

Horse Carts Return to Syria's Streets

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An old-fashioned method of transport is finding new popularity.

Horse-drawn carts are returning to the streets of Maarat al-Nu'uman, as high fuel costs take their toll on the local economy.

With fewer and fewer people able to afford the upkeep of a car or lorry, carts and barrows are being used to transport goods around the local area.

Abu Hussein, a 61 year-old from the village of Kafr Rumah, remembers the last time such vehicles were a daily sight in the area.

"Horse carts were in frequent use across Idlib 30 years ago, but they disappeared when cars became more common," he said. "Now they have returned because of war conditions which brought with them high fuel and transportation costs. Horse carts are useful for people on low incomes and villagers in rural areas starting using them when grazing herds... peasants doing agricultural work like tilling the soil and transporting crops are also using them."

For some trades made more popular by the conflict, for instance the sale of fuel spurred by power shortages, horse carts are simply more suitable.

Abu Ayman, 45, said he had bought a horse cart to help him sell fuel with his son in the street.

The fuel barrels, he explained, did not fit on his motorbike.

For Kamel al-Razzouk, a 41-year-old who owns a small restaurant in a Maarrat al-Nu'man neighbourhood of, horse-drawn transport is a way to significantly cut his overheads.

"Every night I go to the vegetable market to buy goods needed for the restaurant and I prefer to transport them by horse cart because it's cheaper. This costs 300 Syrian pounds and I would have to spend 1000 pounds to transport my shopping by taxi," he said. "That's how I save some money in light of the high cost of living and the low level of income."

Walid al-Marawi, 36, bought a horse and cart when the running costs of his own vehicle became too much to meet.

"War destroyed our dreams and imposed difficult living conditions on us," he explained. "We can no longer afford a car for work because of the high cost of the vehicle as well as the fuel. So I decided to buy a horse cart to transport vegetables and fruits from the market to homes and shops, and that's how I make a living. There is a high demand for horse carts as a form of transportation because they are cheaper than cars."

Al-Marawi said the horse could only travel so far in one day, and took a long time for each journey. Spending his days sitting on the cart, he himself suffered during the cold winter weather, although he had at least fixed up a piece of plastic to protect him from the rain.

But al-Marawi said that he was happy with his work, and even took children for trips on weekends to give them a break from the pressures of the war.

While the use of horses for transportation is increasing, horse-breeding – which used to be a valued part of Syrian heritage – is waning.

Local farmers used to pride themselves on breeding beautiful and expensive Arabian horses, which were exported worldwide. A certified purebred Arabian horse can sell for between 2,000 and 25,000 US dollars, depending on its pedigree.

"The Arabian horse is one of the oldest means of transportation and had a distinguished history during times of peace, but the fierce Syrian war has left its mark on everyone and everything," said Munib Abu Jawad, 34, a farmer in the Idlib countryside.

"Horse farmers are suffering from the scarcity of feed, the expensive prices and the lack of medicine and suitable barns for raising horses, in addition to the difficulty registering them with the World Arabian Horse Organisation (WAHO) to prove authenticity. All of this threatens the future of the purebred horses which are part of the history of the country."

Abu Jawad said he still bred Arabian horses, but only as a hobby, so as to ensure this long-standing Syrian tradition would continue.

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