.

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