

Synthesis Report 4

**RELIGIOUS, CULTURAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC
IMPORTANCE OF
MIGRATORY BIRDS HUNTING In Mediterranean Third
Countries of North Africa and the Middle East**



Synthesis Report (IV)

RELIGIOUS, CULTURAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE OF MIGRATORY BIRDS HUNTING

In Mediterranean Third Countries of North Africa and the Middle East

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Project partners



1. Religious Importance

Migratory birds and bird hunting do not appear to have major religious significance through the region, although both the Koran and the Bible contain many references to birds conservation and sustainable use nature. Examples of specific religious references can be found in Ancient Egyptian mythology, where the Gods are portrayed as birds (the most famous being Horus, the Falcon God) and there is a biblical reference to Quail hunting in Sinai, as "manna from heaven". In Tunisia, the Swallow ("Khoutifa") and the White Stork ("Haj Kacem") are considered sacred and therefore not hunted because of the popular belief that they come from Mecca .

2. Cultural Importance

Bird hunting of various kinds is a very long-standing, traditional activity of great cultural significance throughout the region. Birds have been an important source of food for thousands of years and bird hunting, especially of migrant birds, also has a long history as a popular sport or leisure activity. Today, although many hunted species will be eaten (e.g. in Lebanon, wild birds are considered a culinary delicacy), bird hunting is increasingly practiced as a hobby. In Syria, the cultural value of birds and hunting are demonstrated by the high number of national TV documentaries about them. Hunting festivals and traditional hunting events are still used for important celebrations and ceremonies, sometimes to demonstrate the status of communities or individuals. In Tunisia the Sparrowhawk Festival of El Haouaria takes place in mid-June and marks the public exhibition and release of the female Sparrowhawks that are caught and trained for falconry earlier in the same year. In Morocco there are annual festivals to celebrate the start of the hunting and falconry seasons; traditional hunting is used in ceremonies to honor the memory of ancestors and ceremonial pigeon shooting competitions are used to demonstrate family status within tribes. Use of foreign (western) guns is seen as a mark of emancipation for some tribes. The great majority of hunters are men, with no or very few women hunters. In Egypt and Lebanon, boys learn to hunt birds at a very young age, encouraged by their parents. Boys are given air rifles and often go hunting with their fathers. In Lebanon, hunters talk of hunting "being in their blood" and it is often viewed as a male bonding activity; some hunters also target "rare" species (such as Golden Oriole) to add to their collections. Young bird trappers in South Tunisian oases target species which are rarely seen or difficult to catch in order to enhance their image as a skilful bird catcher. In Morocco, hunting is a patriarchal heritage, passed down to male heirs through the generations .

Several countries feature particular bird species (including some hunted species) on their national flag and other emblems. Jordan has a falcon, probably a Peregrine, in the centre of the national flag; the Egyptian national flag has an eagle in it to symbolize power and might and the national airline uses the eye of the Falcon God Horus as its emblem. In Lebanon, the spectacle of crane migration (60,000 in one day in spring 2005) led to the adoption of the crane as the logo for the World Bird Festival organized in Ebel es-Saqi on October that year. In Tunisia, some towns have migratory birds as their emblem (White Stork for Béja and Greater Flamingo for Radés). Birds of prey, including migrants, have particular cultural significance. Falcons and omen birds are traditionally important in Arabic culture and birds of prey are popularly used in folklore to symbolize courage, pride, good eyesight, agility and strength (e.g. falcons and eagles in Bedouin poetry). Several old Arabic names which signify falcon and eagle species are given to people in Jordan, e.g. Sakir, Igab, Shaheen. In Tunisia, the Sparrowhawk and Peregrine are considered to be a key part of the cultural heritage of the area north of Cape Bon (El Haouaria and Kélibia). Other migratory species of particular cultural significance include White Stork (north-west Tunisia and Algeria); Houbara Bustard (southern Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco); Goldfinch ("Hassoun" in Jordan; "Bou Mzein" or "Moknine" in Tunisia); Thrush Nightingale ("Andaleeb" in Jordan); Swallow (in Algeria and Tunisia); and Bald Ibis (in Algeria) .

3. Socio-economic importance

a. Bird hunters

For the majority of bird hunters in the region, hunting is not carried out as a way of making money or as a necessity for survival, although low levels of subsistence hunting take place in some countries (e.g. Egypt, Syria). Most bird hunting is practiced for sport and recreation (e.g. in Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine, hunting is not considered as a source of income and is carried out by the majority of hunters only as a hobby). However, some forms of hunting can be quite lucrative and potential profits are one of the incentives for continued hunting of migrant birds in some areas. Few individuals depend on migrant bird hunting exclusively for their livelihoods but clearly for those that do it is a vital activity. Hunting and trapping is a source of employment for thousands of people in Egypt, usually as a means of earning extra income (often seasonally) on top of other livelihoods and mostly carried out by people from disadvantaged communities. In some poor communities (e.g. desert dwellers and fishermen in Egypt), hunted birds are an important source of free meat to supplement people's diets. Women in poorer areas of Lebanon also trap quails and thrushes for consumption by their families .

In Egypt it is estimated that Quail hunters earn profits which are well above the average annual income. One of the highest costs incurred by some hunters in Egypt is the cost of renting land on which to catch birds (this can be between US\$ 25 and 80 a season). In Syria, it is possible to distinguish between hobby hunters, professional (commercial) hunters who depend on hunting for their income, falcon hunters, local trap and net hunters (who may also trade their catches) and foreign hunters (from Lebanon and the Gulf States), either falconers or increasingly, hunters with guns. Commercial hunters are thought to pose the greatest threat to migrant birds through hunting but there is no information available on their incomes. Falcon trapping is very lucrative for the few hunters who are able to catch high-priced falcons (see 5b, below). In South Tunisia young bird trappers (mainly aged 8 – 14 years) illegally trap migratory birds and often sell their catch. Live birds are sold for US\$ 0.15 to 0.75 (species such as Woodchat Shrike and Golden Oriole fetch prices at the upper end of this scale). Sedentary and migratory songbirds such as finches, linnets, serins caught in Central and North Tunisia are sold either as pets (in markets in Sfax and Tunis) or to songbird breeders. This business is much more lucrative and mainly practiced by adolescent and adult bird catchers .

b. Wholesalers and retailers

The trade in hunted migratory species varies hugely across the region; much of it is illegal and unregulated and there are few accurate figures for the numbers of birds traded or the value of the markets. Migrant birds are traded alive and dead, for a variety of reasons - as pets, for re-stocking hunting grounds (game birds), as food and as decorations (birds of prey and other large species, stuffed by professional taxidermists) and live falcons are sold for use in falconry .

In Syria and Egypt, trapping and sale of falcons is an important activity, which is thought to have increased significantly in the last 20 years due to demand from the Gulf States. In Egypt, thousands of trappers are thought to be involved, especially in North Sinai but also all other desert areas; many are Bedouins but city-dwellers also take leave from their jobs to hunt falcons. The centre of the trade is in Sharqiya Governorate and most birds are sold to falconers from the Arabian Peninsula. The main target species are Peregrine and Saker Falcons and individual birds can fetch up to US\$ 5,000 to 10,000, which is a huge amount of money for most Egyptians. The total catch of these two species in Egypt is estimated to be tens or hundreds of birds annually but there is also a significant and damaging capture of other falcons and kestrels (thousands to tens of thousands) which are used as decoys to catch the more valuable species or sold for much lower sums of money .

All the species caught and sold are protected by law in Egypt. In Syria, the trade in falcons for the Gulf States is thought to be declining due to the availability of falcons from ex-Soviet Union countries (e.g. Kazakhstan) but, as in Egypt, there are damaging impacts on non-target species because falcon hunters shoot other birds of prey (eagles and buzzards) which disturb their falcon catching. Other migrant birds traded in Egypt include Greater Flamingo and various birds of prey, live as pets or stuffed as decorations and trinkets. In Syria, there are no figures for trade but it is very widespread: a variety of stuffed birds are found in markets throughout the country, especially the old, famous ones, such as Damascus, which are visited by tourists from the Gulf .

In Jordan, there are four principal taxidermists known to the wildlife enforcement authority and these four produce the majority of stuffed birds in the country. Birds, including migrant species, are brought to them by hunters who wish to display them in their personal collection; others are prepared for sale and some taxidermists also hunt birds in order to sell the prepared skins. Most of these birds are large species such as herons, storks, eagles and buzzards. Lebanon constitutes a route for illegal trade in birds between Syria, Egypt, Turkey, Malta & Cyprus. Birds are also sold widely in Lebanese restaurants and even during the ten-year countrywide hunting ban, there was no accompanying ban on sales of caught birds nor any ban on manufacture, import or sale of guns and ammunition. In Palestine, the capture and sale of migrants and summer breeding birds is considered a major problem for these species, and stealing of chicks of the same species (particularly raptors) is also a problem throughout the territories. There are no figures for the quantities of birds involved in the trade but there are public markets at which raptors can be found for sale (alive and stuffed) in all major cities. There are no official figures but prices are estimated (by the Palestine Wildlife Society) to range from US\$ 5 to 250 per bird .

In Tunisia, bird trade is illegal apart from trade in game birds bred specifically for this purpose in approved centres. There are currently three such breeding centres (two State-run and one private) which sell game birds such as Partridge (sedentary species) and Quail (the main species bred) for consumption and to a small extent for restocking hunting grounds. The major part of the production is sold to supermarkets and specialized butchers. It is estimated that 35,000 to 40,000 birds a year (the majority being Quail) are traded. A similar situation exists in Morocco, where there is one state and one private operation producing game birds for reintroduction programmes and selling surpluses to supermarkets as food. The game caught on the hunting grounds can also be sold through supermarkets in Morocco. In all other cases, trapping of wild animals is illegal in Morocco but the level of illegal trade in trapped species is unknown. In Algeria, the trade, hawking and sale of game and game products are all illegal and there are no specialized agencies selling game but illegal trade in some species appears to be increasing. There is only one official taxidermy laboratory which deals with animals found dead in the wild .

■ c. Sport Hunting

There is a general finding for the whole region that most hunting takes place for sport or recreation, rather than for subsistence or to sustain livelihoods, (except perhaps in some areas of Egypt - see 5a). However, no definition is given for "Sport Hunting" and it appears to mean slightly different things in different countries. No country has quantitative information on sport hunting and in most countries it appears often to be equated or combined with "Tourism Hunting" (presumably on the basis that tourists who travel to another country to hunt are by definition doing this for sport or recreation). In Egypt, there are no specific studies but economic benefits from sport hunting are thought to be quite limited: only small numbers of individuals can afford to participate; as a result, there are only a few sport hunting businesses (e.g. a sporting goods store which caters for hunters) .

Most shooting clubs have diverse memberships and no longer focus primarily on hunting. Most Egyptian sports hunters use hunting lakes owned privately or by the club to which they belong and hunting reserves in Egypt depend almost entirely for their income on sport hunters shooting waterbirds. There is also some sport hunting at other wetlands including ones along the Nile River. In Palestine, some illegal sport shooting is carried out by Israelis and Palestinians, mainly on Fridays and Saturdays. In Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, sport hunting is equated with tourism hunting (see 5d below). In Lebanon, almost all hunting is related to manhood, done for sport and recreation and transmitted through generations. Hunters respect local birds and concentrate more on hunting of migrant birds .

■ d. Tourism hunting

Tourism hunting is prohibited in Jordan but some "tourist hunters" (mainly from the Gulf States) are invited by Jordanian hunters on a personal basis to catch and train falcons, to hunt with falcons or to hunt cranes. The Jordanians who invite the tourists in are usually themselves licensed hunters but the hunting by tourists is illegal and often carried out in areas such as the Eastern Desert where all hunting is banned throughout the year . In Palestine, hunting is unregulated and there is no information on tourist hunters but Palestine is not likely to be a significant tourist hunting destination given the current political and security situation .

In Egypt, hunting tourism forms a very small proportion of overall tourism (around 1,000 foreign tourist hunters a year compared with 8 million tourists overall) and contributes little to the country's national economy. However, in some areas, (e.g. El Fayoum Governorate which does not receive large numbers of general tourists) the economic impact may be significant for local communities through the financial "trickle-down" from tourist hunting. Most hunting tourists visit Egypt to hunt migrants and particularly waterbirds but other migrants are also hunted. Most tourist hunters are from Europe, with smaller numbers from Lebanon and the Gulf States (e.g. Kuwait). They usually travel in small groups on trips lasting one or two weeks on a package organized by an Egyptian tour company. Only a few companies organize hunting tours (and some local hunting guides and boatmen offer hunting excursions); they earn significant revenue from this but it is not the mainstay of their business for most companies or individuals. Most foreign hunters bring their own guns and ammunition and occasionally dogs but tour operators can arrange gun hire. Local guides are employed to accompany hunters and small numbers of local people are paid to carry guns and decoys and collect shot birds .

In Tunisia, only Wild Boar, thrushes and starlings are authorized for tourist hunting (and in Algeria, only Wild Boar – which attracts tourist hunters from Europe and Canada). In Tunisia it is estimated that US\$ 884,400 is injected into the economy annually by nearly 1300 hunting tourists (mainly from Italy, France and Malta). However, official figures do not include falconers from the Gulf States who travel to Tunisia with their own falcons to hunt Houbara Bustard and Desert Gazelle. This is illegal according to national legislation but is tolerated by the authorities. It is unlikely that foreign falconers contribute much to local economies since they tend to travel with their own entourages, equipment and supplies. In Morocco, hunting tourism is regarded as an expanding economic sector, contributing to the development of national tourism and boosting development by bringing in foreign exchange to local and regional economies. There are 27 companies organizing sport hunting for a 10-year average of 5,000 hunters (including 1,051 European sport hunters in 2005). The main migratory species targeted are Quail and Turtle Dove and hunters average a stay of 4 days or longer (one week in north-west and south-west regions). In addition, falconry is practiced in the eastern plateaux and semi-arid zones of the south by wealthy hunters from the Gulf States (UAE and Qatar) .

■ e. Bird/ nature tourism

Bird watching is not a traditional or long-standing activity in the region but it is starting to gain in popularity in some countries and has real potential as an alternative to hunting for attracting nationals and foreign visitors to spend time and money in areas with interesting birds and other wildlife. In Syria, studies are being carried out on the potential for ecotourism programmes based on general bird watching in Sabkhet El-Jabboul and on Bald Ibis specifically in Palmyra and Widyan Al-Rabee. In Lebanon, the Ministry of Tourism (advocated by ecotourism operators) is investigating the possibility of including ecotourism as an official category of tourism. One operator (Lebanese Adventure) believes that nature tourism and ecotourism have good potential; the company estimates that it provides for 780 ecotourists annually as well as around 1075 students for ecological education. Foreign birdwatchers who visit Lebanon tend to do so on holiday or research trips. They organize their own activities and depend mostly on specialized conservation NGOs such as SPNL for information on good sites for bird watching tours. In Jordan, bird watching is a growing tourism attraction and national tourism agencies are becoming involved (whereas in the past all bird watching trips were arranged through British companies). It is anticipated that nationals with bird watching skills will start to act as tourism guides in this sector and an ecotourism programme in nature reserves has highlighted the very large potential for income-generation through bird watching and ecotourism. In Palestine too, ecotourism is developing fast and the Palestine Wildlife Society runs over 190 dunums (areas of land) which include bird watching centres. In Egypt, bird watching remains a very marginal activity with few people interested; far more people are active as bird keepers than bird watchers. In Tunisia, ecotourism has only developed recently and quite slowly; most international nature tourists are birdwatchers on family holidays, researchers and academics. Tunisia has great potential for nature and birding tourism due to its rich diversity of natural places and wildlife and a well-developed protected area system. However, slow progress in adapting national regulations (which are tailored to mass beach tourism) to this new form of tourism is hampering the efforts made to develop the sector .

■ f. Trade and manufacture of hunting equipment

In Syria, there is an official hunting ban and there is no official import of hunting guns. Small guns are manufactured locally but cheaper ones of Russian origin are imported from Lebanon. There is a local Ministry of Defence ammunition factory but most ammunition is imported from Lebanese manufacturers .

In Lebanon around 25 million cartridges are sold annually, mostly made with lead shot and either produced locally or imported; there is also thought to be an underground manufacture and trade in smaller cartridges which are quieter and lessen the risk of being caught for illegal hunters. Semi-automatic guns are used for hunting but local gun production is decreasing. The hunting ban since 1995 caused significant losses in the retail industry because it was renewed on continuous basis. Each time in September after the retail stores had purchased new stock in the hope the ban would be lifted. There is probably some underground manufacture and trade in mist nets, cages and lime sticks used for trapping birds as well as in calling machines and projectors used to lure birds .

In Jordan, there is a maximum allowed number of shotguns (875) which can be imported annually and licences are granted to individual traders (35 in 2003) to import these. The total value of this trade was estimated at US\$ 134,600 and other accessories (vests, cartridge belts, bags, caps etc.) at US\$ 53,000 in 2003. Most ammunition is imported from central Europe, the USA, Lebanon and Cyprus. Jordan is also a link for import and export of hunting equipment, for example a large proportion of shotguns imported to Jordan are exported to Lebanon .

Jordanian shops have to be licensed to sell hunting gear and 70 such licenses are issued annually, mostly to shops in major urban centres. Bird traps (for catching songbirds) are hand-made locally for personal use and bird cages are mainly imported .

In Palestine, some hunters have learned to produce high quality ammunition which they sell to their fellow hunters but no information is available on the quantities of ammunition or number of guns made or traded .

In Tunisia there is no manufacture of either guns or ammunition; no more than 50 guns are sold annually. Estimates regarding the number of cartridges sold in Tunisia are varying between 3 and 6 million per year .

In Egypt and Morocco, there is some manufacture of ammunition but not of guns; most guns and other sporting equipment are imported. Only a few specialist stores in Egypt (mostly in Cairo and other big cities) sell guns and rifles for sport hunting; the high costs of these and requirements for licences limit their use. Air rifles are more widely sold and used as they are cheaper and don't require a licence .

In Algeria there is one cartridge factory with an annual capacity of 20 000 cartridges per year .

In Egypt and Tunisia most trappers who hunt birds illegally make their own hunting equipment and tools though there is some local trade of such items made by craftsmen in Tunisia and sale of manufactured lime sticks along the Mediterranean coast of Egypt. Material for making trammel (mist) nets is imported and sold in hardware shops in Egypt .

In Morocco, trapping of wild animals is prohibited but traps are used for legal control of wild animals including migrant birds are sold that "became harmful and following damages duly observed by the Water and Forest Authorities" (Minister of Agriculture, Decree N° 582-62 of 3 November 1962) .

■ g. Government returns

Very little information is available on this but in general, across the region, hunting contributes very little in terms of direct financial returns to government funds. In several countries (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine) there are no returns because there is no functioning system for hunting permits due to hunting bans or lack of implementing decrees specifying the permit systems and fees and mechanisms for collecting them. Total annual returns in countries which do have figures include US\$ 170,500 in Jordan (4,000 licenses costing just over US\$ 40 each) and US\$ 772,000 in Tunisia (all kinds of hunting combined). In Palestine, there were 350 registered hunters in the 1990s but this has dropped to 150 (partly because hunters are increasingly unable to pay the fees) .

However, the actual economic benefits to countries from migratory birds hunting are likely to be far higher than these figures suggest. Governments generate other hunting-related income from taxes on imported goods, income taxes from registered businesses and tourism taxes from foreign hunters (although in practice much of the income generated probably goes untaxed). In Egypt, the government also profits from rental of land as hunting reserves. In addition to this, there are quite significant levels of employment in various hunting sectors and service providers for hunting (e.g. as tourist hunting guides, in game breeding stations in Morocco, in arms factories and depots). In Morocco 2,500 people are employed as site guards and guides for tourist hunting. Furthermore, foreign falconers from the Gulf States are investing significant money and resources on research and establishment of game breeding stations, associated habitat enhancement and wild bird release programmes, but the discussion about the motivation and the impact of these activities is controversial .

■ h. Public awareness

Levels of public awareness and interest in birds and hunting of migrants vary across the region but are generally less than needed for public understanding and appreciation of the need to sustainably practice hunting of migratory birds. Most countries have some environmental programmes aimed at children, either through the formal schools curriculum or informally through clubs (usually run by non-governmental organizations). However, the specific issues of migration and conservation of migratory hunted species are not extensively covered in most countries. General publicity and media coverage of hunting often focuses more on tradition (e.g. announcing the start of the hunting season or festivals) or serious hunting accidents, though there are exceptions – the Algerian Press makes efforts to report poaching and to raise awareness among decision-makers and public about the seriousness of this and the Lebanese Press reported on breaches of the national hunting ban while it was in force .

Syria's Ministry of Agriculture plans to raise awareness of the value of birds but there is no information about hunting in the national curriculum. A recent project on the Bald Ibis produced a special booklet on its conservation for distribution to schools in Palmyra .

In Lebanon, the national curriculum highlights the importance of birds and migration and promotes the establishment of environmental health clubs in schools. The Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL) has produced several books, CDs and posters on birds, migration and Important Bird Areas which were widely distributed to schools and the public. The Sustainable Hunting Project in Lebanon has developed an educational manual for school children aged 8-12 years with interactive presentations, games and activities. More than 130 teachers received training on the use of this manual and the programme has reached over 150 schools. These schools also participated in a rally for nature in Al-Chouf Cedar Nature Reserve. Achievements of the SHP educational programme in the school year 05-06 has been highlighted through articles on the IUCN-CEC and IUCN WESCANA newsletters .

Jordan has some of the best awareness-raising activities, carried out by the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) through schools-based Nature Clubs; these have highlighted hunting as a threat to birds and the need for conservation action. The Press has published several articles since 2003 on migrants, the value of falcons in Arabian culture etc. In Palestine there has been little effort to raise awareness of hunting issues in schools but an issue of the "Environmental Student Mail" covered the international conservation needs of Lesser Kestrel .

In Egypt, there is a growing interest in nature and conservation but it is very new and mostly confined to small numbers of wealthier and better-educated people. Hunters in Egypt are a strong and influential lobbying force nationally, who resist any restrictions on their hunting and do not tend to have a conservation ethic .

In Tunisia, birds and migration are part of the national curriculum for primary schools but the delivery is very dependent on an individual teacher's own knowledge and interest. The media cover migrant hunting issues when pressured to do so by environmental organizations but are very cooperative in covering events related to migratory birds such as the annual International Migration Camp (CIM) in El Haouaria. Several local radio stations (Radio Sfax, Radio Tataouine) have featured weekly programmes on birds and bird conservation recently .

Algeria's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development has an international project to pilot a children's education centre with specific programmes on migratory birds (LIFE/Ramsar Project) was launched in November 2002 by the Algerian government. This includes regular environment education activities in 7 pilot zones and meetings and exhibitions throughout the year .

Morocco's national school curriculum emphasizes hunting as part of family and tribal tradition and its cultural significance alongside the principle of species conservation .

The Moroccan Hunters' Federation has a programme for raising awareness of conservation and TV, radio and newspapers also address issues such as the need for conservation in order for hunting of rare species to continue and the need for guidelines to achieve sustainable game hunting .

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