

Photo Essay: Faces of Damascus

By Douglas



A woman enjoys a stroll on the hillside at the edge of Damascus 13 March 2023

Positioned on a major Silk Road trade route and watered by the Barada River, the Old City of Damascus has been settled since the 3rd millennium BC. Now cited as one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world, Damascus' modern history has been impacted by Syria's civil war that began in 2011. Yet within the ancient city walls, a vibrant and diverse community of people live their lives. Shopkeepers, craftsmen, families, and passersby make their way through narrow alleys, souqs, and market streets.



A family walk the Old City of Damascus (Dimashq al-Qadima), a walled part of the city that is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site 13 March 2023



A man and woman walk past a silk brocade shop. While silk production has declined, some traditional workshops still exist in the Old City, whose name has been given to a woven pattern of damask silk 13 March 2023



A man sells fruit from a cart at the streetside 13 March 2023

On February 2, 2023, a magnitude 7.8 earthquake struck Syria and Turkey, killing over 50000 people across the region. While Damascus wasn't the hardest hit area, the quake intensified an already severe humanitarian crisis. By March 2023, inflation had hit 80% annually, public sector salaries were not enough to cover the cost of living, and people were heavily dependent on imports so they were at the mercy of globally-set prices.



A woman carries Middle Eastern Flatbread (khubz arabi), a daily staple in Damascus 13 March 2023

By March 2023, the civil conflict in Syria that had begun in 2011 was in its twelfth year. Described as a 'frozen conflict', the frontlines had hardly changed since 2020. The government controlled about 70% of Syria, including the city of Damascus, although there were still sporadic clashes in the north and ISIS cells were operating in the country.



An old lady inspects bread in the window of one of Damascus' many bakeries 13 March 2023

In 2023, daily life in Damascus was relatively stable and secure. However, people were used to sudden changes and disruptions. Electricity could be cut at any time, sometimes for a whole day, and most people used old, petrol-powered generators as back up, so the chug of motors and smell of fuel was a feature of everyday life. Most households faced rapidly rising food costs and increasingly relied on informal work like street selling. More and more women, elderly, and children participated in the labour market to help ease economic hardship.



A young woman walks past a handwritten sign advertising a place called Bayt Othman, a restaurant or café in Damascus' Old City 13 March 2023



Three generations of Damascans in a shisha café 13 March 2023



Two women walk the side streets of the Old City of Damascus 13 March 2023