

THE SYRIAN BRIDE

2004, 98 min

ABOUT THE MOVIE

A Druze bride is on her way to marry a Syrian man with the full knowledge that, once she crosses the border into Syria, she can never come back to Israel to visit her family again. Through this story, the movie explores the nature of borders, real and imagined, and the power they have over our lives. This movie is subtle in that it does not directly address any of the burning political questions it exposes, such as whether the Golan Heights should be under Israeli or Syrian control. Rather, it follows one family over a single day, gently exposing the complicated connections between them and the nature of the community to which they belong.

USE THIS MOVIE TO EXPLORE

CINEMA Cross-cultural collaboration in movie production

HISTORY The importance of the Golan Heights

CULTURE Druze society

BEFORE THE MOVIE

PLOT SUMMARY

It is the wedding day of Mona, a Druze woman who lives in a village on the Israeli-Syrian border. It may also be the saddest day of her life. She has agreed to marry a Syrian television star she has never met. To do so, she must cross the border into Syria, and she will never be able to return to visit her family due to the political situation between Israel and Syria.

Her entire family gathers together to say goodbye to her, including her brother Hattem, ostracized from the family due to his unacceptable decision to marry a Russian doctor; another brother Marwan, a shady womanizing merchant; her sister Amal, who is trapped in an unhappy marriage; and her staunchly pro-Syrian father Hammed, whose recent stint in Israeli prison due to his political activities does not stop him from participating in a rally on his daughter's wedding day, which could land him back in jail. At the border, the paperwork for Mona's life-changing trip to Syria becomes complicated when Syrian officials decide to take issue with an Israeli exit stamp on Mona's passport, their way of refusing to recognize the 1967 Israeli takeover of the Golan Heights. As a UN liaison officer races back and forth across the border with the offending passport, it is unclear whether the wedding will take place at all.

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DID YOU KNOW?

Makram Khoury, the actor who plays Hammed, is the real-life father of Clara Khoury, the actress who plays Mona.

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

WHAT IS THE HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE GOLAN HEIGHTS?⁷

WHO ARE THE DRUZE?

The Druze come from a religious group which split off from mainstream Islam in the 11th century. It is difficult to determine their religious beliefs or their numbers because they practice taqiyya, concealing their true convictions while outwardly accepting the beliefs of the people amongst whom they live.

Here are some general statistics:

- **Syria:** Largest population of Druze
- **Lebanon:** The Druze make up the highest percentage of the population, compared to Druze percentages of total population in other countries
- **United States:** Approximately 20,000 Druze live in the US (Institute of Druze Studies)
- **Israel:** Home to 118,000 Druze (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2007)
 - Galilee: 70% of the Israeli Druze community
 - Haifa: Another significant Druze population
 - Majdal Shams, where this movie takes place, is the largest Druze village in the Golan Heights.
- **Syria, Israel and Lebanon:** The Druze have their own religious court system and official recognition as a separate religious community.

AZZAM AZZAM, PROUD ISRAELI DRUZE

While in Egypt on a business trip, Azzam Azzam, a Druze, was arrested for industrial espionage on behalf of Israel. An additional allegation claimed he was using women's underwear soaked in invisible ink to pass information to the Mossad (Israeli intelligence unit). No credible evidence was presented at his trial, nor has any been found since. Nevertheless, he was jailed in Egypt for eight years. In Egyptian-Israeli negotiations in 2004, Egypt finally released him, in exchange for which Israel released six Egyptian students captured in Israel on suspicion of planning terrorist attacks. According to Ha'artez⁸, immediately upon returning to Israel, Azzam Azzam had an emotional telephone conversation with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

He said, "I love you very much. I told my brothers that if I don't get out when Arik Sharon is prime minister, I never will. I am lucky to have been born in Israel and I'm proud of it."

A strategic point of great military importance, the Golan Heights towers up to 1,700 feet above the bordering Huleh Valley, one of Israel's richest agricultural areas. The Golan Heights is also critical for Israel as a source for water from the Jordan River watershed and Sea of Galilee. While the Golan Heights were under Syrian control from 1948-1967, Syrian troops used the position to snipe at the Israelis below, forcing kibbutzniks to sleep in bomb shelters and requiring that northern Israeli roads be swept for mines before use.

Since Israel gained control of the Golan Heights in the 1967 Six-Day War, the UN has continued to hold by 1967 Security Council Resolution 242, which declared the Golan Heights "Israeli occupied territory." However, Israel maintains retaining the Golan Heights is justified by Resolution 242 itself, which calls for "safe and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force." Members of the UNDOF (United Nations Disengagement Observer Force) continue to maintain what is known as the "UNDOF Zone" and are usually the only individuals allowed to cross the Israeli-Syrian border.

Despite the 1981 Israeli Golan Heights Law, which extended Israeli civilian law to everyone living in the Golan Heights, most Druze in the Golan Heights have chosen to retain Syrian citizenship. Druze religion requires loyalty to one's nation of residence, but Druze fear ill-treatment by Syrian authorities should the Golan Heights ever be returned to Syria. As seen in the movie, pro-Israeli Druze are ostracized by pro-Syrian Druze. At the same time, many Druze prefer to remain in Israel due to the advantages offered by a democratic society and the superior standards of living. Most Druze in Israel outside of the Golan Heights do consider themselves Israeli, with all the same privileges and responsibilities as other Israelis. Israeli Druze served in the Israeli army voluntarily from 1948-1956, and their army service has been compulsory ever since. In the 2006 Lebanon War, the all-Druze *Herev* (Sword) Battalion fought valiantly, reportedly killing 20 Hezbollah fighters without suffering any casualties.

CINEMATOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

ARE THE ACTORS' BACKGROUNDS AND PERSONAL BELIEFS IMPORTANT TO THE MAKING OF A FILM?

The script of *The Syrian Bride* was written with collaboration between Eran Riklis, who is Israeli, and Suha Arraf, who is Palestinian. Most of the Druze characters are played by Palestinian actors.

Hiam Suha, the Palestinian actress who played Amal, said her personal background helped her to feel closer to her character. Like Amal, she came from a traditional family where the decision to pursue a career was frowned upon. “When I read the script, I really had the feeling that Amal wasn’t different from me,” she said in a “Behind the Scenes” interview.

Clara Khoury (Mona) had already acted in the role of a bride who must navigate political boundaries on an unhappy wedding day, except in the previous role her feelings as a Palestinian came more clearly into play. In the movie *Rana’s Wedding* (2002), she performed the part of Rana, a young Palestinian woman who, following an ultimatum from her father, flees from East Jerusalem to Ramallah to marry her lover. This storyline is used by Palestinian Director Hany Abu-Assad⁹ to advance an unambiguously pro-Palestinian political agenda, dramatizing roadblocks, shooting soldiers and demolitions along the bride’s trip.

Hiam maintains that, regardless of one’s personal background, the characters in *The Syrian Bride* are applicable on a universal level:

“ The film, even if it’s not the political issue of it that comes out, it’s just how do you share the suffering of a family because of the bureaucracy or because of the borders we stuck in their life physically... It’s a human portrait of all these members of this family with all the contradictions that could exist between them and all the... individualities, the social pressure and political pressure they could have... Still, an American father would see the father as a father, an American bride would see the bride as a bride... this is a universal language that gets to everybody.

Nevertheless, Clara revealed that the acting was easier due to the fact that she was playing opposite her real father. In a “Behind the Scenes” feature, she revealed:

“ In my goodbye scene with him, I thought about something very extreme. Like, something is going to happen and that’s it, I’m never going to see him again. Or touch him, or look into his eyes or hug him. I tried to bring as much as I could from myself, from my personal relationship with my real father. Every time I looked into his eyes, I started to cry, every take. I cried and cried. It was there, I didn’t have to try that hard.

AFTER THE MOVIE

ACTIVITY

Collect “evidence” as to the importance of the following factors to each main character: a) nation of residence/patriotism b) family c) religion. What is revealing about the way different characters prioritize? How do their decisions in terms of priorities affect their lives?

THINKING ABOUT THE MOVIE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

UNIT THEME: Israeli-Arab Relations

“**Hiam Abbass:** Especially when we (Israelis and Palestinians) can meet artistically around something that really we want to get from that country locally to become a very universal sharing with the entire world, it works.

Interviewer: You’ve got to get a better public relations company, because we need to hear that, and I think the rest of the [US] country needs to hear that...

Hiam: Palestinians are Israelis living in Israel, because the Palestinians in Israel are Israelis by identity, and when you live in a country you just belong to the country and you grew up in that country, you study in that country, you speak the language of that country, and I think if [we] tr[ie]d to solve [our problems] by ourselves, I think humanly we would be able to do it... We live it daily there and we know what it means and we are into...talking with each other.

– *From an American interview with Hiam Abbass (Amal).*

- How does this movie reflect or not reflect Hiam’s attitude as she expresses it here? Do you think the movie is optimistic or pessimistic? Why?
- Why is Mona called the “Syrian” bride? What is ironic in this classification, or in the fact that she is classified at all? Why do we tend to put things, including people, into categories, and in what sense is it (or isn’t it) useful?
- How would you characterize the relationships between Israelis and Druze in this movie? What factors contribute to the character of these relationships? Do you think these relationships are realistic?
- What is the importance of borders? What are their advantages and disadvantages? What borders are important in your life?
- What is the significance of using Palestinian characters to play Druze roles?
- How do you believe actress Clara Khoury (Mona) thinks about her two stints as a bride (see “Cinematographic Background”)? How do you think she compares or differentiates between the two experiences?

2 CINEMATIC THEME: Cross-Cultural Collaboration in Movie Production

“It was no problem for a Jew from Israel to get into a Druze Syrian village and make the film with Palestinian actors from Israel and Israeli actors from Israel. I was really moved and touched by how all political borders would just drop down on a cinema set, which made me feel that, at the end of the road, cinema is the tool of communication and the tool of how we can work together, create together, to be able to represent together something that is humanly defensible in front of all the world.

– *Hiam Abbass (Amal), in an interview at an American film festival.*

- Why do you think that cinema could be especially effective at erasing borders between people of different nationalities? Why would it be more effective than other kinds of collaborative projects? Or do you disagree with Hiam?

3 HISTORICAL THEME: The Importance of the Golan Heights

- What is the significance of the movie’s setting? Could the movie have taken place in a different setting?

3 CULTURAL THEME: Druze Society

- Which characters can you sympathize with the most? Which can you sympathize with the least?
- Would you have made the same decisions as Mona? As Amal? As Hattem? Why or why not?
- What do you think is motivating Mona to marry a Syrian? Is this an example of the influences of society, which convinces women they need to belong to a man in order to be a viable member of society? Or are there other factors at play? What evidence do you have?
- Is Amal's husband criticizing her due to his principles, or because he is afraid the villagers will gossip about how he is unable to control his own wife?
- What statement does the lack of information about Mona as a character make in terms of her treatment by her family and by society? What is the importance of her story in the overall story?
- To what extent do you believe the depiction of Druze in the movie is representative on a larger scale?
- The movie's closing scene shows Mona and Amal walking purposefully in opposite directions, towards their respective futures in Syria and Israel. What do you think each is setting out to do? Do you think the physical contraposition is in any way representative of other kinds of opposition? Or are they in fact "walking the same way"?

QUOTE ANALYSIS

“ **Mona:** I'll be lonely there. I'm afraid.

Amal: Don't be afraid. Tallel will love you and you will love him. It won't be like your previous marriage. It's different this time.

Mona: What makes you so sure? Life with him could turn out to be a lot worse than my life now. Perhaps I'm going from one jail to another one.

Amal: Stop it. You'll have a much better life there.

Mona: And what if we don't get along? I won't be able to come back here.

Amal: Stop being so pessimistic! Stop it!

- Imagine Mona's thought process in agreeing to marry Tallel. To what extent do you think she is conflicted about her decision? What information do we have from Mona that can be used in answering these questions? What do you think the quality and quantity of this information, especially considering that "The Syrian Bride" is the title of the movie?

“ **Hattem:** It's been 8 years, and he still won't talk to me. I thought he would soften up over time.

Evelyna: Maybe we shouldn't have come here.

Hattem: How long can one hide? Enough!

- What is revealing about Hattem's choice of the word "hide"? Why do you think Hattem left the village in the first place? Why did he come back for his sister's wedding?

“ **Israeli Photographer:** Are you worried because you don't know him? There are no rules. Marriage is like a watermelon. You can't tell what's inside till you open it up. It's a matter of fate.

- What is the role of the Israeli photographer in this movie? How does this role relate to his profession?

“ **Jeanne:** Can't you just call Damascus and check with him?

Syrian official: This thing has to go all the way up to the president himself. No one can solve it.

- To what extent are the movie's characters passive? Which characters take active roles in their own lives and to what extent? How does this relate to the previous quote about "a matter of fate"?

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE LACK OF FULL DEVELOPMENT OF MONA'S CHARACTER?

In a movie entitled “The Syrian Bride,” one would expect to learn a little more about the bride herself. Why is she getting married? What are her plans for the future? What was her life story leading up to this special day? What is her personality like? On all of these topics, the movie is virtually silent. Instead, Mona’s role as a bride seems simply to create a premise for the other family members to unite to send her off. Through the depiction of her family members, not through Mona herself, the movie directly explores the social fabric of her traditional, insular community. For instance, through the story of Hattem and his Russian wife Evelynna, we learn about the seemingly insurmountable borders between this village and other cultures. Marwan’s philandering and shady business deals are easily tolerated, but Hattem, who is happily married with a son, is ostracized simply because he married a foreigner. His wife is given no respect for her expertise as a doctor in Russia. Instead, the villagers ridicule her for not knowing how to chop tomatoes.

The audience can observe Mona’s family, but Mona’s process of interpreting her family remains impenetrable. Mona’s sister Amal, an intelligent, free-thinking woman, clashes frequently with her traditional husband, who resents her decision to wear pants and aspirations to pursue higher education. Despite observing the distress of her sister’s marriage and having an unsuccessful marriage in her own past, Mona makes the decision to give up ever seeing her family again in order to try her luck with a man she has never met in Syria.

The majority of the “evidence” we do have about Mona as a character comes from her actions, not from her words. The stark importance of the times when she does choose to act stands out even more when it is considered that the majority of her actions are passive as she docilely obeys family members, photographers and UN observers in her attempts to navigate hostile borders on her wedding day.