

FROM CAIRO TO DAMASCUS

An American Teacher's Impressions of the Indirect Route

by Alan W. Horton

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It is now difficult to fly directly between Cairo and Damascus. Since the separation of September 1961 neither of the UAR's former regions offers air service to the other's capital. Before separation it was possible to buy an abnormally cheap round-trip ticket on United Arab Airlines, but now the only opportunity available is a twice-weekly Iraqi Airways service originating in Baghdad.

The two Lebanese airlines, Air Liban and Middle East Airlines, are happy to make indirect arrangements for the trip. They will fly anybody to Beirut by Caravelle or Comet and provide facilities for the next leg of the journey—often after a suitably expensive stopover in the Lebanese capital. United Arab Airlines also offers frequent services to Beirut, but it will not, of course, provide help for the short mountainous hop to Damascus. This does not matter greatly because, once in Beirut, the transit passenger does not ordinarily need the help of any airline. He need only go to a certain area of the city center and negotiate for a taxi or for a seat in a serfis.<sup>1</sup> The former will cost in the neighborhood of L£30<sup>2</sup>; the latter, which is simply a taxi one shares with others so that the cost is divided among its five to seven passengers, L£5 or L£6 a seat. A good Chevrolet with efficient driver can manage the two mountain ranges and the two customs and immigration posts in a little over two hours.

These are some impressions of a particular trip from Cairo to Damascus by the indirect route . . . .

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<sup>1</sup> From the French service.

<sup>2</sup> One American dollar equals approximately three Lebanese pounds.

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The American teacher put his light canvas bag and briefcase into the taxi. Without turning in his seat, the driver asked a short question in English. The teacher grunted an affirmative and the car moved off. It was midafternoon and the dry heat of Cairo discouraged conversation. Though the big boulevards leading to the airport were by no means deserted, the traffic was not heavy. The taxi sounded its horn only occasionally at pedestrians and cyclists. After a time the teacher removed his coat. The driver tried his English once again: "Where you go?"

"I'm going to Beirut, maybe to Syria, for a few days," said the teacher in Arabic. He stared at the tall modern apartment buildings of Heliopolis and reflected that the driver would never be living in one of them. He probably lived in one of those recently built, dirty apartment houses in the wrong part of Sayyida Zeinab, a room and a hall for living, the other room for occasional show of wedding furniture and large ugly cupboards . . . .

The driver was delighted with the foreigner's Arabic. "Ah, you speak Arabic. That's very good. Have you lived in Egypt a long time?" The American sighed and knew that natural curiosity would have to be satisfied before the long drive to the airport was completed. He launched immediately into his usual explanation. Yes, he'd lived for quite a few years in Cairo. He was a teacher at the American University and had a wife and three children. No, regretfully his children didn't speak Arabic very well. Did the driver have children?

"Yes, three boys, two girls—too many but what can one do." The answer came in a tone that indicated more to come. "Poor people like me, we all have too many—and the clothes and the school and everything else cost too much. In a good month I might make E £30,<sup>3</sup> but with E £6—yes, E £6—rent every month and . . . ."

The description of his deplorable economic condition went on. The teacher made appropriate noises from time to time but did not listen with complete attention. This fellow, he thought, is not really doing too badly—the possibility of E £30 is something that most don't have. What of all the petty bureaucrats that make do on less? And, by heaven, what about the peasants—a woman working the fields receives five piastres a day. These reflections soothed him; his multiple standard was firmly under control. Carefully comparing the man with his own poor

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<sup>3</sup> The Egyptian pound is worth about US\$2.40.

kind, he came only to the edge of a subconscious wondering that used to plague him in the past. Could he himself have brought up a family on E£30 or less? Could he have survived such poverty and lack of hope?

He jerked to attention because the driver had just asked a question. "Would siyattak object if I asked a very small favor?" The polite phraseology drew an automatically friendly response. The driver turned, smiled gratefully, and went back to his driving. The teacher was a bit more interested now—the driver's eyes were intelligent, clearly aware of the reality of things, somehow direct.

"Perhaps siyattak don't know what liver troubles are like. Egyptians always suffer from liver. I and my wife used to take Andrew's Salts—Ever heard of them? They're from England—and we always felt fine. But now of course we can't get them any more. There's an Egyptian product that's supposed to be the same but it doesn't suit at all. Is it possible that you might get me one large bottle from Beirut? Or two small bottles? It doesn't matter, and I'd be prepared to pay of course."

The teacher was relieved. It was a small request and easy to fill. And somehow he was very glad to say he'd be pleased to help. Why? Was this the guilt of wealth that reconciles its conscience by shared pittance? With relief came amiability—he asked for further details about the driver's sons. What schools did they attend?

The man was clearly proud of his boys. They were doing well at school and the oldest was to take his secondary certificate examinations in a year's time. "If he does well enough," he said, "he can go on to the university and then take a government position." The teacher thought of others whose university education had secured them government positions: countless youths in countless offices struggling along on status, E£15 a month for the first year, and the promise of a pension.

"A university degree is certainly a good thing," he ventured politely, "but why shouldn't he be like you and go into the taxi business? He might end up owning a fleet of cabs."

The taxi slowed slightly. They were now leaving the well-to-do suburb and entering an area of flat desert and scattered new apartment buildings situated on roads that were marked but not yet paved. The driver turned to take a careful look at the American. The polite smile did not disguise the awareness of the eyes. "Well," he said, "you've lived in Egypt a long time, you know how it is. Without an education the poor stay poor and the rich get richer. If I had the money to buy two

taxi, I'd . . . but I don't and never will. That's the way things are. There's only that one door and my boys will go to the university."

"But things are changing fast," said the teacher, unwilling to share the driver's acceptance of things and unwilling to abandon him forever to poverty.

"Yes, they are—some," said the driver. He paused for a moment and then went on in a different tone. It was as if he were changing the subject. "Do you know about the new Charter?"

"Yes, this is something new and important," said the other. He had indeed been impressed with the new document. Despite its verbiage it was clearly serious and sincere in its intent; it stated positions and made promises that no insincere yet stable government would bother with. He said as much to the driver.

"Do you truly think so?" asked the driver. He had obviously had many doubts but was pleased that the foreigner approved what was purely a local product. "You are educated and I am happy to hear your opinion. But the Charter has, after all, lots of words and we have heard lots of words before this. We have had different kinds of governments but the differences between the classes remain the same. The Egyptian people are still slaves to inefficient bureaucracy . . . ."

The teacher was suddenly aware that the driver had switched to a kind of literary Arabic and that some of his phrases had been borrowed directly from the Charter. He was aware also that the driver was watching him intently in the mirror. Did the man supplement his income by reporting to the government in some way? Did he want reassurance? The teacher spoke firmly and said that things change slowly but there was now hope where there had been no hope. The President, he said, was a man clearly dedicated to a better future for Egypt and—he searched for a nonpolitical phrase but found none—for the Egyptian people.

"Ah, President Gamal." The driver's voice abruptly recovered its personal tone. "He's very good, a very good man. I thank him for many things. He's the best one of them . . . ."

The teacher interrupted. They were approaching the airport and had to make an arrangement about the Andrew's Salts. Would it be convenient if he left the package with the doorman of the American University in about 10 days' time? The driver became respectfully and appreciatively formal.

"It is extremely kind on the part of siyattak," he said. "I will be extremely grateful. Nothing is more important than health . . . . "

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Less than an hour out of Cairo, the Comet began its descent toward Beirut. The air hostess began her trilingual readings on the microphone: "Ladies and gentlemen, in a few minutes . . . . "

The immigration and customs formalities were perfunctory. As usual, the Lebanese passengers finished first—not by reason of favoritism, he reflected, but because of a magnificent inventiveness in getting official attention. Eluding the outstretched hand of a porter, he carried bag and briefcase out of the customs shed and turned them over to a waiting taxi driver. He suddenly became aware of the moist heat, took off his coat, and climbed gratefully into the spacious shade of a new red Chevrolet. The driver started both engine and radio.

"I'd like to go to the Hotel Commodore in Ras Beirut," he said in Egyptian Arabic. He knew that it would be several days before he felt like trying the lyric Lebanese dialect.

"Aha," said the driver in a managerial tone. "Do you have a reservation?" He was heavy-set, blue-eyed, and clean-shaven; he had about him the air of a man of decision and speed—and these, thought the teacher, are qualities that every Lebanese driver seems to possess. The car was indeed moving very certainly and very fast.

"No," said the teacher and firmly changed the subject from hotels to heat. "Has it been this hot for a long time?"

"This is the best weather of all the Arab countries, a sea breeze blowing, the mountains—in ten minutes I can take you up to a place where you have to sleep under blankets." He paused for a reaction but there was none. "Will you be here long?"

"Just a few days." The teacher stealthily braced his body. They were coming into heavy city traffic now and the driver had not yet slowed down.

"One evening you'll be going up the mountain to a night club in 'Aley. It's really not expensive if you know where to go. I have a relative who manages a place where you can have the very best food and see the floor show for only L£10. Here's my card, I can take you up

any night, just phone this number and ask for Michel . . . . "

The tires squeaked as they rounded a turn. A red Falcon driven by a young man in expensive sport shirt and dark glasses cut by on the right.

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He left his air-conditioned room, took the elevator, and paid his bill. Beyond the desk he could see American mothers at the edge of the swimming pool and American children in the water. He did not wonder who they were. He had already, after three days in Beirut, accepted the presence of his own countrymen as a commonplace.

A taxi outside the hotel took him down to the Bourj to find a serfis for Damascus. From the window he stared at the people, the cars, the unkemptness and the disarray, the litter, the constant movement—people of every conceivable condition squeezing in and out of solid lines of parked cars, old buildings falling into disuse and new ones everywhere under construction, heavy equipment causing momentary traffic jams in every block, supermarkets vying with street vendors, chrome and coarse color vying with good taste, crass materialism mixed with chaotic freedom of ideas . . . . The taxi came to a halt in front of a tiny street-level dispatcher's office. He was in luck. The last seat in a serfis was available; the car would leave immediately.

It was again a Chevrolet. He took a corner seat in the back next to two passengers; the driver and two other passengers were in front. They started out for Damascus. At the foot of the mountain a police check was struggling to keep up with the heavy traffic. A sergeant said hurriedly: "Identification. Men only." The teacher produced his American passport, the youth beside him brought out a worn-looking Syrian identification card, and the slim young man beside the driver showed a Kuwaiti passport. The driver was asked to produce nothing. The sergeant waved them on.

Though the morning traffic was heavy, the driver was skillful. The car sped up the mountain with a minimum of horn and a modicum of tire noises at the turns. There had been no conversation except for occasional whispered comments passed between the youth in back and his matronly traveling companion. On either side of the road were fruit stands, factories, houses, service stations, billboards, occasionally a plot of unused land—and, later on, the trappings of summer resorts. Beyond the immediate scenery was the devastating beauty of deep terraced valleys, blue sea, and distant peaks.

The first audible words were spoken at 10 a.m., Lebanese time, but not by an occupant of the car. After glancing at his watch the driver turned on the radio; the dial was already set to the station he wanted. In a moment the Voice of the Arabs began its daily broadcast from Cairo with a news summary, consisting largely of a report on a recent Egyptian political speech. The occupants of the car sat without reaction, staring stolidly at the road ahead as the castigation of imperialism, communism, and the forces of reaction proceeded. The news was followed by Egyptian music and song.

The car reached the pass and started down the eastern slope of the Lebanon into the Beqaa Valley. About halfway down another check post had been set up. This time the police had more time to look at identification papers and examined those of the two matronly women as well. Again the driver was asked to produce nothing.

When they reached the town of Chtaura on the valley floor, the driver pulled in beside a cafe and said: "Ten minutes." The passengers ordered coffee or tea. The young Kuwaiti ordered a breakfast of white cheese and thin pancakes. The Syrian youth and his Lebanese aunt (for this is what she was) bought a bag of watermelon seeds and offered them around. The teacher let it be known that he spoke Arabic. Suddenly conversation broke out on all sides.

As the others waited in the car for the Kuwaiti to finish his breakfast, the Syrian youth commented with impatience and slight sarcasm that the Kuwaiti Emir (Prince) did not apparently understand the relation between time and money. This amused all, but his Lebanese aunt mentioned that some Syrian youths of her acquaintance had difficulty with this relationship also. The heavy-set woman in front turned at this and asked the aunt if by chance she was from Tripoli. There ensued a careful dialogue that established the family origins of both women as being the Mina area of Tripoli; the woman in front won the encounter — she was able to create an atmosphere of greater affluence and to imply conclusively that her antecedents had left the Mina at an earlier date. Though she herself retained a Lebanese passport, her husband, she said, was the owner of a Baghdad hotel; property had been left her in the United States by emigrant relatives. She demonstrated her knowledge of foreign languages by the use of French and English phrases.

After a stop at a service station, at which the high price of gasoline was generally noted, the woman in front continued to dominate the conversation. Prices were terribly high in the Lebanon now, she said, including the prices of various kinds of bribery. She embarked on a

series of stories that told of the regrettable venality of Lebanese officials.

"There is of course some bribery, but you exaggerate considerably," said the driver firmly. "What does exist exists because the government is not truly representative of the people. If the people were in control—persons like yourself who despise dishonesty—there would automatically be an end to these things. The present government is, after all, controlled by imperialism."

There was an element of satisfaction in the pause that followed. All were now able, thought the teacher, to place the driver in his Lebanese pigeonhole—an Arab nationalist, probably a Muslim, certainly a man who listened to the Voice of the Arabs. Was there also an element of caution? The Syrian youth was looking sardonically but very quietly at the driver; the young Kuwaiti looked fixedly ahead. Must every Arab come to terms with Nasser? the teacher asked himself. Does every young Arab subconsciously hope or fear that Nasser represents the direction of Arab history?

The woman in front, having established a conversational hegemony, was not disposed to yield to such theorizing. "We are both Lebanese," she said to the driver, "and we know very well who the people are. The government is as representative as it will ever be. As always the big personalities are in control—and many of them come from our villages in our own mountains. They are not all from big families. And the Lebanese people have lots of advantages—no one can tell them what to do or what to say." Before the driver could respond to her last barbed comment she turned to the aunt in the back seat and effected a diversion. "You and I are of different religions but we are all of the Lebanese people and love our green land, do we not?"

The Syrian youth was now grinning broadly. The teacher was not sure whether the amusement sprang from the inconsistencies of the woman's speech, the invocation of the Lebanese myths of greenery and religious compatibility, or the obvious discomfiture of the youth's Lebanese aunt.

"Indeed, indeed," said the aunt, glancing at the back of the driver's head. The young Kuwaiti hastily inquired of the driver whether or not he preferred the Chevrolet to other makes of car. The driver grunted indeterminately but not impolitely and concentrated on his driving. The woman in front began a discourse on the advantages and disadvantages of the Fiat 1100, the Mercedes 220S, and the Ford Fairlane, the last two of which she now owned.



At the Lebanese frontier the driver asked for passports and identification papers and disappeared into the immigration office. The Kuwaiti got out as well and soon could be seen talking familiarly with a Lebanese officer with whom there was clearly a previous connection of some kind. As the driver came back with passports and papers in order, the officer strolled to the car window and asked the driver to take good care of his old friend. The driver responded with courteous formality. There was no baggage inspection.

At the Syrian frontier customs inspection came first. All baggage was taken out of the car, placed on a counter, and searched thoroughly—except for the American teacher's belongings, which were not searched at all. An official found four cartons of American cigarettes in the luggage of the young Kuwaiti and led him into an office to discuss the matter. When he returned with the cigarettes, the Kuwaiti explained to the other passengers that, although he was sorry to keep them waiting he had had to take time to explain his diplomatic position to the official; as the son of a diplomat, he said, he did not really have to pay any customs duties.

His Kuwaiti diplomatic status impressed or otherwise interested the woman in front. Perhaps, thought the teacher unkindly, she feels she has found a financial equal at last. As they waited at the Syrian immigration post she started a low-voiced conversation with the young man beside her. After the car had started the teacher could overhear little—but later on it was clear that the two were in solid agreement concerning the parlous and unpleasant state of Iraqi politics.

The Barada River came in sight, flowing down toward Damascus near the road. The Syrian youth turned to the teacher and said quietly, "I'm glad you speak some Arabic because I want to know why the Americans favor the return of Syria to the United Arab Republic." The American said that, though he knew little of politics, he did not think that the United States was taking any position on the matter at all. "We must be ourselves," continued the youth almost fiercely. "We cannot be always flirting about with other Arab countries. We have our own destiny, and our people are strong and better educated than the Egyptians. The Egyptians have no proper concept of the Arab nation. Syria is the heart of the Arab world and Syrians feel themselves to be its future nucleus."

Before the teacher could ask if having one's own destiny meant determining the destiny of others, the Lebanese aunt leaned forward and murmured fondly—"My nephew is very loyal to Syria." The boy sank back in embarrassment. The teacher tried to pretend he had not heard

the aunt and asked the first question that came to mind. "Do you think," he asked the youth, "that Syria will now remain unlinked to any other Arab state?" For restoration of youthful pride it was the wrong question because, of course, there was no clear answer. Syria, he reflected, again waits hopefully and fearfully—wondering what it ought to do now.

The youth brought forth a kind of assenting noise, looked vacant for an instant, and then made an indecisive, perhaps dispirited gesture. He had clearly shot his conversational bolt. His aunt leaned forward to speak again, but the teacher turned away and looked carefully out the window. They were now entering the wide uncluttered boulevards of Damascus.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Frank Horton". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned in the lower right quadrant of the page.