

2 Sharia al-Mansour, Abu Roumana  
Damascus, Syria  
July 4, 2002

Dear American Pen Pal,

“Salam alaykum”, this is Arabic for “peace be upon you”. This is what we usually say when we greet a friend. My friend who has been to your country has told me that Americans say “hi” when they see someone they know; in Arabic that would be “marHaba”. I am very excited to have a chance to tell you some things about my country and my family.

I am a twelve-year-old girl. I live with my mother, Fatima, my father, Fayez, my two brothers, Bashar who is fourteen and Riad who is three. I am the only daughter, and it is my responsibility to help my mother with the housework. In Syria, most men do not do housework; it is considered a woman’s duty to do the cleaning and cooking. My mother does not work outside the home, but even if she did, the household would be her responsibility, so I am glad she has me to help her. We laugh and talk together while we work. Before school everyday I help her prepare our breakfast. We have olives, tomatoes, cheese, bread, and chai, which is hot tea served in little glasses. It is very good with sugar.

I attend a state school and my parents do not have to pay for it. My classmates and I wear brown pants and a brown shirt. It almost looks like an army uniform, but it’s fine with us because we never have to think about what to wear in the morning. We study reading, writing, math, science, and history. We are expected to do well at school. I sometimes have problems understanding the math, so Bashar helps me. I hope to attend the university in Damascus when I am older. I would like to become a teacher.

After school I walk home with my friends and my cousins. They all live near by. When I arrive home my little brother is usually watching “Open Sesame”. I think that in your country it is called “Sesame Street”. There are only two television stations in Syria and the government operates both, but my family is lucky to have a satellite dish so we receive many stations from different parts of the world. Of course, they are translated into Arabic. In my country, Arabic is the language we speak. Many people also study French or English; most of my friends are learning English.

My family is very close. In Syria, when a woman gets married she moves into her husband’s home and lives in the same building as his parents and other family members. It is good to have my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins close by. I am never lonely. Sometimes my cousins and I will watch animated shows from Japan or game shows on television, or we listen to Lebanese music and Arabic singers. I help my mother prepare supper of baba ghanoug (mashed eggplant), a flat bread that we eat with every meal, chicken, vegetables like tomatoes and olives. My father enjoys coffee after supper. At times, he goes with his brothers to the coffeehouse to visit with other men. Women do not go there. Their place is at home caring for the children and taking care of the house. I sometimes go with my mother to visit her sisters at their houses.

My father was in the army, and my brother will probably go into the army for a few years. In Syria girls do not go into the army at all. It is a man’s job to protect. In fact, men are the protectors in the home, too. My father and brothers, or my uncles and cousins are expected to shelter the girls and women

from unwanted attention from men outside the family. Women do not receive male visitors in the home when the man is not at home.

My brother wishes to become an archaeologist and study the ancient places in Syria. Our history is thousands of years old. I would love for you to be able to visit me sometime. I will take you to see the site of Ugarit where the first alphabet was developed and to ancient Roman ruins like Apamea and Palmyra. The remains of the once thriving cities are beautiful to see at dawn and at sunset. Syria also has Crusader castles from the Middle Ages. My favorites are those of Salah ad-Din (I think in your country he is known as Saladin) and the Krak des Chevaliers. We could also visit the Umayyad Mosque here in Damascus. It is one of our most important buildings and has a history that goes back 3,000 years. I know you would have a good time. I hope you can come someday.

I sometimes go with my friends to their houses if my family allows. In my country, girls and boys do not go out alone, only in groups and only if the girl's family knows the other families. Some of my girl friends wear the hijab, a head covering to hide their hair when we go out. All the girls dress modestly so as not to bring attention to themselves. I do not wear the hijab, but I might decide to in the future. It helps boys to know that the girl does not want to be approached by them. It is important for girls and boys to behave honorably and show respect for themselves and their families.

When I get married my family will help me to choose a husband. I will probably get married because it is not acceptable for a woman to live alone without a man to provide for her. I respect my family. They will choose wisely, but they will not make me marry someone I don't like; I will have a say in the matter. The family is most important in Syria.

On Friday we visit the mosque. My father and brothers go to the men's section. My mother and I put on black floor-length coverings with hoods, and take off our shoes. We wash our face, neck, hands, and arms before we go into the women's section. It is very peaceful there. We pray and visit with other women we know. Muslims pray five times a day, but the Friday prayers at noon are special because the *imam* gives a sermon. When we pray, we face a mihrab, which is a niche in the wall indicating the direction of Mecca, our holy city.

At night I read a story to my little brother before he goes to sleep. He likes to hear about Big Bird from "Open Sesame". I do my homework and then I go to bed, too.

I hope you have enjoyed my letter. I would like to get a letter from you and learn about how it is to live in your country, and maybe we could even meet some day..."in sha'Allah", "God willing".

Your friend,

*Zayna*

## Zayna Letter Worksheet

1. List the members of Zayna's family and their ages, if mentioned.

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2. List the members of your family and their ages.

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3. Describe the chores Zayna has to do at home.

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4. Describe your chores at home.

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5. Describe the food Zayna's family eats for breakfast.

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6. Describe a breakfast your family would have.

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7. What is Zayna's religion? How does it affect her everyday life?

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8. What is your religion? How does it affect your everyday life?

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9. List Zayna's school subjects and tell how she feels about school.

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10. What do you study in school? How do you feel about school?

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11. What are Zayna's goals in life?

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12. What are your goals?

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13. Describe how Zayna's life as a girl in Damascus is different from the lives of girls that you know in the United States.

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## Writing Prompt

You are an American student writing a friendly letter in response to your Syrian pen pal's letter. In your letter describe the lifestyle of a typical American family, compare the American and Syrian lifestyle similarities and differences, and contrast the roles and expectations for girls and boys.

Friendly letter format:

Your street address  
City, State, Zip Code, USA  
Date

Dear Zayna,

*Paragraph #1* Introduce yourself by stating your name, age, grade in school, something special about yourself.

*Paragraph #2* Introduce your family. Do you live with your mother and father? Do grandparents or aunts or uncles or cousins live with you? Do other relatives live near you and do you see them often? Tell her about your brothers and sisters and what they do. Write about your chores or jobs at home. Do you help cook, clean, or baby-sit?

*Paragraph #3* Write about your school day. What subjects do you study and tell her why one of them is your favorite. What subject is the easiest for you? Tell her which subject gives you trouble and how you feel about it.

*Paragraph # 4* Describe what you do for fun. Tell her about any hobbies you have. Do you do special activities with your family? Do you have a best friend with whom you like to spend time? Do you spend more time at indoor activities or outdoor activities?

*Paragraph #5* Tell her that you enjoyed receiving her letter and what you thought was interesting about her life.

Yours truly,

Your name