THE MERCHANT OF SYRIA

A HISTORY OF SURVIVAL

DIANA DARKE

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Further praise for *The Merchant of Syria*

'Admirable and empathetic. Darke's elegance of style and understanding of the broad strokes of Syria's history over the past two millennia draw the reader deeply into the life and times of the merchant, Abu Chaker.'
— Dawn Chatty, author of *Syria: The Making and Unmaking of a Refuge State*

'By stitching together the fabric of Syria's history through the life and experiences of a merchant from Homs, Diana Darke paints a textured narrative of a richly complex country, society and people. A book filled with passionate understanding.'
— Chris Doyle, Director of The Council for Arab-British Understanding

'The extraordinary story of a country summed up in the life of a man. Darke reveals the details of Syria's cultural and religious history in a style that captures the mind and the heart.'
— Shaikh Muhammad al-Yaqoubi, Syrian scholar, author of *Refuting ISIS: A Rebuttal Of Its Religious And Ideological Foundations*

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This book is dedicated to
Syrian friends who have survived
and to dear Ramzi who has not

CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

developed its own unique multicultural society, with its own language, tax system, architecture, dress style and even jewellery. *(Public domain, photo taken by Ed Brambley, 2010, reproduced under the terms of https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/legalcode. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Palmyra_Ruins_-_Flickr_-_edbrambley.jpg, last accessed 21 December 2017.)*

8. An original drawing of the castellated Homs citadel as it looked in the eighteenth century, by Louis-François Cassus, landscape painter, archaeologist and architect, who accompanied the French ambassador to the Ottoman Empire on a tour of the Middle East in 1784–87. The artist depicts himself in the foreground, sketching the citadel, surrounded by his own guards and intrigued residents of Homs. Very few structures have been found on the citadel mound today, in use by the military since the 1960s, despite joint Syrian–British excavations carried out on the site from 1995 to 2001. A chance find of an altar to the local sun god on the mound in the 1970s seemed to confirm it as the possible site of the famous sun temple. *(Public domain. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:18th_century_original_drawing_of_the_castle_of_Hims_by_Cassas.jpg, last accessed 21 December 2017.)*

9. Annual departure from Damascus of the *Hajj* pilgrims to Mecca, guarded by uniformed soldiers, while the women watch from the rooftops, c. 1900. Half the taxes collected by the Ottoman state for the treasury in Damascus were earmarked for financing the *Hajj*, itself a great river of commerce leading to and from Mecca. Pilgrims would buy gifts to take back to their relatives – gifts which frequently included the high-quality cloth made by Hield, a brand which enjoyed high recognition in the region. *(Reproduced with kind permission of Badr el-Hage.)*

10. Aerial view of the Şemsi Pasha Mosque on the Asian shore of the Bosphorus, Istanbul. The mosque, built by Sinan, was commissioned by Şemsi Ahmet Pasha (the Ottoman ancestor of Mohammad Chaker Chamsi-Pasha) in 1580, the year of his death. Şemsi served under three sultans, including as Grand Vizier to Süleyman the Magnificent. He was a poet, chief falconer, chief hunter and commander (*agha*) of the military cavalry who also served as governor of Damascus in the 1550s,

Endpapers: Map of Syria drawn by N. Partamian in 1953, showing both Banias in the southwestern Golan Heights and Antioch in the northwest within Syrian borders. Banias was occupied by Israel in the 1967 Six Day War, then unilaterally annexed to Israel in 1981,

while Antioch, modern Antakya, was given by the French Mandate authorities to Turkey in 1936. *(Noubar Partamian, 1953.)*

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PREFACE

Set against the backdrop of a socio-economic history of Syria, *The Merchant of Syria* tells the story of Abu Chaker, a Syrian textile merchant from the city of Homs who lived from 1921 to 2013. His father died young, leaving him suddenly alone to support his mother and sisters. He lost everything—twice—through political instability and war, before moving to England in the 1970s. Despite being barely literate, he succeeded in building up a vast commercial empire based ultimately on little more than trust. Deeply religious, he gave away a great deal in charity without ever flaunting his wealth. The climax of his tumultuous life was to buy and save a Yorkshire wool mill, the same mill that still serves today as the headquarters of Hield, the textile manufacturing company he and his sons turned into a global brand.

As a reflection on the vagaries and complexities of globalisation and migration, the book seeks to build a bridge between the cultures of Syria and Britain, a bridge that I hope may draw others in too. It is a plea for multiculturalism, for it is my sincere belief that we can retain the best of our own culture while still adapting to another. The textile merchant and I crossed over into each other's country and culture. He brought with him to England his business ethic, founded on faith and trust in humanity. I took with me to Syria my natural independence and freedom as a Western woman. He was not seduced by the West's materialism, and saw it as his duty to share his wealth, discreetly. I considered it the norm to challenge corruption,

and saw it as my duty to evict the war profiteers who stole my house in Damascus. When the bridge is strong, everyone benefits.

The instinctive Syrian sense of community and empathy for one another, even for those who are outside the family, is something we in the West lost a while ago, without even noticing or seeming to care. In Damascus I was welcomed, accepted and respected, even as a foreigner. The contrast between Syrian and British attitudes to outsiders is summed up in their approach to refugees. In summer 2006, I witnessed Syrian friends driving to the Lebanese border without hesitation to collect total strangers fleeing the war between Israel and Hezbollah in south Lebanon. In a spontaneous act of humanity, they brought these Lebanese refugees back to Damascus and housed them till it was safe for them to return.

The pull to return to Syria is strong for all those who have been displaced. Once the war had forced his final departure, the merchant tried his best to maintain a connection to his beloved Homs through simple, everyday acts that formed invisible links—feeding his favourite aubergine dishes to his many guests in London, watering the plants on his balcony in remembrance of his Syrian farm. It is a connection I understand and share every time I feel the touch of Syrian cloth or soap on my skin, every time I tend the vine on my London terrace in remembrance of the vine in my Damascus courtyard. "It was cut at the wrong time," said a Syrian friend, on my last visit there during the war, "and its soul went out."

But the sap rose again and the dying vine regenerated.

INTRODUCTION

In the boardroom of a mill in Bradford hangs a picture of a white-haired man with piercing blue eyes. Dressed in a suit and tie, he is clean-shaven. His expression betrays the slightest of smiles. But it is the eyes that haunt you—wherever you stand in the room, he is watching you. "He was the only man I ever knew who was fluent in five languages without ever saying a word," joked one of his oldest friends.

Bradford, boomtown of the Industrial Revolution, once boasted thirty-eight mills. Two thirds of Britain's wool production was centred here at the heart of Yorkshire's prestigious wool trade. In a city dubbed "wool capital of the world", Bradford's thundering mill machinery worked flat out to meet an apparently insatiable demand for Britain's famous top-quality worsted. Today these huge industrial powerhouses have fallen silent. Some have been converted to flats, some are art galleries, others have mysteriously burnt down—all bar one.

Briggella Mills is still alive. Standing on Little Horton Lane, halfway up the hill, it continues to function discreetly as the headquarters of Hield Brothers, manufacturers of the finest-quality English cloth. Some of its looms clatter on. When the world wool market collapsed under competition from jeans from the USA and synthetics from the Far East, how did this one brand not only survive,

but even transform itself into an international business, selling its products to luxury-end global markets, from the USA to Japan?

Hield Brothers, established in 1922 by British entrepreneurs David and Hugh Hield, had been a publicly listed company, twice awarded the prestigious Queen's Award for Export. The story of its takeover made headlines in 1981, but has long since disappeared from local memory.

The Bradford daily newspaper the *Telegraph & Argus* ran an article on 17 June 1981, which read:

> Syrian firm gets Hields
>
> The long takeover battle for control of the Hield Brothers worsted cloth concern has been won by Gamma Beta Investments, representing Hield's main customers, the Chamsi Bacha family of Syria...
>
> Company chairman George Park said today: "We are all very pleased at the outcome. It means we can now get down to our real business of making cloth and making a profit."

There were powerful drivers behind why this Syrian entrepreneur needed to secure his supply of cloth, and why he repeatedly pushed himself out of his comfort zone. He had grown up in an unstable Syria under the French Mandate, experienced personal tragedy, lived through the fragile early years of Syrian independence, the disastrous union with Egypt, the rise of the Assads' Ba'ath Party and the descent of his country into its most destructive war ever. How had such a man saved the last working mill in Bradford?

Based on scores of interviews conducted between 2013 and 2017 in Syria, Lebanon and Britain with his family, friends and colleagues, this account touches on many of today's most pressing issues—poverty, family tragedy, Islamic beliefs, religious coexistence, refugees and economic migrants, displacement, multiculturalism, political unrest and war. The merchant was eighty-four when I first met him at his home in Homs in summer 2005, and I knew him for the remaining eight years of his life.

The chapters in the book alternate between two parallel narratives. The odd-numbered chapters give the bigger picture as a

socio-economic history of Syria up to the present day, providing vital context and an illuminating backdrop to this story. The even-numbered chapters narrate the life of one man who lived through these turbulent times, the true story of Mohammad Chaker Chamsi-Pasha—the man with the striking blue eyes—and his survival against the odds. In the final chapter the parallel strands are woven together, seeking an answer to a question that is crucial to Syria's future. After seven years of war, in which over half of Syria's population has been displaced, exports and international banking transactions have been blocked by sanctions, and the currency has lost 90 per cent of its 2011 value, how can Syria survive?

1

THE MERCANTILE TRADITION

Experimentation is the greatest science.

(Arab proverb)

"Everybody feels the government is going to fall"—these were the words of a chorus of respected economists from the Institute of International Finance, a US-based global banking association with branches in Damascus. That was in 2012, when the Syrian state's foreign reserves had dwindled, according to official estimates, from $20 billion to just $2 billion. Crippled by international sanctions, starved of foreign investment, in a culture where tax evasion is endemic and where water and electricity run for just a few hours a day, Syria's economy must surely be heading for bankruptcy.

***

Syria has always been an outward-looking nation built on trade. One glance at the map is enough to see how the country's geographical location at the eastern extremity of the Mediterranean has put it at the natural junction of trade routes, running both east–west between Europe and the Orient and north–south between Anatolia and

Egypt. Its dynamic landscape of snow-covered mountains, forests, rivers and desert have shaped its inhabitants, and in the broad arc of land known as the "Fertile Crescent" that follows the curve of the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys, the world's first settled societies developed from around 8000 BC: the Babylonians, the Assyrians and the Phoenicians. A land of such abundant resources would inevitably provoke conflict, and for millennia Syrian territory has been a battlefield criss-crossed by a multicultural maelstrom of peoples—Akkadians, Egyptians, Hittites, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Frankish Crusaders, Mongols, Turks, and others. All of them have left their mark on Syrian identity, but none more so than the Semitic Arabs, who spilled out in waves at roughly one-thousand-year intervals, whenever their population reached the limits of what the Arabian Peninsula could sustain. In the final and most important of these waves they brought with them a new religion and philosophy, which went on to shape the region and which, together with the Arabic language, continues to dominate today.

Islam provided a new and unifying battle-cry, but it was economic necessity and not fanaticism that drove the Bedouin Arabs of the seventh century north from their harsh, arid environment to greener, better-watered lands. The ninth-century Syrian poet Abu Tammam, born in Dera'a, summed it up in his famous anthology, *Hamasah*:

> No, not for Paradise didst thou the nomad life forsake;
>
> Rather, I believe, it was thy yearning after bread and dates.

The Prophet Mohammad chose green—the very antithesis of the desert—for the colour of his banner, as his armies surged north. When these Muslim newcomers conquered his land, Byzantine Emperor Heraclius was recorded by Arab historian Al-Baladhuri to have cried out: "Farewell, O Syria, and what an excellent country this is for the enemy!"

The majority of the indigenous people in the conquered territories did not convert to Islam immediately. When they did, over the course of several centuries, it was generally to escape payment of taxes or to gain the benefits of identification with the

ruling class. Centuries of continuous social interaction between the various communities created a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society that was surprisingly cohesive, held together, at its very core, by the glue of commerce.

The art of the deal, in many ways, began here. The native Phoenicians, astute navigators and merchants, set sail in their celebrated cedar wood boats in search of fortune, founding new colonies like Carthage on the Mediterranean and Cadiz on the Atlantic. They invented the phonetic alphabet over 3,000 years ago to record their complex business transactions, and in Ugarit on Syria's coast, thousands of clay tablets in the palace archives provided documentary evidence of their administrative records, listing detailed cargoes of ships. Textiles like silks, wools and cottons featured prominently. Their local manufacture and trade was exceptionally important, employing more people than any other occupation. Even then, fine woollen garments made from Syrian sheep were famous—often dyed purple from Tyre's coastal murex shell. Here in the Fertile Crescent grew the wild cereals that are the predecessors of early European wheat and barley, while the sheep that roamed the steppeland from Anatolia to Iran were the forebears of domesticated European sheep.

It is no accident that so many of the world's greatest innovations originated in this melting pot of civilisations, where the blend of diverse ethnicities, cultures and religions led to a uniquely stimulating cross-fertilisation of ideas. In medieval times while Europe was in its Dark Ages, this region was experiencing a scientific and cultural renaissance. Greek, Persian and Indian philosophy, science and literature were translated into Arabic, leading to new inventions whose Arabic names are now a common part of the English language: magazine and camera; caravan and traffic; algebra, algorithm and zero; zenith and nadir; mattress, divan and sofa, to name just a few.

Creativity is built into the DNA in this part of the world, a direct result of the multicultural ambiance where three continents meet and where trade and competition drive enterprise and build

prosperity. Embedded in the regional mindset is the belief that for every problem there must be a solution, a view that has taken root not least where rulers and governments have shown themselves to be neither capable or reliable. Many innovations—like soap, carpets, quilts, the three-course meal, alcohol and coffee (from *al-kuhoul* and *qahwa,* both Arabic words)—have heavily influenced the Western lifestyle, yet our debt to these imports from Muslim culture goes largely unacknowledged.

The concept of debt itself was born here, in answer to a problem that was common in trade. A merchant had a willing buyer, but that buyer did not have the immediate means to pay. Rather than lose the sale, it was in the merchant's interest to facilitate the transaction, and so the Arabs invented "*saqq*", from which we get our word "cheque". *Saqq* was a written vow to pay for goods when they were delivered, and was developed partly to avoid cash having to be transported across dangerous terrain. As early as the ninth century, a Muslim businessman could cash a cheque in China drawn on his bank in Baghdad. This concept then evolved into bills of exchange, letters of credit and promissory notes, such as those now widely used to finance commerce and international trade.

Many more innovations originated in this part of the world, among them weights and measures, essential for fixing quantities of products to be traded; the seven-day week; the numeral system on which our numbers are based; the decimal point; and the division of time into sixty minutes and sixty seconds. The need to measure time precisely so that mosques could accurately announce the five daily calls to prayer provided the incentive to develop advanced time-keeping instruments like the astrolabe, described by an American astrophysicist as "the most important astronomical calculating device before the invention of digital computers." The tenth-century observatory at Damascus had a sextant the length of ten cars end to end. Such early measuring devices enabled Muslim societies to develop the world's most advanced maps and navigation techniques, essential for reaching new trade markets and for establishing the *qibla,* or the direction of prayer towards Mecca. The Syrian

astronomer Al-Battani (858–929), working in Damascus and Raqqa, calculated the length of the solar year to an accuracy of within two minutes and was quoted as a major source by Copernicus over 600 years later.

Syrian cities like Palmyra, built beside a huge oasis in the Syrian desert, developed a unique civilisation that blended local traditions with elements of Graeco-Roman, Aramean, Persian, Parthian, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian culture—a fusion that manifested itself not only in architecture but also in language, fashion, jewellery and even hairstyles. Priests could be identified from their tall cylindrical fez-like hats, while women toyed with their veils in a Roman symbol of modesty or raised their palms outward in the typical Semitic gesture to ward off evil spirits. Their clothing and jewellery declared their social status. The city thrived on trade, and wealthy merchants were immortalised in statues on the city's column plinths during their lifetime, and in funerary busts that graced their tombs after their death. Even the tombs themselves were commercial ventures, their Palmyrene Aramaic inscriptions detailing how the multi-storey burial spaces were to be sold on in later generations to other families, like high-rise blocks of flats. Wars between the Romans and the Parthians disrupted trade a little, but ambitious construction projects continued unabated, only coming to a standstill when trade routes changed because of altered political alliances.

The relics of many civilisations are strewn across the Syrian countryside, among them the 800 early Byzantine "Forgotten Cities" or "Dead Cities" scattered over the hillsides southwest of Aleppo. Their prosperity was built on the production and trading of wine and olive oil, ideally suited to the limestone terrain. Olives were the sole source of oil in the ancient world, used not only in cooking, cosmetics, perfumes, medicines and religious anointing, but above all in lighting. Olive oil was the equivalent of today's hydrocarbon oil, and demand was staggering across the Roman Empire. When the Romans lost their North African province in 439 AD, and with it the empire's traditional source of olive oil, these Byzantine cities of northwest Syria were the beneficiaries, and their prosperity boomed

from 450 onwards. Repeated wars with the Sassanid Persians then disrupted their trade routes, forcing these early Christians to become economic migrants and move from the mountains to the coast in search of other trading opportunities.

The arrival of the Muslim armies in the seventh century added further layers of complexity, but they rarely clashed with the indigenous Syrian Christians. In Palmyra the four churches within the Episcopal quarter continued to be used, and bishops continued to be ordained, even as a mosque was constructed in the centre of the city. The Muslim newcomers built a market of fifty shops along the Great Colonnade, bringing about a resurgence in trade. The inclusive syncretism of early Islamic civilisation accounted for the great speed and success of its spread, as it absorbed elements of Christian and Hellenistic cultures together with their architectural and artistic influences. As late as the twelfth century Palmyra had a Jewish community with three rabbis.

In Damascus the sacred space at the heart of the city—originally a pagan temple under the Arameans, Greeks and Romans—was converted into the Cathedral of John the Baptist, then shared by the Muslim conquerors for nearly a century, with both sets of worshippers entering through the same door. When the population expanded beyond the capacity of the cathedral, the Muslim rulers decided in the early eighth century to build a new central mosque on the site, and compensated the Christians with land to build four new churches in what eventually became the Christian quarter of the walled Old City.

This mosque, known as the Damascus Umayyad Mosque, incorporated echoes of church architecture in the triple window of its main facade as well as classical themes in its columns and capitals. The iconography of its extensive courtyard wall mosaics, created by Byzantine craftsmen, depicted Islamic visions of Paradise in heavenly images of buildings, bridges, trees and rivers. Its minarets evolved from the towers of the earlier Roman temple of Jupiter on the same site; the most famous of them today is the Jesus Minaret, from which local tradition holds that Christ will descend on the Day of

Judgement. Sacred to both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, it is the fourth holiest site in Islam, after the Ka'aba in Mecca, the Prophet's Mosque in Medina and Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque. In Homs and Hama there are similar buildings at the spiritual centres of their respective Old Cities, which likewise evolved over the centuries from pagan temples to cathedrals to mosques.

There was an immediate affinity between the local Syrian Christians and the Muslim newcomers. Islam recognised Jesus as a major prophet and the Prophet Mohammad had himself been a merchant. In his tribe, the Quraysh, merchants were considered the elite—well-travelled, wise and wealthy. The first verses of the Qur'an were revealed to him in Arabic via the Archangel Gabriel in a cave near Mecca, but during the twenty-year period of revelation the Prophet made many journeys out of Arabia. He had once even visited the outskirts of Damascus while accompanying a camel caravan owned by his wife Khadija, a Meccan merchant who was wealthy in her own right. As Mohammad stood on Mount Qassioun looking down over the prosperous city and its well-watered lavish gardens, legend has it, he proclaimed that since he could not enter Paradise twice, he would go no further.

The architectural layout of all Syria's major Muslim trading cities today reflects their deep mercantile tradition. First there was the mosque, always the heart of the city, and beside it the souks (markets), functioning like the city's stomach and labyrinthine intestines. Religion and commerce—the mosque and the market—were both central to Muslim urban life, offering spiritual and material sustenance side by side in a tradition that stretched right back to pagan shrines and their accompanying fairs in pre-Islamic Arabia.

Ancient Islamic cities have an overwhelmingly organic feel, as though they evolved biologically to best meet the needs of their inhabitants. The streets are the bones giving the city its structure; the water channels are the veins bringing life-blood to the public and private buildings. Every resident of such a city understands this instinctively, by virtue of having grown up in a tightly knit community where everything is interlinked and interdependent.

Aleppo's souks are the earliest, dating back to the medieval times of the Mamluks. The rest of Syria's cities, like Damascus, Homs, Hama and Deir ez-Zour, all have souks dating from the sixteenth century onwards, the four centuries of Ottoman rule that ended with World War One. In the West the Ottoman Empire in its later stages is mainly remembered as the "sick man of Europe", yet it was also one of the largest and longest-lasting empires in history and deserves credit, especially in its early centuries, for its remarkable success holding people from a variety of faiths and ethnic backgrounds together under one system of governance.

Over the last fourteen centuries since Islam became the dominant religion in the region, a handful of enlightened rulers have sought to foster an inclusive, multicultural approach, embracing minorities, while despotic rulers have sought to ostracise them, imposing restrictions and harsh laws on those they did not favour. The results have been predictable. The periods of tolerant rule led to increased trade and prosperity, while the periods marked by exclusion and discrimination resulted instead in wars, uprisings and disputes that thwarted commerce, bringing deprivation and hardship to the population. Aleppo's commercial activity soared when in the thirteenth century the Ayyubids, a Sunni dynasty founded by Saladin, encouraged coexistence among its diverse communities, through such acts as restoring Shi'a shrines and even adding inscriptions in praise of Shi'a imams.

More than three thousand archaeological sites in Syria testify to the land's cultural richness. These are only those sites that fall within the country's modern borders of today, and say nothing of the far bigger area of Ottoman Greater Syria (in Arabic: *Bilad al-Sham*) that predated the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 and encompassed what is today divided between Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon, as well as Syria itself. The absence of borders across the Ottoman Empire simplified and encouraged trade, with minimal requirements for documentation or regulation. It was a gigantic "single market". The Ottoman system of taxation was certainly convoluted, with over fifty different types of taxes and fees recorded, for example, in the

Hama court of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But once the sums were remitted to the treasury in Damascus, about half was sent to support office-holders in Istanbul while the other half was earmarked for financing the annual pilgrimage (*Hajj*), itself a great river of commerce leading to and from Mecca.

The Ottomans favoured the "Circle of Justice" system—an equitable social interdependence whose origins can be traced right back to Hammurabi's Code in ancient Mesopotamia—where the Sultan, the army and the people all relied on each other. Fairness was a guiding principle of government and there was an acknowledgement that the survival of the state depended on the prosperity of its subjects, particularly the peasantry. The Sultan, granted the divine mandate to rule, was protected by a strong army, which in turn had to protect the peasants from invasion and banditry, so that agricultural productivity could generate food and taxes. Rates of taxation therefore reflected the relative prosperity of villages, so Turkoman villages closer to steppe and desert areas, for instance, paid reduced rates to reflect the fact that their agricultural land yielded poorer returns. Richer villages situated on the fertile banks of the Orontes river around Homs and Hama could benefit from irrigation by waterwheels, so were charged a higher tax rate. 'Alawi villages in the mountains had a heavier tax burden because their dominance of the commercial tobacco trade, along with their wine production and distribution, brought in much wealth, especially at its peak in the eighteenth century.

The Ottoman authorities' consistent guiding principle was to maximise tax revenues from all subjects, but if areas were in need of economic revival, taxes were frequently forgiven, to give subjects the chance to restore their own and their government's future fortunes. Ottoman court records make it clear that 'Alawis were not, contrary to the much-repeated narrative, persecuted as an extremist brand of Shi'ism, but were simply seen as members of the Syrian variant of Iran's "Twelver" style of Shi'a Islam, which had spread into northern Syria and the coastal highlands under the patronage of the tenth-century Shi'a Hamdanid dynasty of Aleppo.

Christians and Jews, as "People of the Book", were obliged to pay the *jizya* tax stipulated in the Qur'an, because of their protected, albeit subordinate, status, but the rates were not high. Some predominantly Christian villages, for example, were obliged to pay an extra 2 per cent over and above the total tax amount due, showing they were treated with relative clemency. Tax rates on religious endowments (known in Arabic as *waqf*), vital for the upkeep of mosques and other religious and public facilities like hospitals and baths, were also often given preferential low tax rates. Only the '*askeri* class—the military—did not pay taxes.

Across the centuries this dominance of commerce also affected the mentality of local people, who learnt to welcome trade as one of life's constants in a region rife with the vagaries of political upheaval, wars, invasions, earthquakes, fires and plagues.

When the Ottomans entered Aleppo in 1516 after defeating the Mamluks at the battle of Marj Dabiq, prayers were said in the Aleppo Great Mosque recognising the Ottoman Sultan Selim the Grim as the new Sunni Muslim ruler. The people of Aleppo, weary of the 250-year Mamluk rule, had welcomed the Ottoman advance, offering no resistance. Selim referred to himself as "world conqueror" and took on the title of "Caliph", and with it the responsibility to protect the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and the pilgrims performing the annual *Hajj*. His successors demonstrated their commitment to this responsibility by building a series of caravanserais starting at Khan Tuman, 12 miles south of Aleppo, from where the route passed through Hama and Homs to Damascus and onwards into what is now Jordan and Saudi Arabia along the route to Mecca. These caravanserais imitated the style of Roman forts, built around open enclosures, offering protection, accommodation, stabling and sustenance to the pilgrim caravans, as well as to traders. They operated all year round so that Muslims performing the *'Umra*, or non-mandatory lesser pilgrimage, which could be undertaken at any time, were also able to use their services. This land route was used till the early twentieth century when rail and then bus and air travel rendered it obsolete.

Even when the Ottomans were engaged in their frequent wars against the Persian Safavids, merchants of all stripes—Sunni, Shi'a, Christian or Jewish—continued their caravan traffic in both directions unabated. Vasco da Gama's discovery of the sea route to India in 1498 caused barely a blip to the overland caravan trade. Much more significant and disruptive to the commercial flows were local factors like banditry, shipwreck or plague, which resulted in massive trade fluctuations when certain commodities simply disappeared off the market, sometimes for an entire season. Merchants learnt to be adaptive and switch commodity according to availability. The Ottoman authorities did not attempt to constrain or restrict the regulation of trade. Although their interpretation of Islamic law might have been expected to favour Sunni Muslim traders, the realities on the ground meant that Shi'a, Christian and Jewish merchants were all able to thrive under the loose Ottoman administration.

When Selim the Grim had stayed in Damascus for four months after his winter campaign of 1517–18, he had not built an imperial mosque near the centre. Instead he ordered a mosque complex to be constructed high on the slopes overlooking the city, beside the tomb of Ibn 'Arabi, a highly revered and much-loved Sufi mystic. He had found Ibn 'Arabi's tomb severely neglected by "bigoted fanatics" who had seen the mystic's open-minded and inclusive teachings as heretical. It was also a mark of thanks to the Sufi shaikh whose writings had supposedly foretold Selim's conquest of Syria. The Ottoman links with the Sufis were strong throughout the centuries of their rule, bringing them much popularity among the rural peasantry and the urban poor, and Selim's complex in honour of Ibn 'Arabi included a hospice for the needy with a kitchen, a bakery, and a pantry for the residents of the Salihiyya district. Its architectural style was non-intrusive, built by local Damascene craftsmen.

When it came to establishing Ottoman dominion symbolically over Damascus, Selim's son Süleyman the Magnificent, also known as Süleyman the Legislator, three decades later ordered the construction of the Tekiyye Süleymaniye, designed by his chief court

architect, the famous maestro Sinan. It was the stamp of an unmistakeably Ottoman presence, with its full domes and slender minarets, but it also incorporated and blended local features, like the typically Damascene *ablaq* stonework in alternating black and white stripes, and the polychrome marble panelling. Concession to local preferences was also clear in the large rectangular pool in the courtyard of the Tekkiye, which had a central fountain and water-spouts on each of the four rims. This was to comply with different ablution styles practised by the different law schools.

There are four schools of Islamic law that are recognised by mainstream Sunni Muslims; all four were developed in the eighth and ninth centuries. Most Syrians, before the arrival of the Ottomans, belonged to the Shafi'i school of Islamic law, which has a preference for performing ablutions from still water in large basins. The Ottomans however were of the more liberal Hanafi school, which prefers to perform ablutions under running water, a tradition continued by today's Muslim Turks—the modern Arabic word for "tap" is *hanafia*, and derives from the Hanafis' love of running water. The pool design of the Tekkiye catered to both schools. This was a deliberate decision, reflecting the Ottomans' inclusive approach, which allowed local traditions to continue to be practised alongside those imported from Istanbul. Likewise, while in Istanbul only Hanafis could be appointed as imams and professors, in Damascus the governor-generals permitted the appointment of either Hanafis or Shafi'is, to accommodate local preferences.

Such policies reflected an instinctive acknowledgement of the diversity of practices within Islam, without any attempt to impose a hierarchy of which type was "better" or more favoured than another. In Syria today most Sunni Muslims are of the Hanafi school, with sizeable Shafi'i and Hanbali minorities. The fourth school, the Malikis, are hardly found in Syria, but are concentrated across North Africa and were the dominant school throughout Muslim Spain and Sicily. In practice the differences between the four schools are not great, and it was even accepted practice to switch school according to whichever one a plaintiff felt would deliver the most favourable

judgement. The Hanbali school was considered by some to be the best for commercial transactions, though all the schools gave rulings on what constituted fair exchange of goods. Trade across the Islamic world was governed by a well-developed body of legislation governing contracts, exchanges, loans and market conduct in recognition of the major part that commerce played in Islamic life. The Damascus Umayyad Mosque contains four prayer niches (*mihrabs*), each representing one of the four schools, to show that all were embraced as equal. The Hanafis, predominant under the Ottomans, today have the largest worldwide following of the Islamic law schools, comprising over a third of all Sunni Muslims.

The location of Süleyman's Tekkiye complex was set apart from the Old City at a respectful distance from the Great Umayyad Mosque, on the edge of the city amid fields and gardens beside the Barada river. Sinan had himself camped in these fields when he had accompanied Selim the Grim on his Syria campaign. Their intention was to build a gathering place for pilgrims about to set off to Mecca for the annual pilgrimage, as the last safe staging post before the difficult and dangerous journey across the desert. Turkish explorer Evliya Çelebi, writing in the seventeenth century, describes the Tekkiye complex as having the atmosphere of a resort or country retreat, popular for fishing and evening strolls.

Upwards of 20,000 pilgrims would arrive from the northern parts of the Ottoman Empire and from Iran and set up camp in the fields, waiting for the official escorted caravan to Mecca. Their needs had to be served by local traders. It was in these fields where crowds of pilgrims awaited the departure of their caravan that the first ever coffee shops grew up along the banks of the river, the precursors to the coffee chains that have become ubiquitous today in cities all across the globe. An integral part of the mosque complex was the souk in front of it; shops ranged all round the courtyard of the adjoining theological college where pilgrims and students alike would stock up with goods in readiness for the *Hajj*. It was a merchant's dream.

In the imperial geography of the Ottoman Empire, Damascus held pride of place in Syria, despite Aleppo's unquestioned superiority as a commercial centre. As the former capital of Syria, and as the chosen seat first of the Umayyad caliphs and then of other subsequent Sunni dynasties, like the Ayyubids under Saladin, Damascus enjoyed a higher status under its Ottoman masters than any other Syrian city, and this was reinforced by contemporary literature that spoke of the great city's "virtues". Jerusalem was regarded as a dependency of Damascus and the Ottoman province of Damascus extended into what is today Israel, Occupied Palestine and Jordan. Süleyman and subsequent sultans were keen to boost their popularity and legitimacy as religious rulers of Sunni Islam through their religious and charitable endowments, which is why only Damascus can boast an Ottoman complex such as the Tekkiye Süleymaniye.

As with all such foundations, the upkeep of the Tekkiye complex was ensured by the extremely careful and clever integration of adjoining souks, shops and bathhouses. The income from these commercial businesses, as stipulated in the *waqfiyya*, or religious endowment deed, was used to pay the salaries of the imam and professors at the theological colleges and for the ongoing maintenance of the buildings, a set-up that bound Islam inextricably to the life of the surrounding community. Any wealthy person could set up a *waqf* (religious endowment), not just the Sultan or a government official: all they had to do was endow an amount of accumulated wealth and set out the purpose and conditions of management in a deed that was then submitted to the authorities, often the Ministry of Awqaf (plural of *waqf*). In this way the sum of money became God's property. The deed specified exactly how the annual revenue of the *waqf* should be spent—it could either be allocated to a religious purpose or to a group of beneficiaries, such as the offspring of the *waqf* founder, to give them an income stream throughout their lives. This was especially the case in lending financial support to female relatives, provision for whom was generally problematic under the terms of Islamic inheritance law.