

## Damascus, Syria – 1992 United Nations Training Mission

In February of 1992 I had an assignment from the United Nations to conduct a two-week GIS training class for the staff of the Arab Center for the Study of Arid Zones and Dry Lands (ACSAD) in Damascus, Syria. After an initial meeting with staff at the UNESCO office in Paris, I boarded a flight to Damascus and arrived at 4 am in the morning. (Dr Anwar Baydoun from ACSAD was there to meet me with his driver) I couldn't help but notice that the formalities of Passport Control and Customs were fairly easy, however, I was totally surprised to see the officials copying all the details of my passport and visa into a large ledger by hand! (and for every arriving passenger no less!) There was a large sign posted in front of the Immigration booth – “All persons must have their entry and departure documents completed or they can not enter or leave the country”! Once I had cleared Immigration and Customs, Dr Baydoun drove me to a small hotel named “Al Faradis” in downtown Damascus. It was a 12 story building with the front desk on the ground floor and hotel rooms on floors 8 – 12. Upon checking in, I was given the key to room on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor with a view of the hills west of the city on the border with Lebanon.



View from the Al-Faradis Hotel

Among the first things I noticed upon entering the room were the light switches, semi-circular in shape with “slide” up for the OFF position and down for ON – most strange!

I slept until 11:00am, then showered and went in search of a restaurant. I saw nothing on the ground floor, but on the way back to my room I saw a small sign for the restaurant/bar on the 11<sup>th</sup> floor. Upon entering the restaurant, I found myself to be the only person in the place! Soon a waiter came to my table, but he had no menu. Then he asked if I would like to have some rolls with jam, fruit juice, and tea? (of course I did!) As I ate my “breakfast” I gazed out the window upon the “Martyrs’ Square” below the hotel and many domes and minarets of mosques in the distance behind the ancient city walls. (Later I was told that Damascus was one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world) I waited at the hotel for quite a while for someone to contact me to discuss the agenda for the training class, but no one called or came to the hotel. So, I tried to call the ACSAD office, despite there being no instructions in the hotel room for using the telephone! (in fact, there was no information at all in the room about anything!) As soon as I picked up the telephone receiver, a man at the front desk answered, informing me that all calls must be dialed by him. (so, what was the purpose of the numbers on the telephone dial?) As I expected, the call could not be completed, and I was advised to “try again later”.

By this time, I was getting a bit “stir crazy” sitting in the small hotel room, so I decided to go for a walk and check out the rates at other hotels like the Sheraton and Le Meridien. As I walked outside, I encountered a very dusty, dirty, hectic and noisy environment, much like I remembered of Cairo. It led me to wonder if the Middle Eastern culture liked it that way, or they just tolerated it. The weather was quite windy and chilly, but the bright sunshine felt good for a walk. As with Cairo, people walked just about everywhere except on the sidewalk! I passed several government ministry buildings, all of which were guarded by soldiers with automatic weapons. (even the Sheraton and Le Meridien hotels!) I came to a large round-about and the Sheraton Hotel just beyond. When I enquired about the rate I was told

there was a discount for UN staff of 25% off the regular rate of \$195/night, and that was the “low season” rate as well! On my way back to the Al Faradis Hotel, I decided to stop at the Le Meridien Hotel and ask about the rate for UN staff – they quoted me 50% off the regular rate, which made it \$98/night. That’s when I decided to change hotels the next morning!



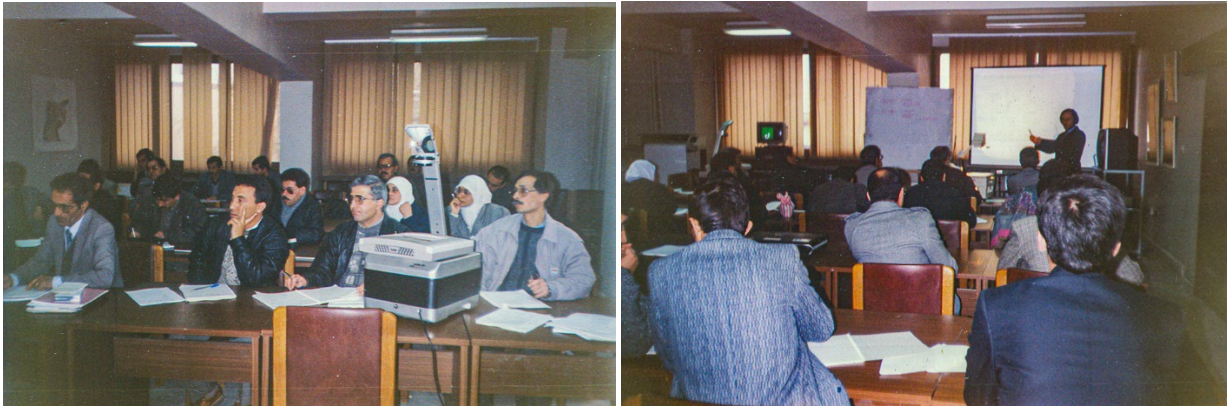
Le Meridien Hotel

Before leaving the Le Meridien Hotel, I had a couple of beers in the hotel lobby bar. As I enjoyed the cold beer, I spotted a sign posted on the door – “alcoholic drinks will not be served after sunset because of the religious holiday”. I thought it fair enough, but that’s also when I noticed the price of the beer was 140 SYP (Syrian Pounds), which at the official bank exchange rate of \$1.00 to 42 SYP amounted to a whopping \$3.40 US per beer! (that’s really cheap today, but not in 1992!)

As I sat at the bar, I saw a young blonde girl “flirting” with a couple of older Australian men. She seemed to have an Aussie accent. But later, after the men left the bar I overheard her speaking fluent Arabic to another man at the bar. (as for her “intentions” your guess is as good as mine) Meanwhile, I wrote some postcards to friends and family back home. As I left the bar, I bought a local guidebook and map of Syria from the hotel gift shop before walking back to my hotel. There I finally met with Dr Baydoun and his assistant Dr Nabil to discuss the schedule for the training class as we shared small cups of traditional thick strong Arabic coffee. The next day I moved to the Le Meridien Hotel where I had access to more office services, as well as a lower room rate. However, as I checked in, I was advised that my hotel bill would have to be paid in US dollars, not Syrian Pounds. Okay, but then came the “catch”, all room charges would be converted at the “hotel” exchange rate of \$1.00 = 11.2 SYP, whereas the official bank exchange rate was \$1.00 = 42 SYP! So, a quick calculation meant the bottle of beer in my room mini-bar at 100 SYP would end up costing me over \$9.00!! And, at the “hotel rate” breakfast in the restaurant would cost me \$24.00 – about the same price as a club sandwich at lunchtime! It was an “official” rip off!

In addition, just after checking in, I was told the hotel had no fax machine, and that in fact, it was illegal to have one in Syria, with the exception of the Central Post Office. So, I was stuck with having to send and receive messages with ESRI via “Telex” or long-distance phone calls, neither of which was a preferred mode of communication, especially since Redlands was almost 11 hours behind Damascus. My first Telex message to ESRI, a mere 6 sentences, cost me 675 SYP (\$16.00 at the bank rate, but \$60.00 at the hotel rate – it was unbelievable! (one must remember that 1992 was well before cell phones and the internet were common!) Later that evening, as I sat in the hotel lobby bar with my cold glass of Lowenbrau beer (\$3.30 bank rate, \$12.00 if charged to my room!), several groups of attractive young women entered the bar unaccompanied, very unusual for an Arabic country. A couple of men joined them, but it wasn’t clear if they were friends. Meanwhile, throughout the hotel were large photos of President Assad displayed everywhere! Later in the evening, as I watched the national TV channel in my

room, his name or photo was broadcast about every few minutes! I was never able to determine what was being said during that time, but I'm sure it was all very "favorable" to the President! The next morning, I woke up to the 5:30am "call to prayer" from the nearby mosque, and as I looked out the window, the mountains beyond the city to the west were blanketed in a carpet of heavy new snow! (definitely not what I was expecting in the Middle East) Later, as I walked along the streets downtown I saw several places where figures of Santa Claus appeared! (I thought to myself, why in the world would Santa Claus be displayed in a country whose population was 95% Muslim?) I never did find out why! For the next few days, as I conducted the training class at ACSAD it involved giving lectures 4 – 5 hours a day purely "off the cuff" from memory, as well as from some hand-written notes I made every evening before, all because the shipment of my training materials couldn't be found at the airport! The daily routine of having to write lecture notes and computer exercises every evening in preparation for the class the next day became very stressful after a while!



GIS Training Class at ACSAD

Almost every day I would see lots of old 1950's American cars on the streets, all still in working condition. The most popular makes were big old Buicks and Cadillacs, and virtually every one of them was "beat up" to some extent from the nature of driving in this part of the world!



Old American cars on the street

One day, as I read the "Sunday Edition" of the Syrian Times (I wasn't sure if they had any other edition), I came across an article on page 3 with the headline "Course on Application of Geographic Data Systems". In reading the article, it seemed that an "American expert" was in Syria – that was me! I felt it was quite an honor to be written up in the national newspaper. And as had been the case for the past several days, the hotel bartender recognized me as soon as I entered the bar upon my return from the daily training class, and he always had a beer ready for me! One day I noticed the sole of my right shoe had

come loose. Immediately, my ACSAD driver named “Jihad” took it to be repaired and he wouldn’t accept any money from me! (such is traditional Arabic hospitality)

The weather continued to be very wet and cold, along with heavy snow in the mountains on the Lebanese border – up to 3 meters (10 feet) in some places! Meanwhile rain, sometimes heavy, continued to fall in the city almost every day, which was fortunate for the city’s water supply, but a real “dampener” on any sightseeing. Near the end of my first week in Damascus, I paid a visit to the UNDP office to enquire about the status of my “per diem” payment. I found out two things – (1) I would receive \$160 per day, payable in US dollars, but (2) they didn’t know anything about paying me since they hadn’t received any communications from UNESCO authorizing payment! (not what I wanted to hear) After returning from the UNDP office, I checked on the status of shipment of my training materials, and for the 6<sup>th</sup> day in a row, there was still no information! (in another week it wouldn’t make any difference – the class would be over!!)

On my way back to the hotel, I was amazed at how many old American cars were being used as taxis, all of which were painted some shade of yellow. Later I was told that the old cars had to be maintained by manufacturing or improvising parts locally since replacement parts were not available in Syria. It sounded a lot like the same situation in Cuba, and I supposed that it would even be very difficult, if not impossible to find parts in the US! On a couple of occasions, I even saw a few classic old DeSotos and Packards with their signature giant tailfins and monstrous front ends – definitely “old boats”!

On one day after the class, I walked to the “Sham Palace Hotel” to check out the menu of their Chinese restaurant. (also spelled “Cham” since Arabic is basically a phonetic language and it’s acceptable to spell it any way that “sounds” right) Just down the street was the main headquarters for the UN Peacekeeping Forces monitoring the Golan Heights overlooking Israel! I saw a lot of vehicles parked outside with the huge letters “UN” painted on all sides – it was very obvious they wanted to be “seen”! While I was at the Sham (Cham) Palace Hotel, I had a delicious grilled chicken sandwich with fresh cucumbers and fried zucchini. Surprisingly it was less expensive than the bottle of Lebanese beer called “Alzama” that I had with it!

The next afternoon at ACSAD, there was a power outage, so the portable generator had to fired up in order for us to work on the computers. However, that did not involve turning on the heat! (I figured it must have been a way to save money) After the class, on the way back to my hotel, Dr Baydoun insisted upon stopping at a small bakery to buy some “cakes” (sweet cookies with almonds and spices) for me, and they were delicious! Then, back in the hotel bar I saw many of the same faces as before, mostly oil industry people from Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and even Scotland and Australia! On another note: the bar was often filled with cigarette smoke since virtually everyone in the country smoked! As I sat at the bar, I noticed a couple of guys behind me, and judging by their strong accent I figured they must have been from southern Louisiana, especially since I could clearly hear many French words that led me to believe they were Cajun. A short time later, four young men came into the bar and they were obviously military, but not Syrian. So, I suspected they were part of the UN Peacekeeping Force. However, as I overheard their conversation, I couldn’t recognize their language, so I had no idea from which country they had come.

A couple of days later, on the weekend, I joined a small group of students in the class for a trip into the mountains west of Damascus overlooking the old highway to Beirut, Lebanon that followed the “Barada River”. As our van climbed the steep winding road, it began to rain and slowly turned to snow the higher we went. Then we came to the summit where we were stopped by the police who had just closed the road beyond due to heavy snow in the Lebanese mountains. As we stepped out of the van, we encountered 18-20 inches of snow on the ground and a howling windstorm! Immediately everyone began “romping” in the snow! For most of them, especially the students from Egypt and Libya, it was a real “novelty” like nothing they had ever experienced before. We all had a lot of fun throwing snowballs at each other, and Dr Baydoun’s young 8-year-old daughter was seeing snow for the very first time in

her life! Lots of photos were taken as the wind whipped up the snow around us. Soon, dark clouds moved in and heavy snow began to fall, which combined with the wind, turned rapidly into near blizzard conditions! At that point, we all retreated to the van, a warm haven in the arctic environment on top of the mountains. (it was the last thing I had expected to find in the Middle East!)



On the highway to Lebanon

As we drove back down the mountain to the city, we passed a lot of vehicles parked on the edge of the road with people throwing snowballs at us and everyone in general. The scene looked like the mountain had been turned into a huge amusement park! Whole busloads of people were still coming up the mountain to enjoy a rare experience in the snow! I was told the weather was the worst on record for the entire region, and Damascus had received more rain in the past three days than the average rainfall for the year!

On the way back to the hotel, Dr Baydoun took us to the top of “Mount Quoisson” overlooking the city for an amazing view. There were numerous small coffee and tea shops perched on the edge of the steep slope that had been terraced and planted with trees, which seemed to have been in a desperate hope they would survive in the barren landscape. I took a couple of photos of the city below before Dr Baydoun cautioned that it might not be a good idea – for unknown reasons that I would never know!



View of Damascus from Mount Quoisson

Since it was still early in the afternoon when I arrived back at the hotel, I decided to brave the fierce winds and freezing temperatures to pay a visit to the Military Museum and National Museum just a few blocks away. The Military Museum was located in a collection of old buildings that looked like they may have been used to store weapons at some time in the past. As I paid the admission fee of 5 SYP, religious services were going on in the mosque across the street from the museum and the “Inman” was wailing at the top of his voice about something that sounded like “fire and brimstone”! Once I was inside the

museum, the first building was filled with hundreds of swords, scimitars, daggers, and assorted knives of all shapes and sizes, a few of which were very ornate with inscriptions in gold and intricately carved ivory handles. But there were also a lot of very ordinary blades! Another building was dedicated to a large display of “debris” from the 1967 “War of Liberation” against Israel, or at least that was the perspective of President Assad in which the Syrians won the war! The main room contained a lot of mangled parts from a couple of Israeli war planes that had been shot down by the Syrians. Throughout my visit to the museum, it was absolutely freezing inside! There was no evidence of any source of heat anywhere. Despite the very cold environment, the museum was quite interesting, especially about the “ancient history”, which I quickly gathered was “BA” (Before Assad), and of course, his photo was displayed everywhere and always of a very large size! Of particular interest and significance was an excellent display about the struggle for independence from France, both before and after WWII. Another exhibit of special interest was about the one and only Syrian astronaut who participated in a space mission with Russian cosmonauts. And housed in a special glass enclosed room was the actual space module in which he returned to earth; the exterior surface being heavily scorched from its re-entry into the atmosphere. I was amazed at how incredibly small the capsule was!

The grounds outside the Military Museum were nicely landscaped, and at the entrance to the gardens was an amazing full-scale reproduction of the original gate to the historic Omayyad Palace in the city of Aleppo. As I entered the National Museum there was a scale model of the palace as well. Walking through the many rooms of the museum, I discovered several fascinating exhibits displaying different periods of world history, from early Egyptian and Phoenician to Roman, Greek, and Byzantine. However, the most common “artifact” I noticed was actually something from a very recent period of history – cast iron radiators – definitely artifacts because none of them were working! Once again, it was “fricking” freezing and the only saving grace was the absence of the wind that was howling outside! But in spite of the conditions, I enjoyed the visits to the two museums.

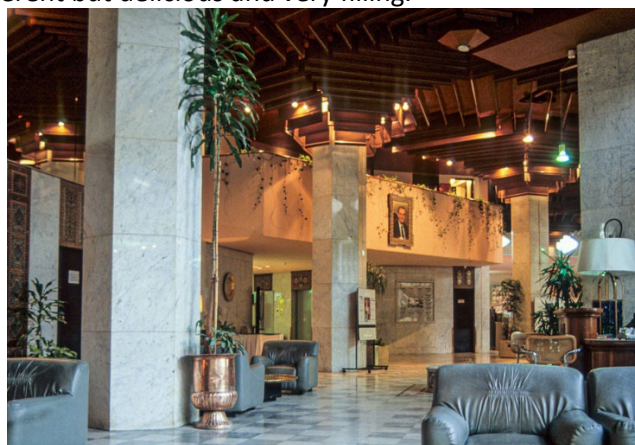
That evening the Le Meridien Hotel had a special seafood dinner buffet with an enormous assortment of fish and shellfish, complete with a large copper pot of traditional French bouillabaisse filled with lots of huge prawns, scallops, and lobster. In addition to the bouillabaisse was a large selection of fresh fish cooked to order – superb! Judging by the multitude of languages being spoken and the formal attire of the diners, the seafood buffet appeared to be very popular with the diplomatic corps, UN staff, and expatriot community. Following the fantastic seafood buffet dinner, I retired to my room to watch a movie on TV. I soon discovered that all the movies available were “for screening purposes only” – a banner that appeared on the screen numerous times throughout the film! (I suspected the hotel was forced to show “illegal” films in Syria) And most strange were the MTV videos that appeared after the film with titles such as “People are still having Sex”! It made me wonder if I was really in Damascus.

During the night I was awakened by the sound and vibration of very strong winds as the sliding glass doors to my balcony began moving back and forth! Later, I could see the large panes of glass in the hotel lobby noticeably “bending” with the wind that apparently was over 120 kph (75 mph)! It was really “howling” outside. As I went to the restaurant for breakfast, I could see it had started snowing again, and by mid-morning there was at least 4 inches of snow on the ground and the streets became treacherous. But somehow my ACSAD driver “Gehad” (Jihad) showed up at the hotel on time and we drove very slowly along the snow-covered streets to the Syrian Airlines office to once again enquire about the status of my shipment of four boxes of training materials. To my astonishment, I was told they had arrived 13 days ago at the airport Customs office! So why in Hell had we been waiting all this time? (I was very pissed, but I knew I would never find out the reason) Leaving the airline office with the “new” information, we continued to the ACSAD office as the snowfall became heavier. The main road was closed due to the snow, but we finally arrived, only to find that just 3 students had shown up and practically none of the ACSAD staff. Since there was no one who could turn on the computers, it was

pretty clear to all of us that class was cancelled! It took only a few minutes for everyone to decide to head home, which was no easy task given the nasty weather and crazy Syrian drivers!

Upon returning to the hotel, I changed clothes (sans suit and tie) and ventured out into the snowstorm on my way to the American Express office to get some sorely needed cash, “dodging” snowballs the whole way! Everyone on the street was going crazy, throwing snowballs at each other and especially the passing cars – laughing all the time! It felt like they all had become a kid again, and it was really a wonderful experience. What really shocked me were all the police officers and soldiers also participating, enjoying it as much or more so! Upon finally arriving at the American Express office, none the worse for the ordeal, I was given some bad news – it was impossible for me to get any sort of “cash advance” on my credit card in Syria, in any form! Basically, it was “illegal” to do so, and besides, even if it were possible, the exchange rate would be \$1.00 to 11.2 SYP, which would making everything at least four times more expensive! Their advice – try the Central Bank of Syria, but good luck! Leaving the AMEX office after having gotten no help, I headed for the UNDP office again, already knowing that I would most likely find no one in the office, given the miserable weather, and sure enough it was the case! And to add insult to injury, I had to slog my way back to the hotel through the thick wet snow, passing through a “gauntlet” of snowballs again! (No one was “exempt” from being a snowball “target”!) Later in the day, as the snowfall tapered off, I made my way to the Central Bank downtown, and was told that “maybe” they could give me money on a personal check, but it would take several days to process and with no guarantee of success. At that point, I was seriously getting “pissed off” and frustrated, and feeling more than ever that I wanted to go home!

Back at the hotel that afternoon, I was finally able to connect with Dr Nabil – not that easy with the Syrian telephone system which had “tones” I’d never heard before and couldn’t decipher. But once we were connected, he reassured me that he would come up with a solution to my financial problem of basically being almost out of cash and having to begin charging my expenses to the hotel room, which meant incurring large personal costs. In the meantime, I would have to wait until the next day to contact the UNDP office again. So, I spent the rest of the day writing lecture notes and exercises for the next day’s training class. Meanwhile, the snow had begun to fall outside the window once again. That evening in the lobby bar, a large Japanese tour group arrived, replacing the Italian tour group from the day before. Then I heard the news that all their tours for the next day had been cancelled due to the weather, which seemed to be obvious to everyone. As I sat at the bar with my usual beer, I wrote of the days events in my journal before heading to the hotel coffee shop for dinner. I ordered a very traditional cheeseburger that turned out to be two huge patties of grilled lamb, each of which was served on its own bun! It was a bit different but delicious and very filling.



Lobby – Le Meridien Hotel

After dinner, the evening “video programme” scheduled in the hotel at 10:00pm was listed as “The Big Lazy” starring Dennis Quaid! (in actuality, of course, it was “The Big Easy”, so obviously something had been lost in the translation)

The next morning was one day past the end of the training course, at least according to the agenda/schedule, and I still hadn’t see anything of my training materials! (almost every day during the course I had asked the question “Where are the training materials”, and the answer was always the same – no one knew!) Everyone was very polite and wanted to help, but day after day, nothing happened! It wore me down to the point where I just finally “gave up” any hope of having training materials to work with. The experience felt like I was in a “black hole”, especially since visits to various offices did no good, telephone calls were useless as it was rare to even make a “connection”. So, as I stood in front of the class that day, it appeared very likely that the students would end up going home without the benefit of any official training materials, just my “handwritten” notes! (I hoped it wouldn’t be seen as a negative reflection on ESRI)

That evening, as I sat in the lobby bar, listening to the conversations of the “regulars” from the oil companies, mostly “shop talk”, they began swapping travel stories. One guy in particular who had a strong Texas “drawl”, told a story about a night in a sleazy Bangkok nightclub with two pilot friends. As the story unfolded, they each ordered a glass of Scotch whiskey and were immediately joined by three young ladies. When the men had finished their drinks, they were presented with a bill for \$980.00 US!! Naturally they were shocked and outraged, demanding to speak to the manager. When the manager came to their table, he pulled out a 38 caliber pistol and stuck it in their face – “either you sign the bill or I’ll blow your head off”!! The Texan oilman turned to his pilot friends and asked, “what should we do”? One of his friends looked up at the nightclub manager and said “ask to borrow his pen”! Who knows if it really happened that way, but it didn’t matter because it was a great story anyway! Just then, I saw a shiny black Mercedes limousine, led by a police escort, pull up outside the hotel. It turned out that the French Foreign Minister was staying at the hotel, which also explained the increase in the presence of hotel security.

The next day, on the way to ACSAD, I made an observation about the “chaotic” nature of the traffic, and especially how people seemed to deal with it. The culture of the region appeared to see the movement of traffic as a process of “negotiation and compromise” whereby everyone would try to “push” the situation to the point where someone had to “give”, then both people would “yield” some space and time to make things work, often at the last possible moment! Another cultural observation I made during my time in Damascus was the importance of personal relationships – such as when two men were very close friends or of the same family, they would often hold hands or walk arm in arm. And sometimes they would kiss each other on the cheek when meeting or saying goodbye. (I couldn’t help thinking that if this took place in America they would be labeled as Gay or Queer!) After class that evening, I decided to try the Chinese restaurant at the Cham Palace Hotel where earlier I had seen some interesting dishes on the menu, especially “Shrimp She-Yuan Style”. So, I ordered some Spring Rolls to start, which turned out to be Lebanese rolls filled with minced lamb and Middle Eastern spices – definitely not Chinese, but still very tasty. Then came the shrimp dish, along with fried rice, and the shrimp were very fresh and well-cooked, but they were incredibly “bland” – nothing like the spicy dish I was hoping for! Then I spotted a small bottle on the table that I thought might be “hot oil”, so I sprinkled a small amount on the shrimp – still no change in the taste. After practically “drowning” shrimp in the oil, there was virtually nothing different from before! I even tried some of the soy sauce, but it turned out to be “rancid”. All in all, at the end of dinner, I was very disappointed – the only “authentic” Chinese things were the fried rice and green tea! As I left the restaurant, I felt it was quite clear that Syrians, like the Czechs don’t enjoy hot spicy foods. (Luckily, the Le Meridien Hotel often had a bottle of Tabasco sauce on the restaurant table – most likely because of the oil industry people from Texas and Louisiana staying in the hotel)



The following day, I was invited to visit the “Devecon Architecture Office” near the hotel where I was shown details of a new luxury resort being planned on the Syrian coast north of Lebanon. It was a very interesting design incorporating both elements of the old (very chaotic and random) with a very modern streamlined “modular” design. (although it was a very interesting visit, I had no idea why I had been invited) Later that afternoon, I met Dr Baydoun at the hotel and we walked to the office of a small travel agency next to the old railway station. It was here that we discovered the location of the four “elusive” boxes of training materials, at long last! We proceeded to unpack six copies which we took around the corner to a small hotel called L'Oasis, and up a tiny elevator to the hotel front desk for safe keeping. (I found out later that it was where most of the students were staying) Meanwhile, a young Japanese student with a huge backpack was trying to get a cheap room. The hotel offered him a single room and shared shower for 400 SYP (\$9.00 US), but even that was apparently too expensive, so he left! From the L'Oasis Hotel, Dr Baydoun insisted that we visit the historic old “Hajez Railway Station” nearby that was built by the French in the early 1900’s on the mainline of the famous Taurus Express train from Istanbul (Constantinople) to Cairo. The interior of the old station was beautifully restored with lots of intricately hand-carved cedar from Lebanon. As I stood in the center of the historic station, I tried to imagine what it must have been like for passengers arriving in Damascus from London, Paris, Vienna and Constantinople. The station’s name derives from the time when the railway went through Saudi Arabia and was the main route for Muslims on the “Haj”, the pilgrimage to Mecca! Now the railway only goes from Damascus to Amman, Jordan and no longer runs from Istanbul, rather stopping at the border with Turkey. (I felt there was so much history to absorb in Damascus and such little time that I had in the city)



Hejaz Railway Station

As we left the railway station, Dr Baydoun insisted that we should walk along the famous “Straight Street”, the only one of its kind in a city where streets and roads were typically very narrow and twisted. Eventually we came to the old “souq” in the center of the city where we were suddenly plunged into a myriad of dark, narrow, crowded streets in the heart of old Damascus where it was very noisy with everyone yelling and cars honking. Walking was difficult, sometimes on the edge of the street, or more often in the street, always dodging vehicles and people! And to make matters worse, I was constantly trying to avoid stepping in the mud or being splashed by passing cars! We passed countless numbers of small shops where the smells and fragrances were at times both pleasant and disgusting – a “menagerie” of odors that were often combined with those of grilled food and spices. Occasionally, our senses were assaulted by a strong odor of decomposing waste lying in the dark corners of the souq. There were also many barber shops filled with men getting haircuts and shaves, however, I never saw any “beauty shops” for women. (Maybe women had places unknown to men?) Despite being besieged by shop owners to buy everything from trinkets to gold, the only item I bought was a traditional red and black scarf that men wear around their head. Before we left the souq, we stopped at a small stand that

was literally built into the stone wall of the ancient city gate, where Dr Baydoun ordered some fresh squeezed orange juice which was delicious. Then we walked along the ancient city wall through an old neighborhood of small houses built so close together they almost formed an “archway” over the narrow street.



Streets in Damascus

Eventually we ended up back at the L’Oasis Hotel to meet up with the students in the bar on the top floor for drinks, non-alcoholic of course, to celebrate the successful completion of the training course. Dr Baydoun handed out the training certificates and copies of the training materials that had been stuck in the Syrian Customs office at the airport for almost the entire two weeks of the course!! (unbelievable, especially since it was a UN training mission!) Just before we bid farewell to each other, Dr Baydoun gave a particularly emotional speech congratulating me and thanking the UN for their support of ACSAD. And to my great surprise, the students presented me with a very special gift – a beautiful clock inlaid with gorgeous mother-of-pearl! It was a very touching and profound emotional gesture, and a gift which I was sure they could hardly afford. (today the clock still hangs on my living room wall) On the way back to my hotel, I couldn’t help but notice the countless number of taxis on the street, all of which had signs and logos plastered all over the vehicle, the most popular being one word – “Turbo”! One taxi in particular had a large sign in the rear window – “TURBO-TURBO”! Just before we approached the hotel, Dr Baydoun pointed to an old wooden building with a massive old wooden door that was actually two doors in one, the large part was intended for camels and a much smaller door beneath it for people. He said it was the entrance to a classic “Caravanserai” in which there was a large courtyard surrounded by small rooms where overland travelers would stay for the night while their camels rested in the courtyard.



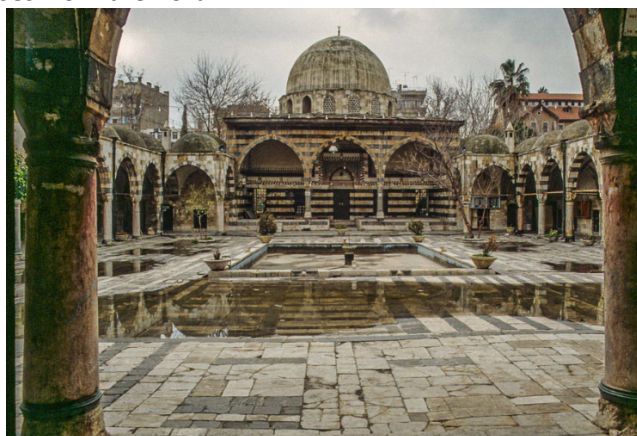
Caravanserai

Nearby the building were the ruins of an old mosque, surrounded by many small craft shops, including one where we were invited to watch craftsmen blowing glass into many different shapes, all of which were very colorful. Of special interest were some gorgeous deep blue vases made from “indigo” glass. (Unfortunately, I knew they wouldn’t begin to fit into my luggage!)



Glass blowing shop

Most of the shops were about to close because Friday evening was the start of the Islamic “Holy Day”, whereas the Jewish shops closed on Saturday and Christian shops closed on Sunday. So, over the weekend, one was bound to find something open! Dr Baydoun informed me that Damascus was home to a large Jewish community but there was no animosity toward them because no one thought of them as Israelis! At one point we walked past some shops where we could hear the rhythmic tapping of hammers as they carved out an image in a brass metal sheet for a large dish or small tea table. At the end of the narrow street we came to a series of ancient Roman columns that formed the entrance to a large open-air square where several small stalls were selling books. Across from the square was the famous Umayyad Mosque where we walked through a huge wooden door that led to a large courtyard. Before entering the mosque, we removed our shoes; the marble floor was very cold! But once we came to the main hall we found it covered wall to wall with beautiful old Iranian carpets. Dr Baydoun said the mosque was built over 1400 years ago and has remained in perfect condition. Just outside the main hall, facing the interior courtyard, was a huge mural of gorgeous green and gold mosaic. And just beyond it we encountered several more ancient Roman columns that had been inscribed with Arabic verses from the Koran.



Umayyad Mosque

From the mosque we walked to the historic “Al-Azm Palace” in the old city where there was another lovely courtyard with several small pools and fountains surrounded by fruit trees. As we made our way through some of the palace rooms surrounding the courtyard, we saw many fine examples of antique furniture from the last century when the Turks ruled Syria.



Al-Azm Palace

Just outside the palace we stopped at a small food stand on the edge of the narrow street to enjoy some fresh baked flatbread topped with a spicy mix of ground meat and tomato sauce that resembled something like a pizza! Then it was recommended by the cooks that we go up some narrow stairs to the restaurant on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor to taste some local “Syrian pizzas”. When the pizzas arrived, we were told to dip them in fresh yogurt – very tasty indeed! The restaurant was located in the one and only “pedestrian mall” I saw in Damascus, and it was very popular with families. Dr Baydoun said there used to be a small funicular railway from the mall up to a mountain park where ducks and rabbits could be seen, but it was no longer in operation. Finally, after walking along narrow, muddy streets, some still with berms of snow remaining from the previous snowstorm, we came to a very old church where we descended very steep stairs into an underground chapel with high vaulted rock walls. There was also a small antechamber with a number of very old paintings that told the story of how St Paul (Saul) had his eyesight restored by the disciple Ananias as commanded by God. Paul was then converted to Christianity by this act of God and began preaching to the Romans. The story was told in both Arabic and French.



Entrance gate



Underground Chapel

Dr Baydoun said there has always been a long history of Christianity in Syria, as well as a large Christian community in Damascus. From the old church we continued to walk along the dark, narrow streets of the old city that were more like “alleys” until we came to an open door that led to a beautiful inner courtyard. The courtyard was tiled with brilliant white marble and surrounded by rooms that opened on to it, while rooms on the second floor had lovely ornate iron railings and beautiful views overlooking the courtyard. It was a very old house with rooms full of antique Arabic and European furniture, as well as many gorgeous examples of very intricately detailed wood inlay work in the form of tables and chairs –

beautiful craftsmanship! In the middle of the courtyard was a small pool and fountain – such a lovely, quiet, peaceful escape from the hustle, bustle, and noise of the street outside! Looking at the old wooden front door from the street, one would have no idea of the beauty of the house. (I wondered how many other beautiful old houses were hidden behind old wooden doors?)

Back at the hotel that evening, as I sat at the bar with my usual beer, I overheard a conversation among some of the oil men from Texas. It went something like this – “On a plane to Doha I had to sit next to a fuckin A-rab who had two Chicken Hawks, one in each arm. I told the stewardess that I wouldn’t sit next to the birds. Then I grabbed one of them and wrung its neck! As a result, I spent several weeks in the Doha jail and paid the fine of \$3500 for the bird!!” (He told another bullshit story about being in Iraq with a friend playing a Madonna tape in a mosque.) Again, I wasn’t sure the stories were true, but it certainly made for interesting bar conversation!

On Saturday evening I met up with Mr. Nasri, assistant to Dr Nabil, to go with him and his young son to shop in the oldest souq in the city, “Souq Hamadesh”. In stark contrast to the previous day with Dr Baydoun, Friday, the market was very bright and busy with all the shops open and crowded with shoppers. As we slowly made our way through the narrow streets between the shops, it was hectic, chaotic, and full of strange smells, some fragrant and others disgusting! Gradually we “bumped” our way through the crowd to a small shop where his son bought a machine to make juice.



On the way to “Souq Hamadesh”

When we returned to the place where Mr. Nasri had parked his car, a location normally closed to the public, he told the policeman who had just ticketed his car, that he had brought an important foreign guest to the old city for his first-time visiting Syria. (that person was me!) Fortunately, Mr. Nasri was “off the hook” for the ticket. From the old city we drove up to the summit of “Mount Quoison” 800 feet above the city for a spectacular view of the city at night – a gorgeous photo, if I had remembered to bring my camera! Meanwhile, scores of cars were parked, and people were out admiring the beautiful view. Before returning to the hotel, Mr. Nasri made a quick visit to the office of the Minister of Environment to confirm our meeting with him the next day. I couldn’t help but notice the brand new shiny black Mercedes parked outside the office! Then Mr. Nasri stopped at a small shop to buy some French pastries before meeting his wife at the Red Crescent office, the equivalent of the Red Cross. As I waited in the car, I watched 4 male cats desperately trying to climb a tree to reach a female at the top who was most definitely in heat. Eventually, we ended up at Mr. Nasri’s home where we shared the

pastries with his family while we all watched an Egyptian program on TV. I was absolutely astounded that everyone in the room was constantly talking throughout the entire program!

After the evening with Mr. Nasri and his family, which I genuinely appreciated, I was glad to return to the hotel, although it was after 11:00pm. So, unfortunately, I was too late for dinner in the restaurant and no food was served at the bar. I ended up with some potato chips and a chocolate bar from the hotel gift shop and then retired to my room. As I watched a bit of local TV in my hotel room, the phone suddenly rang, and a man asked me “what do you like to play”? I responded “who is this”, to which he replied “this is sex boy”! At that point I immediately hung up! Early the next morning, I awoke to the sounds of an army drill sergeant giving calisthenics commands to a group of new recruits over a loudspeaker across the road from the hotel. It was most definitely a “wake up call”, although I never requested one. The last day of my UN training assignment finally came and I was invited to have lunch with the Director and staff of ACSAD at a “German” restaurant run by an Italian serving Lebanese food! Also joining us for lunch was the Director of FAO in the Middle East and the manager of the FAO “Camel Productivity Unit”. During the lunch there were numerous toasts to almost everyone at the table. Later that evening, I was invited to have dinner with the Director of GORS (General Organization of Remote Sensing) and his senior staff at the “Reef Restaurant”, a 4-star restaurant near the hotel. Traditional Arabic music was playing as we entered the restaurant, and we were shown to a large table filled with all manner of traditional Arabic “mezzes”. Just as we sat down, the Director of GORS ordered a bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label Scotch whiskey, worth more than the monthly salary of the average Syrian! (I wondered, could this be called corruption?) And then he proceeded to mix it with Coke! (definitely an insult to Scotsmen everywhere) The food was fantastic, and my order of lamb chops grilled with traditional Middle Eastern spices was superb! Following dinner, we all shared small cups of thick, strong Arabic coffee and a huge plate of fresh fruit. (note: the Director left the restaurant in his chauffeured white Mercedes limousine, while I left with Mr. Nasri in his white Russian “Lada”!) Later that night, I packed my bags to be ready to leave as soon as possible the next day. However, I couldn’t get a beer in the hotel bar because it was “Shaabas”, the “midnight feast”, a solemn Muslim celebration. The next day, I gave my “last” lecture to the staff at GORS, where I had only 10 overhead slides to use for the 2 hour presentation about “GIS Applications in Remote Sensing”. It turned out to be well received, despite my apprehension at the beginning of the lecture. As we were leaving GORS, we spotted a beautiful double rainbow high over the snow-capped mountains on the Lebanese border.



Rainbow over the Lebanese mountains

Then, as Mr. Nasri took me to the airport for my departure to Vienna, he was constantly “pumping” the accelerator, just as he always did when driving around the city. It was driving me crazy, but luckily, we weren’t going on a long trip – thank God! Once we arrived at the airport my “troubles” began. After checking in for the Austrian Airlines flight to Vienna, I encountered a serious problem with the Immigration officer who informed me of my failure to obtain a “resident permit”, which was required

for staying in the country for over 15 days! Well, no one had told me anything about needing such a permit when I entered the country – neither Syrian Immigration, the United Nations, or ACSAD! Then the Immigration officer told me I would have to go to the Central Office in the city to “apply” for the permit. (by this time, the office was closed and would also be closed the following day for the Sabbath!) Facing the prospect of missing my flight and being stuck in Syria for who knew how long, I decided to stand firm and refuse to accept their conditions for departure. (Later, I recalled how one of the Immigration officers had asked me earlier if I had any Syrian money, which I realized was requesting a “bribe”, although in a subtle way) Finally, as the time approached for the departure of the flight, I demanded to speak to the Chief Immigration Officer, and fortunately, he took pity on me and authorized my departure. (Earlier, I had been “escorted” to the Austrian Airlines office with the intent that I was to be “returned to my point of origin”, Vienna, which I had been trying to do all along!!) My passport was examined by at least 5 people, but eventually, I was successfully processed through Immigration. Meanwhile, I noticed two young Austrian guys boarding the plane after they had been refused entry into Syria and were being returned to Vienna. Then I boarded the flight, and as I found my seat, I happened to see Mr. Sag Hewa from the FAO office in Rome. When the plane lifted off the runway, I was immensely relieved, to put it mildly! The flight to Vienna was very nice, with delicious food and great service, as I had always experienced on Austrian Airlines.



Farewell to President Assad!



Sunset over Damascus

Upon arriving in Vienna, I checked into the Sofitel Airport Hotel for the night, before continuing on to Paris the following day for a briefing with the UNESCO staff who had requested the GIS training class in Damascus. As I sat in my hotel room at the Vienna airport, I took some time to reflect upon and remember many of the incredible experiences I had in Damascus, none of which I could have imagined when I began the trip almost three weeks before! While I had to admit that it wasn't always pleasant or without what seemed to be almost “insurmountable” problems, I found the Syrian people very hospitable and “resilient”, despite the challenges they faced under a dictatorial regime. The Syrian people I met and worked with were always very friendly, curious about America, and very proud of their long history and culture. (I never encountered any hostility or anger toward me as an American, despite the fact their government expressed animosity toward America.)

As a follow-up to this story, I still maintain contact with Dr. Anwar Baydoun every Christmas as we exchange cards, now by email since the US Postal Service doesn't deliver mail to Syria. I have no idea what will happen to resolve the Syrian civil war, but I pray for my Syrian friends and their families, especially Dr Baydoun!