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PRESENTING THE “TRUE FACE OF SYRIA”
TO THE WORLD: URBAN DISORDER AND
CIVILIZATIONAL ANXIETIES AT THE FIRST
DAMASCUS INTERNATIONAL EXPOSITION

The postwar period of 1945 to 1963 witnessed dramatic political and economic transformations in Syria. To date, however, the cultural manifestations of these transformations remain largely unexamined. This article seeks to begin the process of redressing that historiographic imbalance and recovering the meaning of these transformations for those who experienced them through a close reading of the discourse surrounding the first Damascus International Exposition of 1954. This event constituted the stage upon which the recently independent, and still fragile, Syrian state conducted an exercise in autoethnography, the attempt to define and represent itself to its citizenry and to the outside world, as well as the screen upon which Syrians' collective longings were focused and projected. Thus, I treat this body of discourse as a unique opportunity to apprehend an emergent elite's anxieties about foreigners' perceptions of their country, as expressed in this stratum's homiletic discourse about street begging and other forms of urban disorder that threatened to disrupt the exposition's staging.