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### **The Making of a Cosmopolitan Quarter: Sha'laan in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**<sup>1</sup>

*Dawn Chatty*

*I was born in Bab Tuma. At the time my father was a teacher at Maktab Anbar. My father wanted to live in a modern – less conservative quarter. He moved us to Sha'laan in the 1930s ... There were many French, Italian, and Greek families in the Sha'laan Quarter ... Everything was available in Sha'laan. There were grocers and butchers. All the buildings you see here are new. Most of the houses were of traditional Arabic style except for the French styled ones such as this building on the corner and the houses on the right side of the lane you see on your way to Arnous ... Present Sibki Park was not there. There was a farm where cows were raised and where we used to go with our grandmother to buy milk. (Abu Wadi', interview September 2008).*

The rapid development of an area of orchards and farms on the outskirts of Damascus at the end of WWI and during the French mandatory period is a perfect reflection of the dynamic transformation of contemporary Damascus in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In recent decades, this area, once officially known as Shouhada, has come to be known as the Sha'laan quarter because of its close

attachment with the Aneza Bedouin leader, Nuri Sha'laan of the Ruwalla tribe. This quarter is approximately equidistant between the old city of Damascus and the important centuries-old village, - now urban quarter - of Salhiyya along the foothills of Mount Kassoun. Sha'laan today retains certain unique features prominent in its early development: it is both a residential as well as commercial district; it is home to a wide range of nationalities including French, Italian, Greek, Russian and Armenian; it is religiously mixed with Muslim and Christian believers. It has maintained its cosmopolitan residential and commercial dominance in the modern city of Damascus even though the city has spread far west with new, more modern residential quarters attracting many of the city's rich. How has this come about and how has the quarter managed to maintain a vibrancy and international flavour into the 21<sup>st</sup> century? This paper will attempt to explore the special circumstances which contributed to the development of Sha'laan into what it is today. Focussing on a series of interviews with present and former residents of the quarter as well as merchants and shop keepers, I set out to elucidate the features which its residents found so attractive in the past and still do today. The interviews reflect on life in the quarter from as early as the 1930s up to the present time.

This is an interpretive essay based on these interviews. Some historic details may be partially or incorrectly remembered by the interviewees. I do, when I am aware of any inaccuracies in recall, make alternative comment in the footnotes. The quarter certainly had a special appeal and coherent atmosphere. As one interviewee said "when we moved from the area, we still returned to it all the time" (Usama, September 2008). Others who were interviewed included settlers to the

quarter in the 1930s, mainly exiled Palestinian leaders and their supporters as well as Armenians and Circassians who were looking for cheaper accommodation than what was possible closer to the old city or in the such suburbs as Halbouni, Afiif or Arnous. Merchants and traders who came to the quarter in the 1940s and 1950s were also interviewed including Armenians, who moved out of the largely Christian quarter of Bab Tuma and Bab Sharqiy to develop their businesses in food vending, shoe production and novelty shops.

### **Background**

The emergence of Sha'laan as a distinct district came on the heels of a major period of urban development initiated by the Ottoman state at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; this included the establishment of a tram line between 1907 and 1913 linking the modern Ottoman government offices in Merj with the centuries-old settlement of Salhiyya up along Mount Kassoun. Prior to the establishment of this tram line there was only a horse and donkey track connecting the city of Damascus with the important outlying village of Salhiyya. Over the next few years a number of important Ottoman residences, government buildings and schools were constructed alongside the tram line. There followed a 'strip development' parallel to the tram line of several districts – Arnous, Shuhada, Afiif and Jisr. Then in 1919/ 1920 as King Faysal of the short-lived Kingdom of Syria and his supporters withdrew from Damascus and moved to Baghdad to create the Kingdom of Iraq, one of the few large residences recently built in the gardens and orchards west of the tram line was bought by the ruler of the Ruwalla tribe, Emir Nuri Sha'laan. The Emir Nuri had fought with King Faysal

to see the creation of the Kingdom of Syria. But his allegiance was with Syria and he was uninterested in moving to Baghdad. Instead he purchased this villa and some adjoining farm land from Yassin Al Hashemi who was to accompany King Faysal to the British Mandate of Mesopotamia (Iraq) and become that state's prime minister twice, once in the 1920s and again in the 1930s. This purchase, in some ways, marked the foundation and emergence of the quarter as a modern, ethnically-mixed, cosmopolitan centre. The Emir extended his residence by building three more villas, a mosque and gardens into which he moved his family. The Subki family, which owned large tracts of apricot orchard, and farmed wheat in the area, began to construct a number of hybridized two-story houses blending traditional Arab with 'modern' European styles. The Shouhada Arch (or Subki Arch) next to the tramline was the gateway to these gardens and farms watered by the Yazid tributary of the Barada River. The Subki's constructed a block of four such houses close to the Sha'laan buildings. These buildings were later rented to a number of important Syrian intellectuals, activists, and nationalists.

The French authorities, having built the new Parliament building in 1932 adjacent to the Salhiyya tramline and established their army barracks and military hospital just behind, followed by purchasing or commissioning residences for its army officers and administrative staff. They also built a large modern, French school for girls at the end of southern end of the quarter. These two near-simultaneous events, as well as an 'urban planning' map which set out to subdivide the quarter into sections and streets, seem to have initiated a major building programme which saw much of the adjacent farmland and fruit orchards turned over and converted

into 'modern' residential buildings during the 1930s and 1940s.

With the withdrawal of the French from Syria in the 1940s, the residential blocks in and surrounding the quarter were increasingly inhabited by returnees (Syrians returning from periods of study abroad often with foreign spouses), foreign nationals [many French businessmen], as well as successful middle and upper-class professionals leaving the old city and seeking modern housing. Among the major players in the development of this quarter were members of the extended family of the Subkis and the Shanawanis. Both of these families made significant contributions to the development of Sha'laan and helped turn it into an important political and economic centre of Damascus. The Emir Nuri, meanwhile, gave his name to the district quite by chance. In purchasing the late Ottoman residence, he established his compound as Beit Sha'laan, a centre of Bedouin hospitality with its open reception area [*madafa*] for visiting tribal members as well as the merchants and male residents of the quarter. He spent the last decades of his life at Beit Sha'laan leaving an impression on the quarter, not easily forgotten. One informant recalled as a girl of 10:

*One of the most fascinating scenes that magnetized me was the sight of loaded camels as they approached, with their ringing bells, the large oval shape of the entrance of the Sha'laan House where some people were busy unloading the camels while others rushed to pay respect to and take care of an elderly man [Emir Nuri] who seems to enjoy a certain status ... There was always a group of ten to twelve people at the door which used to be kept open. And there was always some hay outside the house where*

*the camels used to wait while being unloaded.*  
(Watfa, interview September 2008).

Both the Emir Nuri Sha'laan and the Shanawani families built mosques in the quarter in the 1920s which are still important religious shrines today. The Sha'laan family, moreover, kept its guest room (*madafa*) open to the local traders and merchants. In the past, the family would invite all residents in the quarter to a meal in the *madafa* during important Muslim religious holidays. Although the latter practice is no longer maintained, the *madafa* remains open on most evenings and the grandson of the Emir Nuri continues to hold regularly evening hospitality in the courtyard of this traditional house. The Shanawani family, on the other hand, a wealthy land-owning family, was among the first to take advantage of the French Mandate land rezoning to convert some of its agricultural land and orchards into apartment blocks. They left, as a legacy to this quarter, only a mosque which was built, some say, with stones salvaged from an old quarter just outside the walls of the old city which the French had bombed and burned in their effort to put down the Arab Revolt of the 1920s<sup>2</sup>. The Subki family, which also constructed a number of apartment blocks and single dwelling buildings, did not build a mosque in the quarter. But the sheer number of its buildings resulted in the district just to the north of Sha'laan becoming known locally as the Subki quarter.

By the 1960s it was clear that a distinct district of the city locally recognized as Sha'laan was emerging with an established residential quarter just beyond a number of government ministries and the Parliament building, with its own places of worship - two mosques within the quarter and two churches at each end of the district. Government maps up to the 1960s, however, indicate

that the quarter had no official name other than as a continuation of an adjacent quarter known as *Shuhada*. Similarly the adjacent Subki quarter, was officially recognized as Zenobia Park. Thus neither the locally recognized Sha'laan contribution nor the Subki influence on the quarter was acknowledged on government maps. Only in the 1970s and later was the quarter widely known as Sha'laan and its northern flank as Subki Park.

What emerges from the oral histories and recollections of the long-time residents of this quarter is a picture of an unusually vibrant residential and commercial centre constantly reinventing itself as waves of new settlers, exiles, refugees and 'returnees' settle in the quarter maintaining the cosmopolitan hue of its origins. In recent years the Sha'laan quarter has undergone significant transformation and is rapidly becoming one of the major shopping and entertainment centres for the city's youth as well as the young elite. In the 1970s the integrity of the quarter was damaged when a major thoroughfare – Hamra Street – was cut through its eastern sector. The quarter, recovered its primacy by reinventing itself and at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it gathered a new clientele, the modern youth of the city, attracted to its many new European franchised shops, cafes, fast food eateries and restaurants.

### **Sha'laan in the 1920s**

Between 1918 and 1920, Damascus was the headquarters of the British General Allenby who entered the city with King Faysal and the troops of the Arab revolt against the Ottomans. For the next two years King Faysal attempted to negotiate recognition of the Syrian Arab Kingdom by the west. The French, however, had landed in Beirut in 1919 and were determined to im-

plement the Sykes–Picot Accords which gave them a large sphere of influence over Greater Syria France. In July 1920 French troops were able to move through the Maysaloun Pass and enter Damascus. In the same year King Faysal and his supporters were moved to Mesopotamia by the British to set up and administer a British sphere of influence. The French required three more years to take complete control of Syria and in 1923 were formally granted the ‘mandate’ over Syria by the League of Nations. This political decision was largely rejected by Syrians and several uprisings and revolts followed with the Syrian Revolt [Druze Revolt] of 1925-1927 as the largest and longest anti-colonial insurgency of the Mandate Era. With so much of its attention focussed on consolidating its military hold over the country, French efforts to develop the city of Damascus did not begin in earnest until the late 1920s / early 1930s.

However everyday life continued and as the grandson of the Emir Nuri recalled:

*The Beit Sha'laan was the only house in the area. Earlier we had another house in the Midaan Quarter. At that time the Midaan was the gathering point for Bedouin. It was not really considered part of Damascus, because it was outside the city Walls. It was closely connected to the Hauran and the Bedouin grazing areas. The Bedouin used to come and sell their camels in the 'Sha'laan Market' in the Midaan, and buy whatever they needed from the Midan. When King Faysal came to Damascus, my grandfather bought the Beit Sha'laan. Bedouin love to be on their own. He [Emir Nuri] bought the house because it was isolated and located in the middle of gardens and fields. He could have bought*



*the whole area if he had wanted to. It was very cheap then.* (Emir Nawwaf, interview January 2009).

Emir Nuri was never resident in the house for long. He would come for official meetings or to manage negotiations and drawing up of documents. Most of the time he moved between the Sha'laan house, his residence in 'Adra and his tribe's grazing areas in the southern *bardia* [semi-arid steppe land of Syria]. His immediate family, however, was moved into the Sha'laan house in 1920. The small expansion programme which the Emir undertook – two further houses and also a mosque – was not the only activity in these gardens and orchards. Others were also establishing their presence nearby.

The Shanawani family also began to build in the gardens at about this same time. The eastern sector of the quarter was largely owned by them and had been divided into building plots, most probably under the King Faysal administration. Sometime between 1922-24, the Shanawani family sold off a few of the building plots in order to pay for the construction of a second mosque – the Shanawani mosque. A few narrow passageways connecting the Salhiyya tramline with this developing quarter around the Shanawani mosque. The simple Arab mud and wattle single story houses on these passageways were largely inhabited by Armenian refugees who had arrived in the city several years earlier. This alleyway came to be known as 'Armenian Lane'.

The quarter clearly had, at its birth, a mixed ethnic and sectarian flavour. Yet it was under-populated, so much so that one member of the Shanawani family recalls that the family patriarch is said to have gone to the old food market and given each porter one Syrian pound to

wash and then go to pray in his mosque. At that time, no Friday prayers could be conducted unless there were at least 20 people attending (Mansour, interview 2006).

By the close of the 1920s, there were several rows of housing running from Salhiyya to the west. The 'major' street where the most housing construction took place was along the pathway of the Yazid tributary which was open in places and sometimes ran through the gardens of the homes built along its banks. This was to be known in later eras as the Hafez Ibrahim Street. Two mills were operating along this flowing water, one owned by and adjacent to the Beit Sha'laan and the other further to the east adjacent to a house owned by the Bitar family. With these flour mills, came ovens selling bread as well as baking dough brought in by local customers, small shops selling chick pea paste. As the resident population grew, the local farmers began to sell their produce on donkey and horse-drawn carts along these narrow streets as well as milk.

### **Sha'laan in the 1930s**

With the country largely pacified, the French Mandatory Authorities turned their attention to city planning and the construction of a modern quarter. The French Military headquarters, the Military Hospital, and the Parliament building were all completed by the early 1930s just south and east of the Sha'laan Quarter<sup>3</sup>. Along the southern rim of the quarter, they constructed the Ministry of Health building and supervised the construction of a Franciscan Church and girls' school on land owned by the Shanawani family. In return, the family was permitted to put up a number of tall apartment blocks along the side of the Franciscan school. One informant suggested that the Shanawani were only able to put up

the first of the tall apartment blocks after the French had requisitioned what land they wanted for official buildings. Once these apartment blocks had been completed, the families rented them out to foreigners. “Before we lived in those houses, they were let out to French officers. Our house, for example, was occupied by a French officer called Abel. Another tenant was a journalist from the Press Section of the French embassy. He stayed for years, until the early 1950s”. (Mansour, interview 2006).

By the early 1930s the quarter had two mosques, the Sha’laan and the Shanawani. It also had three churches: “The Franciscan, the Latin Church on the other side of the road. A little further up in the direction of Abu Roumaneh, there was a Russian Orthodox Church for white Russians (Bedros interview January 2009). These places of worship were the significant indicators of the complexity of the identity of the local residents in Sha’laan.

Other informants commented on how the character of the quarter was coloured by its cosmopolitan residents.

*I remember there were a lot of foreigners. The house next to us was taken by a Greek family. Um Elaine and her daughter, Despina, who was a student with us at the Franciscan. I also remember an Armenian family living in the house just before ours. There were many Armenians in the lane. There was an Italian family, the Montovanis. On the first turning on the way to the Franciscan Church, lived a French friend of mine and a school mate called Arlette Payees. In fact I did not have Arabic friends in the quarter. In the house across from ours lived a French Commandant who was the Director of*

*the French Hospital (Umaymah interview January 2009).*

*Sha'laan was self-sufficient. It had two butchers... There were two greengrocers.... It was a quarter in which many French and Armenians lived ... One of the original grocers started as a street vendor. He used to pull a horse-drawn cart down the street loaded with vegetables and call out in French 'Legume, Legume'. (Afaf, March 2009).*

It was not only foreigners who were drawn to the rapidly developing quarter. University students seeking lodging commonly found rooms in Sha'laan. So too did the Arab nationalists and exiles from the British Mandate of Palestine.

*Some of the families who chose to live in Sha'laan were those who fled British oppression in Jordan or Palestine, such as the Abu-Labans, the Nabulsis, and the Kamal. Those families were forced to flee for political reasons. The narrow lanes of Sha'laan were occupied by such families or French families. The houses were small with little front gardens and rivulet /stream running through it... All the houses had rivulets. The water flew with such strength that they had to be covered lest a child should fall in and be carried away beneath the next house. (Watfa, interview September 2008).*

Some local families were building or renting houses which combined both Arabic and 'modern' styles in keeping with the changing social networks and patterns

of community living. One informant described his home in Sha'laan in the 1930s as:

*a mixture of Arabic and modern style. You got into the house through a small corridor. The kitchen was on the left and the bedrooms were upstairs. Downstairs there was a spacious reception room. In the courtyard there were kab-badeh and lemon trees. The river passed through the courtyard, but it was covered with iron bars. There were two flour mills nearby. One was just next to our house. The other was down by the Bitar house. The river continued its way to the parliament building. (Abu Wadi' interview September 2008).*

These small houses did not provide enough room for some new residents who chose instead to live in the modern apartment blocks being constructed by the Shanawani family.

*We were 14 people. We live in a small house for a couple of months only. A new building was recently built across the road from the Franciscan school. The famous political figure, Abdurrhman al Shah Bandar lived there. On the first floor there were two apartments. We pulled down the dividing wall to have one large apartment with 10 bedrooms, two bathrooms and two kitchens. In those days we often had to accommodate revolutionary men coming from Palestine to give or receive arms. (Watfa, interview September 2008).*

To the north of the quarter another residential building project was rapidly taking shape. This was largely constructed by the Sibki family which had built a spacious 16 room multiple story residence at around 1900 for itself on the street which followed the Salhiyya tram-line. This building was later taken by the French Mandate Ministry of Education<sup>4</sup>. Another large family house nearby was rented by the French Military 'Adjunct'. The new constructions in this area were all owned by the Sibki and rented largely to the French. The Sibkis systematically "opened a road, put up a building, and then rented it out. That is how Sibki 1, 2, 3... to 10 came into existence." (Suheil January 2009)

By the end of the 1930s Sha'laan and the Subki houses and orchards all came to be regarded as part of a single emerging cosmopolitan quarter self-sufficient in the provisions needed for daily life and within easy access of the important official agencies as well as leisure industry. With the city under control and the west politically distracted by the looming World War II, Damascus stopped expanding and instead consolidated its quarters and finished off its building projects by establishing parks for family outings and regularizing access to such activities as cinema, theatre and dance.

### **Sha'laan in the 1940s and 50s.**

The early 1940s were a period of great upheaval in Syria and consequently little urban development. The French Mandate Authority was taken over by Vichy France in 1940 but within a year had been defeated by the Allied and Free French Forces. Syrian nationalists elected a new Parliament in 1943 and demanded recognition as an independent state (which the US and the USSR did in 1944). The following year Syria became a

charter member of the United Nations and pressed for French troops to leave the country. Following two years of deep unrest in all the major cities of Syria, all French troops were pulled by April 15, 1946. The Sha'laan Quarter was home to many of the elite of the city as well as nationalists who fought for Syrian independence. The Ba'th party, which at that time was only just gathering a following, opened an office in a three-story building in the quarter (actually in one of the Sibki side streets) and people such as Badi' al Kasim, Jawdat Al-Rikabi, Jalal Farouq al Sharif were often seen there ( Afaf, interview March 2009).

The Beit Sha'laan had become the centre of life in the quarter by the time. It sat directly on what became the main street of the quarter – Hafez Ibrahim Street. As one informant recounted reeling off the names of notables in the quarter:

*Towards the west of the Sha'laan House was the Zahra's house. Abdul Qader al-Zahra was a doctor ....as well as president of the Freemason Society in Damascus. Next to him was Dr Abdul Qader Radi ... his grandchildren worked at the TV station and the surname 'Radi' often appears on the small screen. Following the Zahras was Samim Al Sharif's house ... across from Samim's was the house of Abdullah Atef, the first Defense Minister after the French left Syria... Saki Al Arsouzik ... Wahib Al Ghanem ... Munzir al Midani<sup>5</sup> ... Temmirs ... Nasib al Bakri... Subhi and Badi' Sibki. (Afaf, interview March 2009).*

By the mid-1940s Sha'laan had settled into a comfortable 'suburban' community. Fatima, a young girl of 7

when her family moved into the street registered as Hububi 3 in Sha'laan, recounted how with the French bombardment of the Syrian Radio Station (1945) she recalled seeing French soldiers and sand bags on the rooftop of a nearby building. Also living in her building was the Bekdash family, - the same Bekdash who today have the ice cream shop in Hamadiyyeh Souq. Worried for the family at the time of the French bombardments her mother sent her out looking for her father. She remembered dashing out onto Abu Roumanneh which was empty at that time with no buildings except that of her aunt which was still under construction. Fatima recounted:

*We were friendly with the daughters of the Sheikh of al-Haddadiyin (elite Bedouin family) and we used to chat with them from across our balconies. It wasn't common for children to play in the street. At that time there was in the quarter, Abu Sa'id, the grocer, Al-Tahawi, the butcher, Halfoun, whose children cooked sweetened cereal at the shop across from the public fountain, and later Kanfash, the coffee store... There was also an Armenian dressmaker. And a fabric shop run by a Syrian Jew. All the residents of Sha'laan shopped in his store on credit. He was a kind man and the prices at the shop were very reasonable ... The grocer's, the butcher's the bakery, and the fabric shop was all nearby. (Fatima interview September, 2008).*

By the end of the 1940s /early 1950s, the main Sibki Farm – once a dairy farm – and adjoining lands had a compulsory purchase order placed do on to them. No one knows how much or even if the Sibki family were



compensated. A public park officially named Zenoubia Park was created sometime around 1947 and the track which ran along the northern edge of the Park from the Arnous Arch westwards towards Rabweh was named Mahdi Bin Barake Street. The name Zenoubi never stuck and the park today is known locally as Sibki Park. One informant recalled how he would walk along the park's northern edge when it was first opened "cross Rawda to Rabweh through uninterrupted green fields under shady trees. The old road to Lebanon ran through the fields with signboards telling the distance in kilometres between villages on the way". (Zuheir, interview September 2008).

In the 1950s, the Sha'laan Quarter came into its own. Relatively reasonable rentals were available for the older Franco-Arab two story houses. Modern apartment flats were available to rent although some building plots on the edges of the quarter could still be purchased. As returning 'native sons' sought accommodation for their often bi-cultural families, Sha'laan was more appealing than the traditional quarters of the old city or even Souq Sarrouja. It had become a "busy and lively quarter" whereas Mazra'a, and Abu Roumanneh were "very new and dull" (Fatima interview September, 2008).

Where there were people, more shops and services opened. One of the earlier shops in the quarter was opened by Kamal Zeiton on the corner diagonally opposite from the Beit Sha'laan and called al *Zawiyya* [the Corner]. Interviewing Kamal's son, Ziyad, revealed that the shop had been opened in this location in 1943. Previously the father had worked in one of the French mandate co-operatives and learned his trade there as well as a developed sense of the kinds of foodstuff preferred by foreigners. With a sense of business potential, he came to Sha'laan and found a corner shop to

rent. “My father sold vegetables, fruits and dairy products. We made yoghurt, labneh, and milk. The shop next door made yoghurt from milk and cheese. Everything was home-made” (Ziyad, interview September 2008). With the business acumen reminiscent of the traders in the old city, the Zeitoun brothers began to procure items from the specialized markets in the old city for their customers many of whom were foreign: *basterma* from Bab Tuma, spices and nuts from Bizouriyya. They were also willing to set up ‘credit’ accounts for settlement at the end of the month. The quarter was becoming a cohesive community, one in which little effort was required to have the comforts of home.

One informant, an upholsterer, from the old quarter of Shaghour recalled how he had opened his first shop with his brother in the Armenian Lane of Sha'laan in the 1940s and then moved his shop to Sha'laan (actually it was facing Sibki Park). He recalled that at about the same time, a carpenter moved into the area, a real estate office, a shoe repair shop and an Armenian shoe maker. He recounted how his customers came from all parts of Damascus but that he knew nearly every family in the quarter including the Sheikh al-Ards, the Sadeq Malas, the Shanawanis, some Armenian families, including Albert Karavian, who was the commanding officer of the Syrian Artillery Force, Rashid B'eira, Bader Al Lahham whose family ran a dairy product shop, Jamal Atassis, Fihmi Sultans, Christian Kalash family, the Circassian Aladdin Stasis, the family of Siham Turjamn, the Attars, the Daqqers, the al-Sharifs, among others.

His recall regarding the shops along Hafez Ibrahim Street behind him was also good. There was opposite the Beit Sha'laan public water fountain a well-known

shop that sold Arabic sweets. Halfoon's<sup>6</sup>. Across from Halfoon's was a fabric shop run by a Syrian Jew. "He always used to use the phrase '*bismallah*' [in the name of God] and '*alhumasalli 'al Mohammed*' [May God pray for Mohammed] whenever he was dealing with Muslim customers" (Nazek, March 28, 2009). There was, Nazek recalled, the corner shop( Zeitoun) which specialized in dairy products, next to it a shop selling salted nuts and also a shop for Arabic sweets and cooked cereals, he recalled . Opposite the mill adjacent to the Beit Sha'laan was an oven and bakery known for its nice thin bread, there was also a pharmacy, a dried goods store, and a grocer who used the shop to cover up for his real trade in 'banned' goods. There were dress makers and men's tailors, barber shops and the long-surviving Abu Steif's shoe repair. In all, Sha'laan had developed from an isolated and quiet hamlet nestled in apricot orchards and wheat fields to a bustling cosmopolitan residential area with a thriving commercial district to accommodate the needs of its inhabitants.

### **Sha'laan in the 1960s and 1970s**

In the 1960s new modern residential areas opened up for the city's elite and wealthy foreigners. Malki and Mezze had been laid out and building construction boomed. Although some commercial establishments followed, these shops often closed as customer density could not match that of Sha'laan and business could not have been as brisk. Ziyad Zeitoun recounted how when he started to work for his father in 1967 he learned from where to get the diverse supplies. With a basket attached to his bicycle, he cycled through town to the airport, to the Bizouriyya in the old city, and collected stock. He got to know the agents for imported products

for example, Libby and Cole, where to buy and when to buy; some items could only be sold once a year at the International Trade Fair. Foreigners became important customers of the shop but they were never the exclusive customers. According to Ziyad they were able to stock a great number of different types of cheeses and meats - Roquefort, Camembert, Cheddar, Brie, Gruyere, Pas-trami, Bresaola, and Salami – but they never lost sight of their local clientele.

By the 1960s and 1970s competition among these shops was keen. Two such markets opened on Abu Roumanneh and in the residential areas of Jahez and Malki. “Abu-‘Ula – al Chatty opened a nice supermarket next to Al –Jahez Park. All his customers were Americans. He was closer to the American School. He had more foreign customers than we did” (Ziyad interview September 2008). However many of these shops either stagnated as business and economic opportunities faltered or when the customer base left the country. Some of the shops simply were unable to generate enough business in their isolated position. Sha'laan as a physically small area of tightly nestled buildings and shops with its mixed Christian and Muslim population local and foreign rode out the economic stagnation of the following decades.

One shopkeeper who opened a new sort of shop, a ‘novelty’ business, in Sha'laan was Fayeze. Born in Qanawat and apprenticed in sewing brassiers for another merchant Salhiyya, he decided to open his own business and found rents in Sha'laan reasonable. He opened on Hafez Ibrahim Street in 1970 bringing with him his customers from Salhiyya.

*Sha'laan was a mid-way between the old city.  
Salhiyya was a sophisticated area and had a lot*

*of foreigners. Souq al-Hamidiyyeh , on the other hand, attracted a lot of simple, local people. Sha'laan was a kind of extension of Salhiyya. My customers were quite sophisticated ... there were only three shops like mine. These shops sold a lot of items: clothes, underwear, and specific lines of lingerie... What you offer is determined by your customers. One has to be sensitive to customers' preferences. I started by selling locally manufactured bras and night-gowns. Then I noticed there was a demand for different brands of imported bras: Naturan, Triumph, Warner. I shifted completely to imported items. (Fayez, interview, September 2008).*

Several similar shops opened on the same street during this era, nestling in among the carpenters, metal furniture shops, the cabinet makers, the music stereo shops, the grocers, the furnace bakeries, and the roasted chicken shop and falafel makers. Over the decades in Sha'laan, Fayez has developed close relations with his clientele as have the other successful traders. He identified these relations as 'family-like', and instated that even a new customer once in the shop would soon feel at home. The quarter had character; it also had a soul. Local residents and those from further afield, felt at home in these shops where the merchants knew most customers by name and had a finely tuned sense of the clients' – both local and foreign - desires or needs. This quality which perhaps emerged from the attributes of traditional quarters was combined with a willingness to explore the foreign and the cosmopolitan. These characteristics are what made the quarter special.

Perhaps one of the most successful shops in Sha'laan has been the Zawiyya. Now in its seventh decade of trading, it embodies the character of the quarter. The son of the founding owner moved the business from a small shop with limited goods, into one which caters and supplies the major hotels in the city as well as several important clubs. The square footage of the shop has not changed, but the size of its customer base and annual turnover has grown immensely. The family has done this by intuitively understanding needs of its customers as well as its neighbouring shopkeepers. Always willing to search for produce, take telephone orders, and deliver goods to individuals and companies alike. The Zeitoun family embodied the small community ethos as well as the challenging entrepreneurial spirit which a multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan clientele demanded. As Ziad Zeitoun points out,

*There are many more new customers in addition to our old ones and their offspring. However, a lot of our old customers have moved to Mezze, Dummar, Qudsia and other suburban residential areas – Mrs Kallas, Mrs Sabbagh, and Mrs Daqqa. Some of these people still come to get items from our shop not regularly available in other shops. (2008).*

One reason for the success of this family shop has been its close eye to the requirements of its local customers. For example, Ziad's father used to send groceries on order to Mrs Jamal Atassi - with the artichokes already prepared for cooking – in a wicker basket covered with green leaves for his son to deliver to her house in the 1970s. That attention to detail led to Ziad recognizing the growing demand for pre-prepared fresh vegetables.

About 10 years ago he went into partnership with one of the producers. “We provide the space outside the shop. A lot of TV documentaries are being made about this line of business in Sha’laan – peeled and cut vegetables, zucchini prepared for stuffing and the like. Women say that pre-prepared vegetables help a lot when you have a guest or emergencies” (Ziad, interview 2008). Recognizing the changing clientele and demands on their time, The Sha’laan merchants are modernizing and adapting to the requirements of their heterogeneous constituency as did their fathers and grandfathers before them.

### **Conclusion: Sha’laan in the post Bathi Era**

Sha’laan came to life in a period of rebirth and regeneration. Its origins are closely attached to the early French Mandate period as well as to the local and regional resistance to the League of Nations notion that Syria (as well as Mesopotamia [Iraq] Transjordan, and Palestine) was not yet ready for full independence. The population of the quarter reflected these wider realities with Christian and Muslim residents living side-by-side and often joining together in political positions. Circassian, Druze, and Russians all found homes here as well as French military officers and administrators, Italians, Greeks and other Europeans. Each decade saw a greater density of residence and accompanying services and trades. In the last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the quarter has changed markedly again. It has adapted to meet the requirements of its contemporary residents. Gone are the laundry, the shoe repair, the butchers, the dressmakers, the men’s tailors, the framers, the multiple ovens with their fresh bread. All these shops catered to a different era, when clothing could not be ready

bought, when shoes could be repaired, when the comings and goings of daily life required the services of many skilled craftsmen. Gradually, and then in rapid succession, these traders and tradesmen began to disappear. In their place came the clothing and shoe boutiques, the 'French paste jewellery shops, fast food shops, the cafes and restaurants. Even the Arabic sweet shop has been replaced by a modern 'herbalist'. Sha'laan today has become the trendy centre of food, clothing and music for a younger generation. It bustles in the evening and the shops do a thriving business. Its residents sometimes complain about the noise, but few move out of the quarter. Many more are looking to move in. As one informant recalled,

*I still remember the day I went with my mother, my sister, my uncle's wife and a female cousin to a wedding in Muhajireen. The wedding was over at dawn and we simply walked back to our house in Sha'laan. We couldn't have done the same had we lived in Mazra'a; it was too cut off.* (Fatima, interview September 2008).

Sha'laan may have been born in the French Mandate period. However, it has reinvented itself several times over, always managing to maintain its multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan nature.



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<sup>1</sup> In 2001, the French Institute in Damascus (IFPO), in collaboration with the Maison de l'Orient de la Méditerranée/Université de Lyon 2 (GREMMO), and the Faculty of Architecture and Geography at the University of Damascus, began a multidisciplinary study of Damascus which undertook to examine the architecture, and the socio-economic development of Sha'laan. Dr Anne-Marie Bianquis, a geographer at GREMMO, began the scoping study of the Sha'laan quarter in that year. This included an examination of cadastral surveys, satellite photographs and detailed descriptions of the quarter by French bureaucrats, visitors' reports and private diaries. In June 2006, with the mission of Dr Françoise Metral, some of the notable families of this quarter were identified and interviewed. Dr Metral's survey highlighted the fact that the extended family of the Ruwalla Bedouin tribal leader, Emir Nuri Sha'laan, had played a significant part in establishing this once late Ottoman agricultural settlement into an important political and economic centre of Damascus. My role in the project was to contribute to the ethnographic history of the quarter through the personal testimonies of its inhabitants. With the support of a grant from the Council for British research in the Levant (CBRL), I made three research trips to Damascus between May 2008 and April 2009 seeking out a representative sample of the oldest living residents of the quarter who could contribute to an anthropology of this quarter. I engaged a research assistant, Jihad Darwaza, who ably sought out and negotiated informed consent with potential interviewees. Over three two-week periods I conducted a total of 22 interviews with a wide range of current and former residents in the quarter from the grandson of the Emir Nuri Sha'laan to a retired geography teacher turned bookseller. We interviewed shopkeepers and merchants who had maintained business in the quarter for over a half century and others who had been present in the quarter for decades but had recently sold up and moved to outlying suburbs of the city to take advantage of soaring real estate prices in Sha'laan.

<sup>2</sup> This quarter just outside the walls of the old city is today known as the *Hariqa* [fire] district.

<sup>3</sup> The French Lycée or French Laïque Mission was also built in 1930 on Baghdad Street and commenced its 'civilizing mission'.

<sup>4</sup> The Sibki family came from Egypt with the Campaign of Ibrahim Basha in the mid- 1800s. According to one Sibki informant, the grandfather had come as the Campaign supply manager and

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was probably awarded this large tract of orchards and farm land as a reward for his service to the state.

<sup>5</sup> The Midani family are generally understood to have built the two hybrids Franco/Arab two story houses in the orchards of Rawda just north of the Subki farms.

<sup>6</sup> Halfoun was a Syrian Jew who had a partner from the Sadaki family. The shop was always known as Halfoun's even when the shop changed hands and Halfoun sold up and left the country.