Exploratory Archival Research in Syria: Practicalities, Affordability, and Advantages

By Beverly Levine

This report is an evaluation of the use of funds, progress to dissertation, and application for future funding made possible through support from a pre-dissertation grant I received from my home university in the summer of 2008.

I was awarded a Pre-Dissertation Research Grant in the amount of $1,500 from my university’s International and Area Studies Department for the summer of 2008. I combined this award with summer funding from the Graduate School through the History Department to pay for a roundtrip flight to Damascus, traveler’s insurance, room and board in Damascus and Aleppo, and direct research expenses such as book-buying, photocopying, and application for library privileges at the Assad National Library.

The funding helped me live in Syria for a total of six weeks. While in Syria, I managed to conduct research trips and build professional contacts with staff and scholars at a number of research institutions, including the Institut Français du Proche-Orient (IFPO) in Damascus and the IFPO in Aleppo, the Center for Historical Documents (Dar al-Watha’iq al-Tarikhyya, or DWT) and the Asad National Library in Damascus, and a number of churches and hospitals in or near Aleppo and Damascus, including the Avicenne Hospital and the Saydnayya convent.

Beverly Levine visited the Miriamiya Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Bab Touma during her exploratory research trip to Syria last summer. Photo courtesy of the author.
I believe that this exploratory trip truly advanced my dissertation proposal progress by allowing me to become familiar with the professional and cultural landscape in Damascus and Aleppo. I developed academic relationships with a number of Syrian and European scholars in Syria, and I expect my return to Syria next year to be a smoother transition into the local research climate. My visits to a number of Syrian government ministries, hospitals, libraries, research centers, archives, and universities during the summer trip have given me the confidence to believe that my research timeline for next year, and my topic on health in interwar Syria, is feasible.

I applied to Fulbright-IIE, the Fulbright-Hays Fellowship for Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad and the Social Science Research Council International Dissertation Research Fellowship for a return to Syria with a nine-month research schedule from September 2009 to May 2010. While I was recently notified that I did not receive the SSRC funding, I believe my exploratory trip did make me a much more competitive applicant for external funding to return to Syria.

**Note on Apartments and Residency Permits**

It is safest to avoid renting from landlords whose apartments are unregistered with the Syrian government. When a Syrian landlord registers their apartment(s) with the government, they must give a sizable portion of the rent to the state. If the apartment is unregistered, landlords may keep the rent for themselves. This situation may be economically beneficial to landlords, but the unregistered status of the apartment will present problems for you in any government-requested situation in which you need to provide proof of housing.

Check the SSA website [www.ou.edu/ssa/general_info.htm#Apartments](http://www.ou.edu/ssa/general_info.htm#Apartments) and call or email ahead about staying at the IFPO or the Danish institute ([http://www.damaskus.dk/index.php?id=2](http://www.damaskus.dk/index.php?id=2)) for a week or so, just long enough to check bulletin boards at the research centers for foreign flatmates or home-stay options in Bab Touma. For scholars interested in living in areas less frequented by foreigners, try Mouhajireen or Affif. These two neighborhoods are also closer to IFPO than Bab Touma. See [http://www.ifporient.org/IMG/pdf/Plan-Damas-1.pdf](http://www.ifporient.org/IMG/pdf/Plan-Damas-1.pdf) for a map IFPO provides of Damascus neighborhoods and research centers. A warning to foreign travelers in Syria: do as much research as possible on apartments by speaking to friends in Syria.

I ended up paying a lot by Syrian rent standards (1000 SP a night (22 USD) – which is how much IFPO charges in Damascus and Aleppo) for staying at what turned out to be (unbeknownst to me at the time) an unregistered apartment. The apartment had A/C in the bedroom along with a twin-size bed, a desk, lamp, and chair; a small TV and pirated cable that had BBC Arabic, CNN World, VH1 and a handful of other channels with varying levels of reception quality; a modest closet; a very small bathroom with a Western style toilet and a 3’x3’ shower space using water from a tank above the building rather than plumbing; a very sparse kitchen with a large fridge, sink, and small stove-top burner lit by holding matches to a large gas tank sitting below the table (this was very difficult for me to do without burning myself, as the matches routinely broke, but perhaps you’ll have better luck); and a dial-up
modem line in a common area far from the A/C and shared with neighboring unregistered apartments rented to foreigners. I was lucky to live near plenty of internet cafes when I was in Damascus, but Aleppo's internet cafes are fewer and further between, and frequented by Syrian men more than by foreigners of either gender.

There is a single computer (with high-speed internet access) off the kitchen of the IFPO-Aleppo location which is open to researchers staying in one of the five or so rooms at IFPO in Aleppo. The Aleppo IFPO does have a very spacious common kitchen area and a laundry equipped with a washing machine, and is in an old-style Arab house, so there is a beautiful courtyard as well. While staying at IFPO is relatively expensive, affiliating with IFPO is highly encouraged. IFPO has a very good relationship with the Syrian Ministry of Culture, and a letter of affiliation from IFPO will help you easily obtain an extended residency permit at the Ministry of Immigration and Visas two weeks after arriving in the country.

Note on Visas and Passports

All travelers to Syria should obtain visas in their home countries prior to travel by contacting the local Syrian embassy. Passport holders showing prior travel to Israel will be denied entry to Syria (and Lebanon.) It is recommended that you contact your respective ministries of travel for information on how to request new passports or second passports so as to avoid this problem.

Beverly Levine is the Syrian Studies Association Graduate Student Member and a 4th-year PhD student in History at Washington University in St. Louis. Just as this issue of this newsletter went to press, Ms. Levine learned that she had been awarded a Fulbright Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad for 2009-2010 in Syria.