



From Mölndal to Damascus, a story of Syro-Nordic integration

The National Agencies of Denmark, Estonia, Finland and Sweden co-organised a study visit to Syria. Sara Lesch and Delaram Hajipour, two youth workers from different youth centres in Mölndal, South Western Sweden, spent a week in Damascus. The objective was to give youth workers from participating countries and Syria an opportunity to make contacts, learn about each other's daily lives and plan future co-operation within the area of youth work. Here is the story of their study visit.

Damascus, September 2005

Sara and Delaram went to Syria to find partners and to plan for future youth exchanges. The programme during the week is very busy and during the first few days Sara and Delaram hardly get a chance to see Damascus at all. The group consists of about 40 visitors; Swedes, Finns, Estonians, Danes and Syrians, all getting to learn more about EU's co-operation programme with the Mediterranean region, and what kind of projects are given priority. Syrian television is here, filming an exercise where all the Europeans and Syrians are trying to organise themselves in alphabetically, standing without shoes on chairs placed in a circle. The noise level is escalating. "You have to move forward!" shouts Antti, one of the Finnish delegates who thinks everyone is moving too slowly.

"Rinkeby Swedish"

Finally all the participants manage to find their right place. Everybody then presents their own countries. Sara and Delaram talk about Sweden together with the other Swedes-Harri, Liz and Jonathan. "This is what we look like nowadays. We come from South Africa, Chile, Iran and Finland. Only Liz was actually born in Sweden", says Delaram.

Sara talks about "Rinkeby Swedish", a dialect which has developed in a suburb of Stockholm. Arabic words, such as 'Shoo', 'Yalla Yalla' and 'Len' (hello, hurry up, boy) have come to stay in Swedish. The Syrians giggle.

One day the group visits the Red Crescent – the Muslim counterpart of the Red Cross – in

Damascus. Sara and Delaram talk about young people in Sweden and about their work in front of about fifty Syrian teenagers. During these study visits the participants' roles change from one context to another; suddenly Sara and Delaram represent Sweden as a whole. After the visit it is time for lunch and a sharing of the water pipe – shisha – with the Red Crescent representatives at a restaurant.

Optimistic change

Syria is a country with many political problems and is in a constant state of emergency because of a conflict with Israel which has persisted for many years, amongst other things. Neither freedom of opinion nor free elections exist here. However, some changes have taken place during the last few years, and the Syrians have a positive attitude towards President Bashar Al-Assad, who rules the country since a few years back. "Syria has changed a lot the last five years: people are more open and happier", says Wael Dasouk, who recently returned to Syria after many years in Sweden and who now works for the Red Crescent.

This new optimism is obvious among those we meet. Everybody seems eager to participate and to express their opinion. "It would really be good for the teenagers I work with to meet some of these young people. They need to broaden their views", Sara says.

There are more than 400,000 registered Palestinian refugees living in camps in Syria. One day the group visits a Palestinian school financed by the UN in the Khan-el-Shih refugee camp. We are taken into a classroom full of young girls.



Delaram is given a rose by a girl who is about 12-years-old, and the pupils start asking the Europeans questions in English:

"What will you do when you grow up?" a girl asks. "I'll move to Syria", Delaram answers. "What does your Daddy do for a living?" another girl asks. "He works at a factory", Delaram answers. "How old are you?" And Delaram, who so far has managed to keep her age a secret, has to reveal it.

On the last day in Damascus, Sara and Delaram have met the President's wife; they have been at a mass wedding, attended concerts and eaten at restaurants. They have been interviewed by Syrian television, visited Mosques and made many new friends, both from Syria and the other European countries. But they have also worked hard. They spent a whole day in groups brainstorming project ideas. The room was buzzing with discussions and creative energy. Delaram initiated a seminar on honour-related violence together with Ula and Basel from the recently founded organisation Nesa Syria.

Sara and Delaram will also start cooperating with the town of Mikkeli in Finland and UNRWA (United Relief Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees) in Syria with the aim of organising youth exchanges. They feel really pleased with their week. "Well, we have actually managed to combine two things: integration in Mölndal and integration between Europe and the Middle East", says Sara.

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