

EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE  
**FIELD GUIDE**

**Syria**



# About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.

The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 is the “Culture General” section, which provides the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment with a focus on the Levant.

Part 2 is the “Culture Specific” section, which describes unique cultural features of Syrian society. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location. This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment training.



For further information, contact the AFCLC Region Team at [AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil](mailto:AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil) or visit the AFCLC website at

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# PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

## What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic because it represents the premium Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.



## Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones, where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

### **Cultural Domains**

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains” – in order to



better understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains – which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems and others (see chart on next page) – as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the way a culture defines family and kinship, a US military member operating overseas can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

### **Social Behaviors across Cultures**

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival, although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more complex market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they

represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

## Worldview

One of our most basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different based on our cultural standards. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are “people like me” or “people not like me.” Usually, we assume that those in the “like me” category share our perspectives and values.

## 12 Domains of Culture



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This collective perspective forms our worldview—how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an

accountability standard for actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A



community's belief system assigns meaning, sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the

fundamental values we hold to be true — regardless of whether there is evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central aspect of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have helped shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.



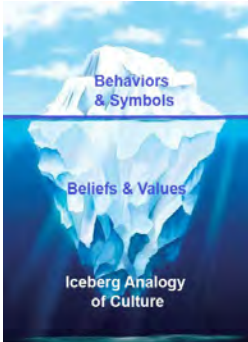
## Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is

being made visible (above the waterline).

In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.

As you travel through the Levant, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.





## CULTURAL DOMAINS

### 1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable, or which occurred prior to written language.

The Levant comprises Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian Territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.



Archaeological finds suggest humans inhabited the region as early as 194,000 years ago. Around 9000 BC, inhabitants began domesticating animals, cultivating crops, and producing pottery. The region is home to some of the world's earliest continuous settlements, notably Jericho in the present-day West Bank and Byblos (modern-day Jbeil) in present-day Lebanon. These and other early settlements played an important role in the development of regional trade and culture.

The Levant came under the influence of several powerful empires in subsequent centuries, notably the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks. Beginning in the 1st century BC, the region was incorporated into the Roman Empire, and following the split between the Western Roman and Eastern (Byzantine) Empires, was ruled by the Byzantines from their capital at Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul).

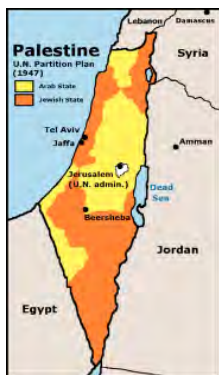
By 640, Muslim warriors from the Arabian Peninsula were expanding into the region. Islamic dynasties then controlled the Levant until the Roman Catholic Church pursued a series of religious crusades to capture territories in the region. However, the Crusaders were soon evicted, and Islamic dynasties from Egypt governed the Levant by the 13th century. In the 16th



century, the region fell to the Ottoman Empire based in present-day Turkey, which ruled the Levant, with some interruptions for the next 400 years.

Following the Ottomans' defeat in World War I, European powers took control of the former Ottoman territories in the Levant, with France occupying Syria and Lebanon and Britain occupying Jordan and Palestine. Concurrently, the British committed to establishing a "Jewish homeland" in Palestine. In the 1940s, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria gained independence (though Syria would briefly unite with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic from 1958-61). During World War II, British Palestine's Jewish population grew as many European Jews fled persecution.

In 1947, the United Nations (UN) voted to partition British Palestine into Arab and Jewish states, prompting conflict between Zionists (advocate development and protection of a Jewish nation in Palestine) and Palestinian Arabs. When Britain withdrew from the area and Israel declared independence as a Jewish state in 1948, further violence erupted with Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and Iraq declaring war against Israel. At



the conflict's end in mid-1949, Israel had gained territory beyond the 1947 UN plan, and Jordan occupied the West Bank and Egypt the Gaza Strip. Both of these territories had been allocated to the unrealized Palestinian Arab state. Further, the fighting caused some 700,000 Palestinians to flee Israel. Forbidden from returning, most settled in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Jordan.

Conflict continued through the 1970s, despite various peace talks and attempts to establish a self-governing authority for the Palestinians, who still sought their own state. In 1970, civil war erupted in Jordan between the Jordanian Army and Palestinian guerillas supported by Syria. Between 1975-90, Lebanon also endured a devastating civil war in which

Palestinian groups, Syria, and Israel played a large role. In 1988, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO – an umbrella organization of the various Palestinian activist groups) proclaimed the founding of the State of Palestine in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, though many countries refused to recognize it, and Israel continued to build settlements in territories claimed by the PLO. In the 1990s, a series of agreements transferred authority over some areas of the West Bank and Gaza Strip from Israel to the newly-created Palestinian Authority (PA), though Israel continued to promote settlement in disputed areas.

In 2006, a 34-day war erupted between the Lebanese militia Hezbollah and Israel. A year later, Hamas, a militant Islamist group, forcibly took control of the Gaza Strip, intensifying tensions between the PA and Israel. In 2011, civil war erupted in Syria, triggering violence throughout the Levant. As of mid-2024, the Levant continues to face civil war, territorial disputes, and the destabilizing activities of non-state actors.



## 2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all of the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community.

Jordan is a parliamentary constitutional monarchy with its King holding ultimate executive, judicial, and legislative powers. Lebanon is a parliamentary republic with a unique “confessional” structure which divides political power among 18 Christian and Muslim sects. A presidential republic, Syria has been ruled by the al-Assad family for over 50 years. The PA governs the Palestinian Territories through an elected President (presently,

also chairman of the PLO) and legislative council and is housed in the West Bank. While Israel lacks a formal Constitution, a set of “Basic Laws” defines it as a parliamentary democracy.

Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria are among 140 countries that now recognize the State of Palestine, though the US and Israel do not. Palestine is not a member of the UN but holds observer



status. As of mid-2024, the Gaza Strip remains contested, with the Palestinian militant group Hamas presently controlling it. Neither Lebanon nor Syria formally recognizes Israel. Instead, they consider themselves in a

state of war with Israel, which occupies parts of their territories. In mid-2020, the PA announced it would end all security, economic, and political ties with Israel.

Regional security threats and mutual distrust motivate significant military posturing in the Levant. The ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict, heightened by Hamas' occupation of the Gaza Strip, and the Syrian Civil War have also significantly increased tensions. Israel and Jordan are key US allies, but the PA has cut most diplomatic contact with the US since 2017.

While the citizens of Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian Territories are predominantly Arabs, other groups, notably Armenians and Kurds, are present. Some three-fourths of Israelis are Jews of a variety of ethnicities. The Levantine territories host large numbers of refugees and displaced persons. As of 2024, Lebanon and Jordan together host almost 2 million refugees from Syria, while as of 2023, over 6.6 million Palestinians live in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank.

### 3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also

create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society.

The Levant is the birthplace of both Judaism and Christianity. Today, Jews, Christians, and Muslims consider many Levantine sites sacred.



For example, the Temple Mount, located in Jerusalem's Old City, is Judaism's holiest and Islam's third holiest site, while also holding significance for Christians.

Since its arrival in the 7th century, Islam has been a defining factor in shaping regional cultures and societies. Today, Syrians, Jordanians, and Palestinians are predominantly Muslim, though some are Christian. While Lebanon has a majority Muslim population, some one-third are Christian. As the self-proclaimed "Nation State of the Jewish People," Israel has a predominantly Jewish population.

Religious affiliation continues to be an important marker of identity in the region. While the Levantine governments generally recognize religious freedom, discrimination and intolerance persist, especially towards converts from Islam and atheists. Across the region, religious identity and political affiliation tend to be linked, so religious discrimination often has political underpinnings.

#### 4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called "fictive kin").

Family life and relationships are fundamental elements of Levantine society. Regional inhabitants maintain strong connections with both immediate and extended family members, supporting them emotionally and financially, while providing physical care for elderly or ailing kin if needed. While residence

patterns differ somewhat across the region, multiple generations often reside together in one household or live in close proximity.

The urbanization of Levantine society has changed family life in recent years. As of 2024, over three-fourths of inhabitants of Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian Territories live in urban areas compared to around 57% in Syria. As both men and women take advantage of the enhanced educational and employment opportunities available in urban areas, family structures have become more diverse. Moreover, traditional family dynamics have been disrupted in recent years by regional conflicts, especially in Syria.

Historically, marriage was an arranged union intended to bring



both families social and economic advantages. Although arranged marriages are still common across the region, many regional residents now choose their own spouses, particularly in urban areas. None of the

Levantine governments performs civil marriages, relying instead on religious authorities to officiate ceremonies. While divorce was traditionally uncommon, rates have generally increased in recent years. Polygyny, the practice of a man having multiple wives, is legal for some Muslim inhabitants of the Levant.

## 5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

The Levant's cultures and religions traditionally privilege the male's role as leader and provider. For example, Islamic law favors men over women in inheritance and other family matters. While most of the region's inhabitants continue to adhere to traditional gender roles – men as breadwinners and guardians and women as mothers and wives – recent decades have seen

some changes. In Syria, for example, gender roles have somewhat shifted since the start of the civil war.

While literacy rates for women have increased in recent decades, female participation in education varies. In 2021, 49% of Israeli women had completed tertiary compared to 43% in the Palestinian Territories. Generally, Levantine women face challenges to attaining education and are often encouraged to pursue traditional “female” disciplines such as education and healthcare.

While women are involved in politics across the region, they are generally less likely to participate than men, and overall, the number of women serving in elected offices remains relatively low. While Israel elected Golda Meir as its first female Prime Minister in 1969, and a few women serve as ministers across the Levant’s Arab states, Hamas authorities in the Gaza Strip typically exclude women from formal leadership positions.

Historically, Levantine women rarely worked outside the home, and female workforce participation varies across the region today. While some 62% of Israeli women worked outside the home in 2024, just 13% of Syrian and 14% of Jordanian women did – some of the world’s lowest rates. Working women in the region often face a pay gap and discrimination. Some Levantine women experience other



barriers to their full participation in society. For example, Jordan’s traditional male guardianship system significantly limits women’s freedoms, and Syrian law permits certain male relatives to place travel bans on female family members.

Same-sex relations in Lebanon, Syria, and the Gaza Strip are criminalized. Discrimination against homosexual individuals is widespread throughout the region, even where same-sex activities are technically legal, namely Jordan, Israel, and the West Bank.

## 6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally.

Arabic is the official language of Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian Territories and the Levant's most widely spoken language. Most residents regularly use two Arabic varieties – Modern Standard Arabic in school, the media, and in official government proceedings and Levantine Arabic for everyday



communication. Some Levantine residents speak other languages and dialects. For example, inhabitants of northeastern Syria tend to speak Kurdish, and Syrians in other regions speak other Arabic dialects, such as

Mesopotamian, Najdi, and Bewadi Arabic. Hebrew is the predominant and official language of Israel, with Arabic holding “special” status after losing its official status in 2018. Across the region, English and French also are spoken widely.

Generally, the region's residents demonstrate respect, generosity, and candor in their communication practices. In most of the Levant, communications reflect high levels of emotion and engagement, though some residents refrain from displaying emotions around strangers or in public. Residents tend to share information about themselves and often expect foreign nationals to do the same. Gestures are common when speaking, particularly if the speaker is interested in the topic.

## 7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized



systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.

Prior to the early 20th century, religious affiliation largely dictated educational opportunities, with Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities operating their own schools during the Ottoman period. Following World War I, the British and French imposed European-style education throughout the region, emphasizing French and English language instruction but largely neglecting the development of the educational system as a whole.

After their independence, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Israel developed their own educational structures and curricula at different rates. In 1946, Lebanese reforms replaced French with Arabic as the primary language of instruction in public schools. Meanwhile, the Jewish community in British Palestine created its own Hebrew educational system, and after its 1948 independence, Israel expanded upon this framework. In 1957, Syria and Jordan replaced European curricula with their own educational programs. The Palestinian Territories relied on foreign curricula until the 1990s, when the authorities began developing their own learning materials.

While the adult literacy rate in Syria was just 86% in 2015, the rate is now over 94% in Syria and throughout the rest of the Levant. As of 2022, enrollment rates at the primary and secondary levels were nearly 96% in Israel. By contrast, just 91% and 47% of children enrolled at those levels in Jordan and Syria respectively. Public investment in education varies across the region, ranging from 7% of GDP in 2022 in Israel to 5% in the Palestinian Territories and 2% in Lebanon and Jordan. Due to years of conflict, education in Syria has been severely disrupted with some two million children out of school and one-third of schools destroyed or occupied. International organizations operate schools for displaced and refugee children across the Levant.



## 8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In most Western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management, devoting less effort to relationship-building. By contrast, in the Levant, establishing and maintaining relationships often takes precedence over meeting deadlines, punctuality, or accomplishing a task in the most efficient manner. While regional residents typically agree in advance on scheduled start times, meetings frequently begin late. An exception is Israel, where inhabitants typically prefer to work quickly and efficiently.

Some Levantines interact with each other in different ways than

Americans are used to. For example, in many Muslim and Orthodox Jewish communities, unrelated women and men seldom interact, and when they do, it is typically in group settings. Concepts of personal space also differ from those in the US. For example,



many Levantine residents of the same sex commonly sit and stand closer to each other and tend to touch more often during conversations than Westerners.

The region's communities use a variety of calendars, notably Islamic, Western (Gregorian), Julian, and Hebrew ones. Because Friday is considered a holy day in Islam, most of the region observes a Saturday- or Sunday-Thursday workweek. Israelis also observe a Sunday-Thursday workweek, as Saturday is considered a holy day in Judaism. By contrast, in Syria, the workweek generally runs Monday-Friday.

## 9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Levantine art, architecture, dance, music, poetry, and theater reflect the region's rich history and modern global trends.

Across the Levant, and particularly in urban areas, Western-style clothing is common, though some Levantines prefer long, loose-fitting garments and other traditional attire. Some religious groups have their own traditional clothing and headgear.

Levantine music and dance styles express topics like nature, rural life, love, history, and current events. Both traditional and modern forms of music are popular, ranging from Arab folk songs accompanied by the **oud** (a stringed, pear-shaped instrument) to contemporary, upbeat Lebanese and Israeli pop. A popular traditional dance found throughout the Levant is the **dabke** (a folk dance performed in circles or lines, with different versions defined by the speed and rhythm of the steps).

Many Levantine artists historically favored geometric designs and patterns to depict plants, flowers, and animals on buildings, jewelry, and household



items. Regional inhabitants today create various traditional handicrafts and pieces of folk art that reflect the region's rich heritage and often incorporate religious motifs. Common handicrafts include pottery, embroidery, ceramics, and calligraphy. Soccer is the most widely followed sport in the region. Other popular sports include basketball, weightlifting, handball, and swimming.

## 10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

While cuisine varies across the region, residents tend to rely on many of the same staple ingredients such as chickpeas and other beans, lemons, onions, and garlic. Common dishes include mutton and chicken prepared with a variety of spice mixtures such as **za'atar** (made of sumac, oregano, thyme, and

sesame seeds) and **bokharat** (a seven-spice powder). Fruits, yogurt, various salads, bread, and rice are common accompaniments to meals. Popular drinks include tea, often sweetened and flavored with mint or sage, and a variety of fruit juices. Neither observant Muslims nor Jews in the Levant consume pork. Observant Muslims also refrain from consuming alcohol and prepare food using halal guidelines – allowed by Islamic law.

Health in most of the region has improved in recent decades as evidenced by decreased infant mortality rates and longer life expectancies.



Most residents of the Levant have access to quality healthcare that is generally subsidized by governments.

Nevertheless, years of conflict have created significant challenges to the delivery of healthcare

in some areas. For example, around half of Syrian hospitals have closed, and two-thirds of Syrian medical personnel have fled since the civil war began in 2011. Consequently, specialized physical and psychological care is unavailable. Meanwhile, Jordan and Lebanon struggle with rising healthcare costs generated by the influx of Syrian refugees.

Healthcare systems face several other challenges such as long wait times at health facilities and increasing out-of-pocket expenses. Further, the quality of care tends to vary between urban and rural areas, where clinics are often understaffed and equipped with outdated equipment. Noncommunicable diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer, and chronic respiratory disease now cause more than three-fourths of all deaths in the Levant, except in Syria, where injuries cause some 50% of deaths.

## 11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. It details how countries allocate their resources by sector, trade

with other countries, give or receive aid, and pay for goods and services within their borders.

Prior to the 20th century, the Levantine territories maintained largely agrarian and trade-based economies. Even after most of the region declared independence, conflict and political instability largely hampered significant economic development. The territories subsequently followed different strategies to stimulate economic growth. For example, in the 1960s, Syria implemented socialist economic policies with extensive government involvement, while Lebanon prioritized the growth of its private sector. In the 1980s-90s, Israel implemented market-oriented reforms and its economy began expanding significantly, while the other Levantine economies experienced less impressive growth.



Today, the region's economies are predominantly services oriented. As of 2024, Israel's GDP per capita, the Levant's highest, is more than 15 times that of the Palestinian Territories. Israel, a technologically advanced economy, controls much of the Palestinian Territories' economy, limiting the movement of people and goods. Unemployment rates vary widely, ranging from greater than 51% in the Palestinian Territories to 18% in Jordan, 13% in Syria, 12% in Lebanon, and 3% in Israel as of 2024. As many residents work informal jobs, the formal unemployment rate is often much higher. In both Jordan and Lebanon, public dissatisfaction with worsening economic conditions has repeatedly led to anti-government protests. Meanwhile, Syria's economy virtually collapsed after the 2011 start of the civil war, shrinking by about 80% between 2011-16. As of mid-2024, the region's economic outlook is as experts predict a less than 2.8% growth in GDP, a decline from 2021-22 and due in part to the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

The region maintains trade relationships with other Middle Eastern countries, several Asian nations, and the US. For

example, Syria depends largely on imports from Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and China, while Jordan primarily relies on imports from China, Saudi Arabia, and the US.

## 12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology.

Israel has a modern and robust transportation network, while Jordan, the Palestinian Territories, and Lebanon lack transport infrastructure and public transportation systems. In 2017, the Lebanese government estimated that only 15% of the country's main roads were in good condition. While Syria once had an advanced transportation network, the civil war has caused extensive damage, destroying or damaging some 44% of roads in Aleppo. By contrast, the Jordanian government invested some \$1.7 billion between 2014-19 in transportation projects.

Information technology is spreading rapidly throughout the



Levant. Between 2000-23, Internet usage grew from 0.1-21% of population to 75-90%. An exception is Syria, where just 36% of population were Internet users in 2024. Cell phones are popular – the Levant

reports 68-152 mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people as of 2023. While Israel places few restrictions on press freedoms, journalists and social media users in Syria, Jordan, and the Palestinian Territories tend to face significant restrictions.

Most of the region faces significant challenges in meeting growing energy needs. With limited resources of their own, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinian Territories import most of their required energy. Syria, once a net oil exporter, has imported much of its required oil since 2011. By contrast, Israel has recently become a natural gas exporter.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize Levantine society at large, we will focus on specific features of society in Syria.

# PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

## 1. HISTORY AND MYTH

### Overview

Syria is located along the eastern Mediterranean in an area that has been at the crossroads of cultures, peoples, languages, and religions for millennia and first achieved independence in 1946. Since 1970, the Assad family has maintained control of the country through authoritarian measures that led to civil war in 2011. In the ongoing conflict, Syria has experienced widespread destruction of its infrastructure, largescale population displacement, foreign intervention, and the growth of terrorist groups within its borders



### Early History

Archeological evidence indicates that early humans inhabited present-day Syria as early as 700,000 years ago. Between 15,000-11,500 BC, the Natufian people were the first in the region to begin congregating in settlements. Damascus (Syria's capital today) and Aleppo emerged around 5000 BC, making them some of the world's oldest continually inhabited cities.



Around 3000 BC, the city-states of Ebla and Mari emerged as local powers, controlling much of the Levant (the region comprised of present-day Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian

Territories). The Akkadians and Babylonians of Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) conquered the region around 2250 BC and 1759 BC, respectively, ushering in a long period of rule by foreign powers.



## Early Empires

Subsequent centuries were marked by a succession of outside groups struggling for control of the region's strategic location. Notable powers included the Hyksos, Mitanni, Hittites, Sea Peoples, Egyptians, Assyrians, and Persians. At the battle of Issus in 333 BC, Alexander the Great of Macedonia defeated the Persians and captured much of the region. Following his 323 BC death, Alexander's generals divided his empire, with Seleucus I

Nicator gaining control over Syria and establishing the Seleucid dynasty.

The Seleucids aimed to make Syria a center of Greek culture,

relocating many Greeks to the Decapolis (a group of 10 important cities in the Levant) and establishing a centralized bureaucracy. Notably, the Seleucids were the first to name the region Syria, and many elites in the region adopted Greek as their main language. Greek-style art and architecture became common in Syria's wealthy trading centers. At the height of their power around 200 BC, the Seleucids controlled most of the Levant and competed with Egypt's powerful Ptolemaic dynasty for regional influence. However, infighting among the Seleucid leadership, combined with revolts in present-day Jordan and the Palestinian Territories, severely weakened Seleucid control.

**The Romans:** Meanwhile, the Romans had begun building their empire in central Italy around 500 BC. Beginning in the 2nd century BC, they pursued rapid expansion, and in 64 BC, conquered the region. Inclusion in the Roman Empire brought several advantages, notably relative peace, a legal system, and improved infrastructure. Syria achieved additional prominence when a series of Syrian-born emperors assumed power between 193-249 AD. The Romans founded schools of medicine, law, and rhetoric in cities such as Antioch and Damascus and fostered the region's glassblowing and garment-dyeing industries. Further east, incorporation of the wealthy Syrian trading city of Palmyra into the Empire brought increased trade with the Persian, Parthian, and Sasanian empires.



In 285, the Roman emperor reorganized his holdings into western and eastern divisions, and in 380, adopted Christianity as the Empire's official religion. Some 15 years later, the split between the western Roman and Eastern (Byzantine) Empires became permanent, with the Byzantines ruling Syria from their capital at Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul).

The following 300 years were marked by conflict between the Byzantines and Persians. Persian raids deep into the Levant drained much of Syria's wealth, particularly after the capture of Antioch in 540. Centuries of conflict with the Persians also weakened the Byzantines' hold over the region, and over time, its emperors came to depend on allied Arab tribes that had begun to move into the area to fight on their behalf.

### Arab Rule

Meanwhile, a new religion, Islam, was gaining converts in the Arabian Peninsula (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Soon, Muslim Arab warriors sought expansion into the eastern Mediterranean, defeating the Byzantines in the decisive Battle of Yarmouk in 636 and capturing Jerusalem 2 years later. In subsequent centuries, rival Islamic dynasties competed for control of the **Ummah** (community of Muslim believers – see *Religion and Spirituality*).



Ruling from Damascus, the Sunni Umayyad dynasty took control in 661. Umayyad **caliphs** (rulers) undertook large building projects in their new capital, such as the Umayyad Mosque. However, internal conflict and economic decline soon weakened them. In 750, they were overthrown by the Sunni Abbasid dynasty, which ruled from Baghdad (present-day capital of Iraq). Over time, Arab culture and language began to supplant Greek and Aramaic in villages across the Levant (see *Language and Communication*).

As the Abbasids began to weaken in the 860s, Islamic dynasties in Aleppo and North Africa began to strengthen. The most

prominent was the Shi'a Fatimid dynasty based in Cairo (capital of Egypt today), which gained control over much of the Levant by the late 10th century and was able to repel Byzantine efforts at reconquest. This period also saw the emergence of new Shi'a sects (the Alawites and Ismailis – see *Religion and Spirituality*), and the introduction of the Druze



religion to the region, also an offshoot of the Fatimids' Shi'a tradition, although the Druze consider themselves a distinct faith (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

By the 11th century, a new power was rising. The Sunni Seljuk Turks first expanded into Fatimid territory, then won a notable battle against the Byzantines in 1071, marking their new prominence in the eastern Mediterranean.

### The Crusader States

The Seljuk Turks' success and Arab control of Jerusalem concerned the Byzantines and their brethren in Rome. In 1095, the Pope, leader of the Roman Catholic Church, declared a series of religious crusades to capture territories in the Levant. Crusaders succeeded in capturing large swaths of coastal territories and established a series of kingdoms in the region, notably the Principality of Antioch located in what is today northwestern Syria and southern Turkey. However, internal disputes and attacks from the Seljuk and other Turks greatly weakened the principality.

Muslim campaigns to reconquer the region began shortly after the establishment of the Crusader states. By 1149, the Seljuk Turks had repelled European advances on Damascus. Founding the Ayyubid dynasty in Cairo,



the Seljuk Turks unified Egypt and the interior of the Levant against the Crusaders.

### **Egyptian Mamluk Rule**

The Ayyubids' hold on the region was short. In 1250, they fell to a rebellion which led to the establishment of the Mamluk dynasty in Egypt. In 1268, the Mamluks captured Antioch, and by 1291, they had expelled the last of the European powers from the region. Around the same time, the Mamluks repelled Mongol invaders from Central Asia. Their success in both missions granted the Mamluks credibility as defenders of Islam, and they quickly consolidated their control of the Levant.



Some 225 years (1291-1516) of Sunni Mamluk rule included the repression of Shi'a Muslims, Jews, and Christians, which led to occasional conflicts. Nevertheless, Mamluk rule also brought significant commercial growth. Coastal cities prospered as Venetian merchants from present-day Italy settled in Syrian ports to profit from trade between the Middle East and Europe. The Mamluk elite encouraged the development of literature and architecture with the wealth generated from trade with Europe.

### **Ottoman Rule**

Meanwhile, to the north, the Byzantine Empire had been steadily weakening and losing territory. By the mid-14th century, the Ottoman Turks were the region's rising power, and in 1453, they besieged and captured the Byzantine capital of Constantinople, ending the Byzantine Empire. In 1516, Ottoman Sultan Selim I defeated the Mamluks and incorporated Syria into his growing empire, which eventually spanned much of the Balkans, Middle East, and North Africa. Subsequently, the region of present-day Syria would remain under Ottoman control for some 400 years.

While the Ottomans ruled Aleppo directly, they granted most of the region semi-autonomous status, managed by Syrian administrators, who swore loyalty to the Sultan in

Constantinople. This period of relative self-rule brought considerable stability to the region and a newfound tolerance for religious minorities. The agricultural sector also benefited from advances in the cotton and silk industries, and the Ottomans fostered trade relationships with France and Britain. This renewed European presence in Syria improved the position of many Christians, who profited from the protection afforded to them by the French.

Over time, the Ottomans' hold over the region weakened. Economic relations with Europe declined, and uprisings rocked the Ottoman military. In 1831, Egyptian Ottoman Governor Muhammad Ali began a decade-long effort to expand his influence through the region, but the European powers or Great Britain, Russia, Austria, and Prussia intervened and forced him to retreat.



**The *Tanzimât*:** In an attempt to reassert their power and regional influence, Ottoman authorities launched the ***Tanzimât*** (“reorganization”) in 1839.

These reforms sought to modernize the Sultan’s vast holdings, affirm the equality of all Ottoman subjects before the law, abolish certain taxes, devise a new military recruitment system, and change the legal system. Nevertheless, implementation encountered significant resistance in the Levant. New laws dictating the equality of Christians, Jews, and Muslims caused riots in Aleppo in 1850 and armed conflict in southern Syria in 1860.

The *Tanzimât* reforms also brought demographic changes, namely the arrival of Circassians and Chechen Muslims (see *Political and Social Relations*), who had been expelled from the Russian Empire. Meanwhile, Europeans maintained a commercial foothold in Syria, and the French developed the region’s first railways (see *Technology and Material*). The French also opened foreign-run missionary schools. Combined with other educational opportunities (see *Learning and Knowledge*), the spread of education in the region led to a new

interest in local and Arab history, which set the stage for the Arab nationalist movements that would emerge in the 20th century.

In 1908, a coup brought the Ottoman Empire under a Turkish nationalist government, which introduced an unpopular campaign to impose Turkish language and culture in the Levant. Meanwhile, fearful of losing territory, the Ottomans ignored growing Arab calls for regional decentralization.

### **World War I (WWI):**

In 1914, WWI broke out between the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire) and the Allies (the US, Britain, France, and Russia, among others). The Ottomans abolished autonomous rule



in the region and introduced military conscription. With the Ottomans plundering the Levant to sustain their war effort and the Allies blockading the coast, Syrians suffered repression and extensive hunger.

Meanwhile, Arab leaders from across the region joined the Allies to fight the Ottomans. In 1916, Faisal bin Ali of present-day Saudi Arabia, and regional residents loyal to him, collaborated with the British to expel the Ottomans from Damascus.

### **Short-Lived Independence and the French Mandate**

Concluded before the war's end, the British-French 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement anticipated the Ottomans' defeat and divided certain Ottoman territories between the two powers, with Syria assigned to France. Syrian leaders denounced the move, instead proclaiming Faisal as the region's so-called Hashemite King (Hashemite is the name of the royal family of present-day Jordan) of the Arab Kingdom of Syria. However, French forces invaded in 1920, expelled the monarch, and imposed their control, largely setting Syria's current borders.

Over their 26-year control, the French made significant investments in Syria's infrastructure by paving roads, improving urban public services, modernizing agriculture, and investing in

education. The French also established separate districts and local governments for Alawite, Druze, and Sunni residents.

Many Syrians rejected French rule, especially when it became clear that the French viewed their mandate as a colonial project rather than an interim administration preparing Syria for self-governance. From 1925-27, Syrians across the region revolted in what became known as the Great Syrian Revolt.

After quelling the uprising in 1927, the French began to make some concessions. In 1928, they permitted elections for a Syrian constituent assembly, which drafted a Constitution in 1930. After years of negotiation, the French drafted a treaty in 1936 that outlined Syrian independence and granted the French special privileges. Although the newly organized Syrian parliament approved the treaty, France never ratified it, forcing the Syrian nationalists to dissolve their government.

**World War II (WWII):** Syria remained under French rule during WWII, fought between the Axis powers (Nazi Germany, Italy, and Japan) and the Allies (Britain, France, the US, and the Soviet Union, among others). After France fell to Germany in 1940, Syria briefly came under the control of France's pro-Nazi Vichy government until Free French and British troops overthrew the pro-Vichy administration in 1941.



### Progress Towards Independence

In November 1941, the Free French troops occupying Syria bowed to international pressure and proclaimed Syria's independence. Nevertheless, the French declined to withdraw and continued to exercise authority over Syrian affairs.

In the ensuing 1943 elections, powerful landowning nationalists led by Shukri al-Quwatli gained control of the first independent government, which sought to coordinate France's withdrawal from Syria. However, when the French refused to cede control of the armed forces to the Syrian government in 1945, riots



erupted, prompting the French to shell Damascus. British forces then intervened to restore order and negotiate France's exit from Syria, which was completed on April 17, 1946 and today is celebrated as Syria's Independence Day. Syria subsequently became a founding member of both the United Nations (UN) and the Arab League (see *Political and Social Relations*).

### **The 1948 Arab-Israeli War and Instability**

In 1947, the UN voted to partition the British mandate of Palestine (bordering Syria to the southwest) into separate Jewish and Arab states. Clashes between Jews and Arabs in Palestine erupted immediately. When the British withdrew, and the Jewish state of Israel declared independence in mid-1948, war broke out. As an Arab League member, Syria joined Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq in declaring war on Israel.

The Arab League underestimated the Israeli Army and suffered a destabilizing defeat. Israel pushed Syrian troops back into Syrian territory called the Golan Heights, a territory Israel would seize 2 decades later. In Syria, the unexpected defeat led to internal



tensions, and in 1949, the country suffered three military coups. After 5 years of military rule, another coup in 1954 returned Syria to civilian rule under Quwatli.

### **Arab Nationalism and Brief Union with Egypt**

Across Syria's diverse population, Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser was popular for his support of Arab unity and opposition to Western imperialism. As a first step toward Nasser's goal of creating a pan-Arab state, Egypt and Syria merged in 1958 to form the United Arab Republic (UAR). However, hopes for a cohesive union soon dissolved, with Syrians unsatisfied with Nasser's treatment of Syria as a northern province of Egypt and the imposition of land reform policies that were ill-suited to Syrian agriculture. When Nasser

made Syrian Army officers inferior to their Egyptian counterparts and introduced authoritarian measures that stifled political participation, the Syrian military staged a coup, dissolving the short-lived union in 1961.

### Transition to Ba'athism

Meanwhile, Syria's powerful elected landowning elite oversaw increasing economic inequalities that caused political tensions and contributed to the growth in popularity of the newly formed

**Ba'ath** (Renaissance) Party (see *Political and Social Relations*). Promoting Arab Socialism, an ideology combining pan-Arab and socialist ideals and emphasizing state-led development and economic independence, the party gained many followers among the military, minorities, and many Sunni rural poor.



In 1963, the military committee of the Ba'ath Party took power in a coup, today celebrated as Revolution Day (see *Time and Space*). Subsequent

years of political infighting led to another coup in 1966, which Ba'ath party member and general, Salah al-Jadid, led. In mid-1967, conflict between Israel and Syria, Egypt, and Jordan flared again in the Six-Day War. Once again, the Arab League members suffered significant losses, and Israeli troops occupied the Golan Heights, a source of tension still today (see *Political and Social Relations*).

### Hafez al-Assad Consolidates Power

Following this loss, Syrian Minister of Defense Hafez al-Assad, representing the military wing of the Ba'ath party, consolidated control of the military and gradually broadened his power base. In 1970, Assad ousted Jadid and proclaimed himself President, a position he would hold until 2000.

Assad, an Alawite (see *Religion and Spirituality*), was popular among many Syrians, particularly rural residents and minorities, as he oversaw infrastructure development in previously neglected areas. Although Assad's authoritarian military regime was repressive, it brought stability, a notable change from the

political tumult of the previous 25 years. Syria's relative success in a 1973 war with Israel, notably the return of some Golan Heights territory it had lost in 1967, helped bolster Assad's control over the government and military and allowed him to place Alawites in key positions of power. As his popularity grew, Assad banned several rival political parties and regularly arrested political dissidents.

Meanwhile, opposition to the Assad regime had been growing. Between 1979-82, a wide range of political and religious organizations participated in an uprising against Assad. When a revolt in Hama took a violent turn, the Assad regime violently repressed it, resulting in thousands of deaths and effectively silencing dissent, especially among the Sunni majority.

Assad's rule was also marked by external conflicts such as the 1975 civil war in Lebanon. Fearing that one faction's victory would provoke an Israeli invasion of Lebanon and destabilization of the



entire region, Syria entered the war in mid-1976. Syrian involvement in Lebanon proved to be long-term, with the government giving various factions both formal and informal military assistance for decades. Contentious relations with Saddam Hussein, leader of Iraq and its Ba'ath Party, meant Syria was the only Arab nation to support Iran during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War. This rivalry also compelled Syria to support the US-led international coalition against Iraq during the 1990 Gulf War (also known as the Persian Gulf War).

### **The Bashar al-Assad Era**

After Hafez al-Assad's death in 2000, his oldest surviving son, Bashar al-Assad, emerged victorious in a presidential election in which he ran unopposed. Many observers, in Syria and abroad, hoped that the younger Assad, who was educated in the West and had married a British-born Sunni Muslim, would reject his father's authoritarian policies. Indeed, Assad initially welcomed visits by Western leaders, granted amnesty to political prisoners,

and tolerated open political discourse at pro-democracy gatherings called ***muntadayat*** during a period known as the “Damascus Spring.” However, this political opening proved brief, with the government arresting political activists and closing the *muntadayat* just a few months later.

While President Assad was less repressive towards civil society,



he reinstated his father's authoritarian politics and shifted Syria's foreign policy. After decades of diplomatic hostilities with Iraq, Syria sought to improve relations, denouncing the 2003 US-led coalition invasion. Following widespread

demonstrations in Lebanon against Syria's continued presence there, Assad withdrew Syrian troops in 2005, ending 29 years of Syrian involvement.

**Arab Spring:** Assad's hold on the Presidency was reaffirmed in a 2007 rigged election. Meanwhile, opposition to Assad was growing. Inspired by protests that swept the Arab world in early 2011 and came to be known in the West as the “Arab Spring,” coupled with overcrowding in urban areas prompted by a devastating drought (see *Political and Social Relations*), thousands of Syrians gathered in protests to demand greater political participation and an end to repression. When the Assad regime met the protestors with violence, opposition grew. In mid-2011, some members of the Syrian Army began to form opposition groups, notably the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

**Civil War:** As violent opposition to the regime grew in 2012, the Assad regime began bombing what it identified as opposition strongholds in the cities of Hama, Homs, and Idlib. In response, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar began to arm Islamist opposition groups such as the Nusra Front (see *Political and Social Relations*), allowing opposition forces to take control of much of northern Syria. Meanwhile, in southern Syria, pro-regime forces, with the assistance of Iran and the Lebanon-based Shi'a militia Hezbollah, retained control of Damascus.

Later that year, opposition politicians and civil society groups formed the Syrian National Coalition as an opposition government, which the US and Arab League among others subsequently recognized (see *Political and Social Relations*).



In 2013, Assad's attacks on opposition groups included the use of chemical weapons against civilian targets, causing widespread international condemnation and leading the UN coordinating the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal. At the same time, a group of seven Islamic militias, not including the Nusra Front, merged to create the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as Daesh, ISIL, and IS), a notoriously brutal militant Islamist group intending to gain control of large swaths of territory in the region. ISIS quickly expanded from eastern Syria, capturing and declaring the northern city of Raqqa its capital.

ISIS's subsequent spread and associated human rights abuses threatened to destabilize large parts of the Middle East. Syrians escaping the group fled primarily to Turkey and Greece, where their numbers overwhelmed Turkish and European Union officials (see *Political and Social Relations*). In response, the US, Jordan, Bahrain, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia began aerial bombing campaigns to prevent ISIS from expanding further.

In 2015, Russia began a bombing campaign in support of the Assad regime, targeting Islamist militias as well as FSA troops. With Russian assistance, Assad's forces recaptured the city of Homs and eastern Aleppo from opposition groups but caused heavy civilian casualties. Meanwhile, the Nusra Front, threatened by ISIS growth, joined with other Islamist groups in 2017 to form the **Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham** (HTS) militia (see *Political and Social Relations*), which began fighting to free the northwestern city of Idlib from ISIS control. The offensive against ISIS continued when US-backed Kurdish troops (see *Political and Social Relations*) expelled ISIS from Raqqa. In addition, Israel launched air raids against Syrian and Iranian-linked

groups it considered as threats to regional stability (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Western involvement deepened in 2017 after US intelligence agencies identified a series of chemical attacks attributed to Assad's forces. In response, the US, Britain, and France bombed regime airbases and chemical munitions factories in Aleppo and Damascus. Israel joined them in 2018 and attacked Iranian military installations in southern Syria.



In late 2018, Assad's push into opposition-held areas in the North compelled Turkey to establish a demilitarized buffer zone along the border (see *Political and Social Relations*).

While most armed groups respected the buffer zone, the de-escalation enabled HTS to become the predominant opposition group in the region after it launched an offensive in 2019. Assad's efforts to repress HTS and recapture northern Syria led to direct confrontation with Turkish troops in 2020, which was eventually defused with Russian mediation.

With the FSA weakened and holding little territory, HTS stands as the dominant opposition to Assad. While the Assad regime has recaptured major cities and wide swaths of Syrian territory, its control of the country remains weak and much of Syria's infrastructure has been destroyed. Nevertheless, Assad was reelected in mid-2021 amid claims of fraud and coercion (see *Political and Social Relations*). However, ISIS is still a threat along the Iraqi border and in the sparsely populated eastern steppe. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has complicated the already dire situation (see *Sustenance and Health*). As of 2025, the civil war has caused one of the world's largest refugee crises with some 6.5 million Syrians living abroad and about 7.3 million internally displaced people.



## Myth

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity. Many Syrian myths come from traditional **hakawati** (storytellers), who often recount folk tales at family gatherings and coffeehouses (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*). Many stories relate the exploits of heroes and their chivalrous, charitable, and honorable acts, providing a model of proper behavior. Others tell of evil spirits or relate the adventures of mystical creatures. While the civil war has disrupted some of these traditional storytelling practices in Syria, some **hakawati** continue these traditions as refugees in neighboring countries.

### One Thousand and One Nights

The well-known stories of "Aladdin" and "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" originated as Syrian folk tales transmitted orally over the generations. In the 18th century, Syrian storyteller Hanna



Diyab recorded these tales, which were introduced to European audiences in a collection of stories called *One Thousand and One Nights*. The stories' diverse characters and places highlight that Syria lies at the crossroads of

trade routes linking Asia with Africa and Europe.

The story of Aladdin follows the so-called hero and his protective **djinn** (genie) as he fights various villains in China and seeks revenge on an evil African magician. As the **djinn** grants Aladdin his every wish, Aladdin becomes wealthy, builds a jeweled palace, and marries the local sultan's daughter to become his heir. In "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," a poor carpenter, Ali Baba, finds a band of thieves' secret hideaway. After opening the door using the command "Open Sesame," Ali Baba escapes with the thieves' treasures. After Ali Baba's slave stops the thieves' attempt to murder him, she is freed, marries Ali Baba's son, and lives happily off the wealth obtained from the treasure.

## 2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

### Official Name

Syrian Arab Republic

***Al Jumhuriyah al Arabiyah as Suriyah***

الجمهورية العربية السورية (Arabic)

### Political Borders

Turkey: 565 mi

Iraq: 372 mi

Jordan: 225 mi

Israel: 49 mi

Lebanon: 245 mi

Coastline: 120 mi

### Capital

Damascus

### Demographics

Although Syria's 2011 population of over 21 million was one of the world's fastest growing, civil war has caused millions of Syrians to leave the country (see *History and Myth*). After reaching a low of about 17 million in 2018, the population rebounded to an estimated 23.8 million in 2024. Some 57% of the population lives in urban areas. Generally, the population concentrates on the Mediterranean coast, in the cities of Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs, and in the Euphrates River Valley, though the ongoing civil war has caused significant internal displacement. The Syrian Desert is sparsely populated.



### Flag

Adopted in 1980, Syria's flag consists of three horizontal bands of red, white, and black with two green stars in the center. Each color represents an Arab dynasty that influenced Syria's history:

Hashemite (red), Umayyad (white), Abbasid (black), and Fatimid (green, with the stars representing Syria and Egypt).



## Geography

Located in a region of Western Asia called the Levant, Syria borders the Mediterranean Sea to the west, Turkey to the north, Iraq to the east and south, and Jordan, Israel, and Lebanon to the southwest. Syria's total land area is 72,370 sq mi, about the size of North Dakota.

Syria is geographically diverse. The fertile coastal area along the Mediterranean Sea is separated by mountains from the more arid rest of the country. Along the Syrian border with northern Lebanon lies the Homs Gap, a significant trading route between the coast and inland Syria. South of the Homs Gap, the Anti-Lebanon Mountains form the border with western Lebanon and contain Syria's highest point, Mount Hermon, which stands at 9,232 ft. The Anti-Lebanon Mountains taper in the south near the Golan Heights, an area occupied by Israel since 1967 (see *History and Myth*). Eastern Syrian largely comprises flat, grassy terrain (steppe), which mostly livestock farmers occupy. The Syrian Desert covers a large portion of the South.



Syria's longest river, the Euphrates, bisects the country, running southward for 450 mi from Turkey to Iraq, and provides vital nourishment to farmlands in the steppe. In the West, the Orontes River flows north from Lebanon through Syria to Turkey.

## Climate

Located in the Mediterranean climatic zone that stretches westward toward the Atlantic Ocean, Syria experiences a two-season climate of hot, dry summers and cool, rainy winters. Average temperatures range from 105°F in the summer to 45°F in the winter. Mountainous areas tend to be the coolest, averaging 72°F in the summer and regularly experience freezing temperatures and snowfall in the winter. Coastal areas, mountains, and the steppe see 20-50 inches of rain per year, usually in the winter. The Syrian Desert is the country's driest region, with average annual rainfall of just 5 inches.

## Natural Hazards

Located along major fault lines, Syria is prone to frequent earthquakes. While most are small, destructive earthquakes have occurred. In 1138, Aleppo experienced one of history's deadliest earthquakes, killing an estimated 230,000 people. In February 2023, two devastating 7.8 earthquakes occurred in the Turkey-northern-Syrian border, around 6,000 Syrian deaths, the worst in over 20-years. Syria's



hot, dry summers occasionally cause devastating droughts. For example, during a 2006-09 drought, many farmers abandoned their crops and livestock and migrated to urban areas, leading to severe overcrowding. Some scholars consider the inadequate government response to the drought as a factor in the 2011 uprising that led to civil war (see *History and Myth*). In warmer months, sand and dust storms are common, causing sudden temperature changes and blanketing cities in clouds of dust and sand.

## Environmental Issues

The ongoing civil war has severely degraded Syria's natural resources and significantly damaged its environment. Shelling has destroyed irrigation infrastructure and waste treatment plants, leading to water shortages. Meanwhile, industrial activity like oil drilling pollutes rivers. Further, a lack of waste collection and disposal has created major public health hazards.

## Government

Syria is a presidential republic that divides into 14 governorates (*muḥāfaẓāt*), led by governors, which subdivide into districts (*manāṭiq*) and subdistricts (*nawāḥī*) headed by governor-appointed officials. Adopted in 2012, Syria's Constitution separates power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, while outlining the fundamental rights and duties of Syrian citizens).



## Executive Branch

Executive power is vested in the President, who also serves as head-of-state and commander-in-chief of the Syrian Armed Forces. The President appoints a Prime Minister (who serves as head-of-government), a Vice President, and a Council of Ministers. The President is elected directly for 7-year terms without term limits and, according to the Constitution, must be Muslim. First elected in 2000, President Bashar al-Assad was reelected three times, most recently in May 2021 amid widespread reports of voter coercion and deception. He was overthrown by Islamist rebels in December 2024. He and his family fled to Moscow and granted political asylum. The presidency is currently vacant. The Prime Minister Muhammad al-Bashir is the current head of government.



## Legislative Branch

Syria's legislature is the one-chamber People's Assembly (PA) composed of 250 members serving 4-year terms. The PA's main duty is to approve laws, treaties, and the budget. According to the Constitution, half of the PA members must be workers and farmers. Under former President Assad, the PA held very little power and mainly served as a supplement to the executive branch.

## Judicial Branch

Syria's legal system is based on a combination of civil and religious law, such as ***sharia*** (Islamic) law derived from Sunni principles. Christians, Jews, and Druze (see *Religion and Spirituality*) have the right to judgement under their respective personal status laws. As the highest courts, the Court of Cassation and the Supreme Constitutional Court handle civil, legislative, and constitutional matters. A Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) composed of judges and the President select justices for the Court of Cassation. The President nominates Supreme Constitutional Court justices, which the rest of the SJC approves. While Court of Cassation justices serve for life, Supreme Constitutional Court justices serve 4-year renewable terms. Other courts include the Counterterrorism Court, the

Economic Security Court, courts of first instance, and religious and military courts. Although Syria's Constitution calls for an independent judiciary, international observers have accused judges of bias in favor of the executive branch.

### Political Climate

The Assad family and the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party had dominated the political arena since 1970, and while elections still occurred, they are marred by fraud and vote rigging. The 2020 parliamentary elections awarded 200 seats to the National Progressive Front, a coalition consisting of the Ba'ath Party and nine other pro-regime parties, with independent candidates receiving the remaining seats. One notable opposition party is the Marxist People's Will Party, which held seats in the PA until 2020. Although the party is considered oppositional to the National Progressive Front, it had expressed support for former President Assad.

Since the 2011 beginning of the civil war (see *History and Myth*), the Syrian regime has become increasingly authoritarian, despite a Constitution that establishes democracy and grants basic human rights to all Syrians. President Assad continually ignored human rights and freedoms, notably the freedoms of association, speech, and movement, in the name of fighting terrorism. Citizens, especially journalists, government critics, and suspected opposition sympathizers, are subject to persecution, arrest, and torture.



International human rights groups have condemned the regime for holding political prisoners, including women and children, for months or years without trial, while withholding information on their status and whereabouts from their families. Further, to compensate for a weak economy (see *Economics and Resources*), the regime imposed fines of up to \$8,000 on men who refused conscription in 2019, seizing money and assets and causing many families serious financial hardship. Nevertheless, President Assad's regime continued to control most Syrian territory, notably much of central and southern

Syria until it was overthrown in December 2024. Updates to the current government structure and areas of control will be updated as new information becomes available.

**Alternative Governments:** While several de facto governments operate locally in Syria, the only internationally recognized opposition government is the Syrian National Coalition (SNC). Working in coordination with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) (see *History and Myth*), the SNC experienced significant success in the civil war until 2015. However, in 2021, the SNC directly controlled little Syrian territory (see *History and Myth*).



The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) holds the largest swath of territory which President Assad does not control, namely much of northeastern Syria along the Turkish and Iraqi borders, a region known as Rojava. Comprised of forces from the Kurdish-led Democratic Union Party (***Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*** or PYD) and the Kurdish-Arab Syrian Democratic Forces (***Quwwât Sûriyâ al-Dîmuqrâtîya*** or SDF), AANES operates as an autonomous body unaffiliated with the Assad regime or the main opposition groups. The US notably provides funding to train and equip the SDF.

In northwestern Syria, the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), an extremist organization closely affiliated with ***Hay'at Tahrir al Sham*** (Organization for the Liberation of the Levant, or HTS—see “Security Issues” below), controls a small swath of territory surrounding the city of Idlib. While the SSG provides some public services such as schools and clinics, some citizens (particularly women) are subject to human rights restrictions and abuses.

## Defense

Due to the Assad regime being overthrown in December 2024 by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Syrian armed forces have collapsed. The Defense sections of this guide are as they stood prior to the takeover and will be updated as information becomes available.

The Syrian Armed Forces (SAF) are a unified power consisting of about 169,000 active-duty troops charged with defeating opposition forces to consolidate the regime's hold on all Syrian territory. While all Syrian men are required to serve for at least 30 months, many have fled or gone into hiding to avoid service. Before the civil war, the SAF had limited and mostly outdated



equipment but retained a few offensive weapons such as ballistic missiles and chemical weapons. As the war continued, the SAF modernized its arsenal with help from allies Russia and

Iran. While SAF soldiers remain poorly trained, the force receives aid and training support from Russia, Iran, and the Lebanon-based and Iran-backed Shi'a Muslim militia, Hezbollah.

**Army:** The Syrian Army consists of some 130,000 active-duty personnel organized into 5 military corps divided into 3 special forces divisions, 9 brigades (including armored, mechanized, and artillery, 13 mechanized infantry divisions, a Republican Guard armored and mechanized division, and 2 surface-to-surface missile brigades.

**Navy:** Based in Tartus, the Syrian Navy is comprised of 4,000 active-duty personnel and consists of a small coastal artillery brigade and a coastal radar surveillance battalion.

**Air Force:** The Syrian Arab Air Force includes 15,000 active-duty personnel organized into 12 fighter and ground attack squadrons, 4 fighter squadrons, 4 transport squadrons, 5 attack helicopter squadrons, and 6 transport helicopter squadrons.

**Air Defense Command:** Numbering 20,000 personnel, Syria's Air Defense Command comprises 4 air defense divisions and 3 air defense regiments.

**Paramilitary:** Numbering about 100,000 personnel, Syria's paramilitary is organized into several militias, the largest of which is the National Defense Force (NDF), which supplements the Army.

# Syrian Air Force Rank Insignia



General



Lieutenant  
General



Major  
General



Brigadier  
General



Colonel



Lieutenant  
Colonel



Major



Captain



First  
Lieutenant



Second  
Lieutenant



Warrant Officer  
First Class



Warrant Officer  
Second Class



Warrant Officer  
Third Class



Sergeant  
Major



Second  
Sergeant



Sergeant



Corporal



Private  
First  
Class

## Security Issues

**Internal Conflict** Violence associated with the ongoing civil war has caused the death of up to 613,407 Syrians. Further, the war displaced nearly half of all Syrians, with some 9 million still domestically displaced as of mid-2025 (see *History and Myth*). With millions of Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance, conflict continues primarily in the northwestern region around Idlib, where the regime seeks to defeat the remaining opposition groups. The fighting there has forced thousands of refugees to flee to the Turkish border.

However, the conflict is not confined to the Northwest. In early 2021, the US struck two Iran-backed groups in eastern Syria near the border with Iraq. Nevertheless, while fighting continues among the regime, opposition groups, and foreign actors, reports in early 2021 suggested that Turkey, Russia, and Qatar were seeking a political solution to end the conflict.

**Terrorism:** With the support of its international allies, the Assad regime had regained control over most of the territory which the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as Daesh, ISIL, and IS) held in early 2021. Nevertheless, ISIS remains a major threat in the region.



in early 2022, *Hay'at Tahrir al Sham* (HTS), the successor to the Nusra Front (see *History and Myth*) and an affiliate of Iraq-based terrorist group al-Qaeda, occupies the northwestern city of Idlib and surrounding area. Meanwhile, other terrorist groups have moved into Idlib, using it as their own base of activities. Although periodic skirmishes continue between the HTS and Syrian, Kurdish, and other regime opposition forces, Russian and Turkish forces negotiated a regional ceasefire that mostly remained in effect until late 2021. While the US, Russia, and Turkey have all designated HTS a terrorist organization, its leadership considers the group to be an insurgent organization fighting an authoritarian regime. On December 8, 2024, HTS overthrew



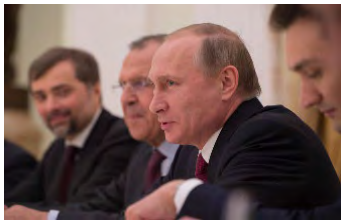
the Assad regime causing President Bashar al-Assad and his family to flee to Moscow seeking and receiving political asylum.

### **Foreign Relations**

While Syria once maintained positive relations with many countries, the Syrian regime has been regularly condemned for human rights abuses against its citizens, especially since the start of the war in 2011. The Arab League suspended Syria's membership in 2011 following the outbreak of the civil war, though the country remains a member of the United Nations (UN), International Monetary Fund, Group of 24, and the International Criminal Police Organization.

### **Relations with Russia:**

As the Assad regime's closest ally and primary arms supplier, Russia has been a central player in the civil war since becoming involved in 2013. Significantly,



Russia collaborated with Syria on the use of chemical weapons from 2013-18 and has used its UN veto to protect the Assad regime from international investigation of its chemical weapons use. In 2018, Russian troops attacked hospitals, private homes, and schools to retake a Damascus suburb for regime forces. International observers have blamed Russian forces for over 6,500 civilian deaths since 2013.

**Relations with Iran:** Despite significant ideological differences, Iran and Syria have an amicable relationship. For Syria, Iran is a key ally against Israel, which the Syrian regime considers its primary adversary. Iran, in turn, values Syria as an important shipment route to transfer weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Since 2011, Iranian officials have taken advantage of Syria's civil war to extend their influence in Syrian society, notably opening cultural and education centers in certain areas. The SAF also depends on Iranian funding and manpower support.

**Relations with Lebanon:** Since 2011, over one million Syrian refugees have entered Lebanon, increasing tensions between the two countries. While the Lebanese government has taken a

neutral stance on the Syrian Civil War, Hezbollah has been an active participant on behalf of the Assad regime since 2012, deploying up to 7,000 fighters at a time. In 2020, international law enforcement accused Hezbollah leaders and the Assad regime of running drug-production and trafficking rings to both cripple the Lebanese economy and make up for Syria's lost revenue caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (see *Economics and Resources*).

**Relations with Iraq:** Syria and Iraq share military and economic ties. Since 2014, the two countries have coordinated strikes against terrorist groups. In 2019, they reopened the al-Boukamal-al-Qaim highway, a vital 185-mi trading route that ISIS previously captured. The reopening marks a resurgence of the countries' trade relationship. Notably, millions of Iraqi refugees live throughout Syria.

**Relations with Jordan:** While Jordan maintains that its activities in Syria are restricted to offensives against ISIS, its close relationship with the US has caused a rift with Syria. Jordan hosts some 640,000 Syrian refugees, accounting for about 6% of the country's population and causing societal tensions within Jordan.



**Relations with Israel:** Syria and Israel have been in a state of conflict since 1967, when Israel occupied and subsequently annexed the Golan Heights (see *History and Myth*), a 460 sq mi elevated plateau. While the UN has never recognized the annexation as legitimate

and still considers the Golan Heights as part of Syria, Israel continues to occupy the area. Further, relations have worsened as the Syrian regime continues to strengthen ties with Iran, a longtime enemy of Israel. While Israel has at times launched air attacks against Iranian-backed forces in Syria (see *History and Myth*), Israeli officials remain neutral in the present conflict.

**Relations with Turkey:** Historically, Syria and Turkey have had a fragile relationship due to Syria's support of the

Kurdistan Workers' Party (***Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê***, or PKK), a Kurdish extremist group based in Turkey and designated as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the US, and the European Union. In the late 20th century, Syria allowed the PKK to operate in northern Syria to quell Syrian-Kurdish uprisings. While Turkey and Syria experienced a period of peace after former President Hafez al-Assad expelled the PKK from Syria in 1998, the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 marked the end of friendly relations, with Turkey lending its support to the oppositional FSA (see of *History and Myth*).



Because Turkey seeks to eliminate Kurdish influence in the region, Turkish military activities have mainly targeted the Kurdish militias and SDF in northeastern Syria. In late 2019, Turkey launched an offensive against the SDF to establish a 20 mi-wide buffer zone between its border and SDF-held areas. After weeks of conflict, Syria, Turkey, and Russia reached an agreement to patrol the zone jointly, which Turkey planned to use to house refugees located within its own borders. As of 2025, Turkey still houses some 3.6 million Syrian refugees and migrants, more than any other country. Turkey and its citizens have grown increasingly frustrated with the migrant influx in recent years, another cause of tensions between the countries.

**Relations with the US:** The US and Syria established diplomatic ties in 1944, but Syria cut those ties in 1967 during the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War (see *History and Myth*). While formal ties were reestablished in 1974, the US designated Syria a state sponsor of terrorism in 1979 after Syria's involvement in the Lebanese Civil War. Since then, relations have worsened, especially after Bashar al-Assad assumed the Presidency in 2000. In 2005, the US established sanctions against Syria over the regime's continued presence in Lebanon and again in 2011 as the civil war began. The US closed its embassy in Damascus in 2011, and as of 2025, the US

imposes sanctions on any international actor who knowingly provides financial or military aid to Syria.

From 2012-17, the US assisted the FSA in northern Syria, providing local government support, immigration aid, education funding, and military assistance. To improve US relations with Russia, President Trump withdrew aid to the FSA in 2017, instead directing all assistance to the SDF, then threatened US withdrawal from Syria in 2019. Nevertheless, as of 2025, the US maintains troops primarily in northeastern Syria to combat ISIS in cooperation with the SDF. In addition, the US offers special immigrant status to Syrians who assist US forces in combat or intelligence operations.



## Ethnic Groups

Around 85% of Syria's population is Arab. While more than 74% of residents are Sunni Arabs, some 15% of the population who are Alawites and Druze (see *Religion and Spirituality*) are considered ethnic Arabs but believe their religious affiliation to be their ethnicity. Some Syrians identify simply as Levantine, a broad term referring to residents of the Levant (see *History and Myth*).

According to prewar estimates, Kurds comprise around 10% the population and historically concentrate in northern and eastern Syria. Considered one of the world's largest groups of stateless peoples, Kurds also reside in parts of southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq, and northwestern Iran.

As of 2025, some 438,000 Palestinian refugees live in



Syria, primarily in the West, where the UN organizes humanitarian assistance and basic services such as education and medical care. Syria is also home to a sizable population of Bedouin, a historically nomadic group found throughout much of the Middle East and North Africa. Smaller groups include the Roma (also known as Domari), Iraqis, Turkmen, Assyrians, Circassians, Armenians, Abkhaz, Ossetians, and Chechens.

## Social Relations

Syrian society divides along rural-urban, male-female, and rich-poor lines. Generally, urban dwellers, males, and the wealthy have greater access to educational and economic opportunities and hold the most social prestige. Some women experience domestic violence and face discrimination in the workplace (see *Sex and Gender*).

Since the Assad family took power in 1970 and prioritized the creation of a homogenous Arab state, some minorities have experienced significant persecution and repression, with Kurds a particular target.



To decrease the Kurds' predominance in northern Syria, President Hafez al-Assad relocated many Arabs to the region in the late 20th century. Persecution increased after 2000, when President Bashar al-Assad implemented additional repressive measures, such as denying Syrian citizenship to Kurds. Since the 2011 outbreak of civil war, ethnic tensions have continued to increase in some areas, especially as some opposition groups have sought to create societies and governments based on their own ethnic or religious affiliations.

The Assad regime has historically favored one minority group, the Alawites, a minority Muslim sect (see *Religion and Spirituality*), by granting members privileged social, economic, and political positions (see *History and Myth*). However, since the 2011 beginning of the civil war, the regime's repressive tactics have compelled many Alawites to distance themselves from the Assad regime.

### 3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

#### Overview

Although the ongoing civil war makes an accurate count difficult, some 74% of Syrians are Sunni Muslim and about 13% are followers of other Muslim sects, primarily Shi'a, Alawite, and Ismaili. Before the war that began in early 2011 (see *History and Myth*), around 10% of the population were Christian, primarily Orthodox, Eastern Catholics (or Uniate), or members of the Assyrian Church of the East. Smaller numbers of Syrians are Druze or Yazidis

Although Syria's constitution requires the President be Muslim, it names no official religion and affirms religious freedom,



provided practices do not disturb the public order. While the constitution also guarantees Syrians the right to challenge the government if their rights are violated, it states that Islamic legal views are a source of laws. The law requires religious

instruction in Islam or Christianity in public schools (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

All religious groups must register with the state to gain legal recognition, and meetings beyond regularly scheduled worship require permits. The government has banned some religious groups, notably the Jehovah's Witnesses and some conservative Sunni groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. Membership in the latter is punishable by death. Moreover, the constitution and laws only apply to regime-controlled areas, not in areas controlled by opposition or other groups (see *Political and Social Relations*).



## Early Spiritual Landscape

The region's early inhabitants led rich spiritual lives characterized by the veneration of multiple deities and spirits. Residents attributed human-like characteristics to divine entities that constructed the universe, created the earth and humans, and influenced daily life. Archaeological finds suggest residents worshipped deities at temples and other sacred sites.

## Judaism

The Levant was the birthplace of Judaism, and Syria has been home to a Jewish community for some 3,000 years. Following the collapse of the Syrian economy in the late 1800s, many Syrian Jews emigrated to Latin America. After the 1948 creation of Israel as a Jewish state (see *History and Myth*), thousands of Syrian Jews moved there. Shortly thereafter, the Syrian government restricted Jews from travel outside of the country and prohibited them from buying property, among other repressive tactics. Anti-Jewish riots and attacks resulted in significant property destruction and some deaths.



After assuming office in 1970, President Hafez al-Assad lifted many of these restrictions. Under US pressure, Assad removed the foreign travel restrictions in 1992, prompting many Jews to leave Syria permanently. While exact figures are unknown, most observers believe that Syria's few remaining Jews have left during the ongoing civil war, but those that remain tend to suffer persecution and discrimination. For example, Jews are the only religious group whose religious identity is listed on their national identity cards.

## Christianity

Christianity emerged in the Levant some 2,000 years ago. In 313, Roman Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, establishing freedom of religion and ending the persecution of Christians. Following Constantine's conversion and the late 4th-century establishment of Christianity as the Empire's official

religion, Christianity spread rapidly in the region, and Damascus became a center of Christian thought.

Following the Ottoman conquest of the region (see *History and Myth*), Christians paid taxes in exchange for religious autonomy. Over the years, Christians from other regions moved to Syria, drawn by its religious freedom. During World War I, many Armenian Christians fled to Syria, and following a 1933 massacre, Assyrian Christians entered Syria from Iraq.

## Islam

### Origins of Islam

Muhammad, who Muslims consider God's final Prophet, was born in Mecca in 570 in what is today Saudi Arabia. Muslims believe that while Muhammad was meditating in the desert, the

Archangel Gabriel visited him over a 23-year period, revealing the Qur'an, or "Holy Book," to guide their everyday lives and shape their values.



### Meaning of Islam

Islam is a way of life to its adherents. The term Islam literally means

submission to the will of God, and a Muslim is "a person who submits to God."

### Muslim Sects

Islam is divided into two sects: Sunni and Shi'a. Sunnis are distinguished by their belief that the leader (**Caliph**) of the Muslim community (**Ummah**) should be elected. Conversely, Shi'a Muslims believe the religious leader should be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad.

### Five Pillars of Islam

There are five basic principles of the Islamic faith.

- **Profession of Faith (*Shahada*):** "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Messenger."



- **Prayer (*Salat*):** Pray five times a day while facing the Ka'aba in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The Ka'aba is considered the center of the Muslim world and a unifying focal point for Islamic worship.
- **Charity (*Zakat*):** Donate a percentage of one's income to the poor or needy.
- **Fasting (*Sawm*):** Abstain from food, drink, and sexual relations from sunrise to sunset during the holy month of Ramadan.
- **Pilgrimage to Mecca (The *Hajj*):** Perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia once in a lifetime.



### Shared Perspectives

Many Islamic tenets parallel those of Judaism and Christianity. In fact, Muslims consider Christians and Jews “people of the Book,” referring to biblical scriptures, because they also believe in one God.

**Abraham:** All three faiths trace their lineage to Abraham, known as *Ibrahim* in Islam. However, Christians and Jews trace their descent to Abraham, his wife Sarah, and their son Isaac; while Muslims trace theirs to Abraham and his Egyptian concubine, Hagar, and their son Ishmael.

**Scriptures:** Much of the content of the Qur'an is similar to teachings and stories found in the Christian Bible's Old and New Testaments, and Muslims view Islam as a completion of previous revelations to Jewish and Christian prophets. However, Muslims believe Jews and Christians altered God's word and that Muhammad received the true revelation of God.

**Jesus:** The three religions differ significantly in their understanding of the role of Jesus. While Christians consider him the divine Messiah who fulfills Jewish Scriptures, Jews are still waiting for the Messiah to come. Muslims recognize Jesus as a prophet but do not acknowledge his divinity or the Christian Trinity.

**View of Death:** Muslims believe that God determines the time of death and birth. While people grieve the loss of family members or friends, they do not view death as a negative event, as Muslims believe that a person who lived a good life goes on to live in Heaven.

### Concept of Jihad

The concept of jihad, or inner striving, is a fundamental element within Islam. Traditionally, it is the principled and moral pursuit of God's command to lead a virtuous life. It should not be confused with the publicized violence often associated with jihad. Most Muslims are strongly opposed to terrorism and consider it contrary to Islamic beliefs.



### Ramadan

Observed during the 9th month of the Islamic lunar calendar (see *Time and Space*), Ramadan is a month-long time for inner reflection, self-control, and focus on God. During this

time, Muslims who are physically able fast from dawn to sunset. Many Muslims believe that denying their hunger helps them to learn self-control, appreciate the difficulties of the poor, and gain spiritual renewal – by fasting, a Muslim learns to appreciate the good in life. Muslims typically break their daily fast at sunset with a meal known as *iftar*. Ramadan includes several holidays:

- **Lailat al-Qadr:** This “Night of Power” marks Muhammad’s receipt of the first verses of the Qur’an.
- **Eid al-Fitr:** This “Festival of Fast-Breaking” celebrates Ramadan’s end and is a national holiday in Syria.

Another important holiday is celebrated when the *Hajj* ends, about 70 days following the end of Ramadan.

- **Eid al-Adha:** This “Festival of Sacrifice” commemorates Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, Ishmael (or Isaac, according to Christians), as proof of his loyalty to God. It is also a national holiday.

## The Arrival and Spread of Islam in Syria

Following Muhammad's 632 death, his followers set out to spread the teachings of Islam beyond the Arabian Peninsula. Arriving in the Levant around 636, Muslim Arab warriors won decisive battles and captured significant territory (see *History and Myth*). During the subsequent Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties (see *History and Myth*), the Muslim population began to divide among Sunni and Shi'a. Further divisions appeared within these groups, notably the Ismaili and the Alawite sects, which emerged from Shi'a ideology in the 8th and 10th centuries, respectively.



In the 11th century, a group of Egyptian Ismaili Shi'a calling themselves Unitarians (***Muwahhidun***) combined elements of Ismaili beliefs with other philosophies. Facing persecution for their unorthodox ideas, they left Egypt and settled in the Levant. Known as the Druze by non-*Muwahhidun*, the group soon would not accept outsiders and has not admitted a convert since 1043. While some early Druze settled in isolated areas in Syria, most migrated there from Lebanon in the 18th century.

## Religion Today

Today, the Islamic faith features prominently in Syrian society and is an important part of many Syrians' identities. Islamic traditions inform socially acceptable public behavior for Muslims and non-Muslims alike, influence ethics and culture, and frame day-to-day living. For example, Islam's frequent calls to prayer shape the daily rhythm in many regions of Syria.

While the Syrian regime allows some freedom of religious expression, some laws and customs ensure the predominance of Islam in society. Muslims cannot legally convert to another religion, and in matters of marriage, divorce, and inheritance, judges often apply Islamic (***sharia***)-based laws to non-Muslims (see *Sex and Gender*). A 2018 law gave the Ministry of Religious

Endowments the authority to create a council that issues religious rulings (*fatwas*), giving the state an additional way to control and regulate religious discourse.

Although most Syrians are Sunni, since assuming power in 1970, the Assad family has ensured that Alawites occupy many positions of power in government (see *History and Myth*). Further, many opposition groups are predominantly Sunni, compelling some minority Muslim groups (notably Alawites and Shi'a) to align with the Assad regime. In addition, Iran's Shi'a government and its affiliate Hezbollah, which support the regime (see *Political and Social Relations*), have further inflamed tensions between Muslim groups. In recent years, some minority Muslims have distanced themselves from the Assad regime, fearing reprisal from Sunni extremist groups (see *Political and Social Relations*).

While the 2011 protests that led to civil war were primarily a response to the authoritarian policies of President Assad and not motivated by religion (see *History and Myth*), the conflict has developed sectarian characteristics. Some Syrians believe the war has politicized their religious identity, whereby they have

been forced to adopt certain political beliefs according to their religious adherence (see *Political and Social Relations*).

In some regions, extremist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as Daesh, ISIL, and IS) and



*Hay'at Tahrir al Sham* (HTS) (see *Political and Social Relations*) have forced religious minorities to convert and adhere to a strict interpretation of *sharia*. Further, Christians and Yazidis have experienced frequent and brutal attacks by Sunni extremist groups, including abductions and mass murder. As of 2019, the United Nations estimated that ISIS had killed over 9,000 Yazidis in an attempt at genocide.

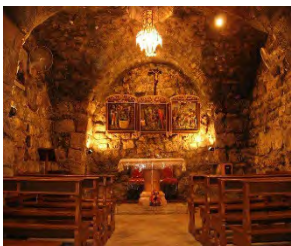
## Islam

Sunni and Shi'a Muslims comprise about 87% of the population. Most Sunnis belong to the Maliki school, a generally tolerant group that teaches the primacy of the Qur'an over later teachings and stresses the importance of community consensus.

**Alawites:** Around 12% of Syrians are followers of the Alawite School of Islam, a sect that broke away from Shi'ism around 900. An oppressed religious minority for much of history, the Alawites hold a distinct interpretation of Islam and have maintained a position of relative security in Syrian society since the Assad regime came to power in 1970 (see *History and Myth*).

## Christianity

Prior to the outbreak of civil war, Christians comprised 10% of the population, though their numbers have significantly reduced during the war. While Syria's remaining Christians live across the country, they tend to concentrate in urban areas.



## Druze

Some 3% of Syrians identify as *Muwahhidun* (Druze to outsiders). They primarily inhabit the mountainous southern Jabal al-Arab region. The community does not permit conversion or marriage outside the faith. Knowledge beliefs and practices are reserved for *uqqal* ("the wise"), a minority of men and women followers, who are



initiated into the faith.

## Yazidism

According to prewar estimates, some 80,000 Syrians identify as Yazidi. While many Yazidi beliefs are private and known only to adherents, they likely incorporate elements of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

## 4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

### Overview

Despite conflict, unrest, and economic hardship, family remains the foundation of Syrian society, with members relying on each other for emotional, economic, and social support.

### Residence

Since the mid-20th century, Syria has experienced significant internal migration and urbanization. As of 2024, some 57% of Syrians live in urban areas. Since 2011, civil war (see *History and Myth*) has destroyed hundreds of thousands of homes and caused significant internal displacement, resulting in rising housing costs. Many Syrians were forced to flee their homes and now reside in refugee camps, both in Syria and abroad. Further, many remaining homes lack proper sewage and waste disposal.



**Urban:** Due to overcrowding in cities (see *Political and Social Relations*), many urban Syrians tend to live in small, cramped apartments. These buildings often feature Western-style architectural elements and interior designs and consists of bedrooms, bathrooms, a kitchen, and a common area. By contrast, some upper-class Syrians reside in large, luxurious apartments or houses. Since many apartment buildings were fully or partially destroyed during the war, some Syrians have been forced to decide between fleeing to refugee camps or remaining in ruined buildings.

**Rural:** In rural areas, residents traditionally live in single-family brick homes, often surrounded by fruit trees. These houses typically consist of several rooms encircling an open-air courtyard, which cools the home in Syria's intense heat, since air conditioning is uncommon. Similarly, in northern Syria, some homes are beehive-shaped structures made of mud and straw, which protects residents from the heat.

## Family Structure

Familial relationships are an integral aspect of Syrian daily life and social organization. Generally, extended relatives are expected to help each other, avoid actions that may bring shame to the family, and value the needs of the family over individual desires. Households often include extended family members, with other relatives living nearby. In Syrian families, the father or eldest male is often the undisputed head of the household, sometimes referred to as **Si Sayid** (“Lord and Master”). While most Syrian families share intimate bonds, siblings tend to be particularly close. Further, Syrians highly respect their elders, with children often caring for their parents as they age. While most Syrian men live with their parents through adulthood, Syrian women typically move in with their husband’s parents after marrying.

**Polygyny:** This term refers to the practice of a man having multiple wives simultaneously. In accordance with Islamic law, a Muslim man may have up to four wives if he can treat them all equally. However, in 2019, the Syrian parliament passed a law allowing wives to forbid their husbands from engaging in the practice. In Kurdish-held regions (see *Political and Social Relations*), the practice is outlawed entirely.

## Children

Historically, Syrians had many children, but today, tend limit the number to just two or three. Extended family members typically assist with childcare, though children often begin working at a



young age. While the legal working age is 15, young children in poor, refugee, or displaced families often are expected to help supplement the family income, typically by working in agriculture, construction, or other jobs requiring manual labor (see

*Economics and Resources*). Since the start of the civil war, militias have forced boys as young as 6-years-old to become soldiers, and sometimes kidnap young girls for marriage.

**Birth:** Childbirth traditions vary across religious groups (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Among Muslims, when a baby is born, a **sheikh** (religious community leader) whispers the **adhan** (call to prayer) into the baby's ear. Then, 7 days after the birth, Some Syrians hold a party called **sebou'** ("the seventh") to welcome the baby. Syrians traditionally celebrate *sebou'* with a midday meal, singing, and an official presentation of the baby's name.



**Circumcision:** Syrian boys traditionally undergo circumcision before age 10, signifying their membership in the Islamic community. While most newborn males are circumcised at the hospital immediately after birth, the civil war has limited access to healthcare (see *Sustenance and Health*).

## Marriage

While varying by religious affiliation, marriage in Syria tends to be a formal process between two families of similar social standing. Traditionally, the engagement process begins when a son tells his mother he is ready to marry. The mother then finds a potential bride, judging a suitable spouse by considering her education, social status, religion, character, and wealth. In some cases, the bride and groom do not meet before becoming engaged. After establishing the engagement, the couple typically spends a few months getting to know one another in public spaces before getting married.

The government performs no civil marriages, but instead, marriage authority lies with religious leaders. Some interfaith couples cannot legally wed (see *Religion and Spirituality*). For example, Orthodox Christian personal status law requires both the bride and groom to be Christian.

**Bridewealth:** Upon marriage, Syrian men traditionally pay **mahr**, or a so-called bridewealth, to the bride, which becomes her sole property. A legal requirement for Islamic marriages, the *mahr* symbolizes the bride's financial independence. However,



in the event of a divorce, the man's family may ask the woman to return the *mahr*.

**Weddings:** Marriage festivities vary by religious group, with Muslim events sometimes segregated by sex. Among Muslims, a marriage is established through a *nikah* (wedding contract). Muslim couples traditionally participate in several pre-wedding ceremonies with family and friends. The night before the wedding, the bride's wedding party decorates her hands and feet with henna, gives her gifts, and sings and dances. Historically, the bride's family held a procession through the town to bring the bride to the groom's home, though today this practice is less common. Christian couples typically marry in a church ceremony, followed by a reception in the bride's home or a wedding hall. Many weddings, regardless of religion, are held at



the largest venue the family can afford, with wealthy Syrians often renting expensive hotels for the event.

Both men and women in Syria face immense pressure to marry before they turn 30, as single people over that age are often subject to social stigma. Further,

child marriage became increasingly common during the war (see *Sex and Gender*), though a law passed in 2019 made the practice illegal.

**Divorce:** Although the current divorce rate is largely unknown, according to a 2017 estimate, it is likely around 31%. Some observers report that in recent years, the divorce rate has probably increased, due to home-life stress caused by war and the COVID-19 pandemic (see *Sustenance and Health*).

## Death

Funeral traditions also vary by religious affiliation. According to Islamic tradition, Muslims wash and wrap the deceased in a *kafan* (shroud or clean white cloth) and bury the body within 24 qahours of death, facing the Ka'aba in Mecca (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Christian funerals typically comprise a procession from the hospital or home of the deceased to the cemetery, where a priest presides over the burial.

## 5. SEX AND GENDER

### Overview

The Syrian social system is patriarchal, meaning that men hold most power and authority. While historically men have denied women full participation in society, the ongoing civil war (see *History and Myth*) has displaced or killed many Syrian men, forcing women into nontraditional roles to provide for their families. In a 2021 study, Syria ranked 152 of 156 countries in gender equality, lower than all its neighbors except Iraq (154).

### Gender Roles and Work

**Domestic Work:** Women traditionally hold responsibility for childcare, cooking, and cleaning, and typically maintain those responsibilities even if they work outside the home. In rural areas, some women tend crops in addition to their household chores. Many families expect young girls to be competent as homemakers by the time they reach puberty.



**Labor Force:** In 2024, only 14% of Syrian women worked outside the home, lower than neighboring Lebanon (28%) and Turkey (36%), but higher than the rate in Iraq (11%). However, as many Syrians work informal sector jobs (see *Economics and Resources*), the real employment rate is likely higher. In the past, women who worked outside the home often served as craftspeople or in retail. In recent years, women have entered a wider variety of professions, working in factories, agriculture, food services, and media. Even so, Syrian law does not require equal pay. In 2024, Syrian women on average made 77 cents for every dollar a man makes for similar work, one of the world's widest pay disparities.

### Gender and the Law

Although Syria's constitution guarantees equality for all citizens, women routinely face unequal treatment before the law. Syrian citizenship derives from the father. While a Syrian woman

married to a non-citizen maintains her own citizenship, she may not pass it on to her children.

Personal status laws regulating marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance differ by religious group (see *Religion and Spirituality*) but tend to restrict women's rights. The law forbids Syrian Muslim women to marry non-Muslim men. Christian women who marry Muslim men must convert to Islam to be buried in a Muslim cemetery. Syrian law only allows a woman to seek divorce if permitted by her husband or marriage contract. Further, divorced women lose custody of their sons at age 13 and daughters at 15, and a woman must obtain the father's permission to leave the country with her children.

Regarding inheritance, all women married to Muslim men are subject to **sharia**, or Islamic law (see *Religion and Spirituality*), and female heirs typically inherit half the amount that their male counterparts receive. Christian women married to Muslim men forfeit all inheritance rights, even if they convert to Islam.

However, male heirs must provide financial assistance to their female relatives.



In the Kurdish-held territory known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) (see *Political and Social Relations*), Syrian women's rights have

improved in recent years. In 2014, the local government passed a law guaranteeing equal labor force and inheritance rights and banned forced marriage and polygyny, the practice of a man having multiple wives simultaneously (see *Family and Kinship*).

## Gender and Politics

While women in Syria gained the right to vote in 1953, their political participation remains low. Today, women hold 10% of national parliament seats, a higher rate than Lebanon (6%), but much lower than Iraq (29%) and the US (29%). Further, female lawmakers are often excluded from high-level decision-making. However, some opposition governments (see *Political and Social Relations*), specifically AANES, require men and women to hold equal numbers of seats in government.

## Gender Based Violence (GBV)

GBV is widespread and has become more prevalent, both due to the civil war and COVID-19 pandemic restrictions (see *Sustenance and Health*). Although rape is illegal, some rapists avoid punishment by marrying their victims. Domestic abuse is common, as Syrian law permits men to discipline wives and female relatives. Child and forced marriage are most common among poorer or displaced families. While some 13% of Syrian girls married by age 18 before the war, this rate has likely increased during the ongoing conflict.

Women in some opposition-controlled areas, and refugees, are often targets of GBV. Some extremist groups (see *Political and Social Relations*) have used rape and the threat of sexual violence as terror tactics in conflict zones and conquered territory.

## Sex and Procreation

Between 1960-2023, Syria's birthrate dropped from 7.5 births per woman to 2.7, less than Iraq (3.2), but more than Lebanon (1.7) and the US (1.8). This decrease is primarily due to displacement by war, rising costs of living, and growing unemployment. Abortion is permitted only if the pregnancy endangers the mother's life. Women who seek an illegal procedure are subject to up to 3 years in prison.



## Homosexuality in Syria

Syrian law criminalizes sexual contact between men, with penalties of up to 3 years in prison. While the law does not criminalize relations between women, gay and bisexual women sometimes experience significant persecution. Syrians arrested for proven or suspected homosexual contact report widespread abuse from authorities, including rape, sexual harassment, and torture. As a result, many survivors suffer trauma, physical disfigurement, and sexually transmitted diseases. At this time, the US State Department does not have a Status of Forces Agreement in place for Syria. Service members will be subject to local laws with regards to this topic.

## 6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

### Language Overview

Arabic is the official and primary language of business, government, education, and the media.

### Arabic

The first language of most Syrians is Levantine Arabic, an Arabic dialect also spoken across Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine. The Syrian variant of Levantine



Arabic is North Levantine Arabic, or alternatively, Syrian-Lebanese Arabic. In school, Syrians learn to read and write Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), a variety used across Arabic-speaking countries. Syrians use MSA for writing, formal discussions, speeches, and in many national news broadcasts. With a 28-character alphabet, Arabic is written horizontally from right to left.

Levantine Arabic and MSA differ in both vocabulary and grammar. For example, Levantine Arabic avoids certain noun endings common in MSA, and while the subject precedes the verb in Levantine Arabic, the verb comes first in MSA. While Levantine Arabic varies among speakers, it is mutually intelligible with most other regional Arabic dialects and relatively well-known across the Arabic-speaking world.

### Other Languages

Syrians and other residents, including refugees and immigrants, speak Northern Kurdish (some 1.9 million speakers), Turkmen (1.5 million), Western Armenian (82,600), Ossetic (58,700), Kabardian (47,800), Domari (37,000), South Azerbaijani (43,800), Adyghe (34,800), and three types of Aramaic (257,360). While use of Aramaic declined in the 1920s, in recent years, the Syrian government has partnered with the University of Damascus to sponsor Aramaic revitalization programs through a language institute in Maaloula.

**English, French, and Russian:** Following World War II (see *History and Myth*), English became increasingly important as a language of business and education. Today, English skills tend to correlate with age, with younger urban dwellers more likely to speak the language. Some Syrians also speak French and/or Russian. In government-run schools, students choose English, French, or Russian as foreign languages in addition to their primary studies in Arabic (see *Learning and Knowledge*). The Syrian government notably approved Russian as an optional foreign language only in 2014.

### Communication Overview

Communicating competently in Syria requires not only knowledge of Arabic, but also the ability to interact effectively using language. This broad notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these forms of communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.

### Communication Style

Syrians' communication patterns



reflect their regard for politeness, generosity, flattery, and respect for tradition. Accordingly, Syrians devote significant time to greetings and other formalities, such as inquiring about one's family and health in detail. In their interactions,

Syrians strive to emphasize respect for their conversation partners and their social status, while avoiding embarrassment to themselves or others, particularly in business meetings and in interactions with elders and social superiors. In relaxed social situations, Syrians are often expressive and tend to consider the display of emotions during discussions to be indicative of deep and sincere concern for the subject. Some Syrians insert blessings into conversation as a demonstration of respect and hope for the future.

The emphasis Syrians place on politeness is evident in a widely held preference for indirect or non-specific answers. Syrians tend to provide a positive response to most requests, usually accompanied by the phrase ***insha'allah*** ("if God wills"). However, this "yes" answer is not necessarily a promise of action. Similarly, foreign nationals should not interpret a noncommittal answer to a request as neutral. Instead, such an answer might actually be negative. Likewise, when saying

goodbye to friends, Syrians tend to ask ***biddek shi?*** ("Do you need anything?"). In response, foreign nationals should respond ***salamtek*** ("Your health and wellbeing").

Additionally, politeness demands that Syrians

express goodwill instead of criticizing another person's ideas. Consequently, a foreign national should avoid giving direct criticism, especially in public. Instead, he should combine indirect criticism with praise for any positive points, while reassuring the individual of his high regard for him personally.

## Greetings

Syrians extend greetings with great care and respect, typically offering ***marhaba*** (hi) in order of seniority. Upon entering a room, Syrians often say ***Salaam Alaykum*** ("peace be upon you"), and all present respond ***Wa Alaykum as-Salam*** ("and upon you be peace"). Following this verbal exchange, men stand and exchange light handshakes or kisses on the cheek, depending on their relationship. To indicate respect and sincerity, men may pat the other's back.

Women commonly exchange cheek kisses when greeting each other. Some Syrians of the opposite sex shake hands or lightly



exchange kisses, while others do not touch when greeting. Men greet women verbally or with a nod as an alternative to shaking hands, though some women may extend their hands for a handshake with foreign men. Foreign nationals should wait for members of the opposite sex to initiate the greeting. The same greeting used for the introduction typically is repeated when saying goodbye.

## Names

Arab names for both genders reflect the genealogy of the father's side. The full name consists of a first (given) name, the



person's father's (first) name, the paternal grandfather's (first) name, and often a family or clan name. Some Syrians include the term **bin** (son of) or **bint** (daughter of) between a person's given name and his/her father's name.

Further, family names frequently begin with **al-** or **el-**, the article meaning "the." A Syrian's family or clan name typically indicates membership in an extended family, a relationship with an ancestor, origins in a particular geographic location, or a symbol, such as **Assad** (lion). A Syrian woman does not traditionally take her husband's name upon marriage.

## Forms of Address

Syrian friends and relatives of the same sex usually address one another by first name. Honorifics such as military ranks and professional or personal titles (Dr., Engineer, Mr., or Mrs.) are often combined with the person's family name. Syrians may also call older non-family members '**aam** (uncle) or **khaleh** (aunt). Some Syrians refer to men of high social standing as **bey** (equivalent to esquire or sir), a term used during the Ottoman era for government officials.

## Conversational Topics

Polite conversation typically involves inquiries about general well-being and that of one's extended family. Male Syrians usually avoid inquiring too closely about another man's female relations, and male foreign nationals should do the same. When



confronted with a sensitive topic like politics or religion, foreign nationals should endeavor to change the subject rather than refuse to discuss the matter outright. Suitable topics include Syrian culture, history, food, soccer (known locally as “football”) (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*), and overall impressions of the country. Other common conversational topics include careers, schooling, and places of origin.

### Gestures

Syrians often use gestures to augment or replace spoken words and emphasize their point of view. To gesture, Syrians use the whole hand or a simple eye motion because they consider pointing at someone using the index finger as rude. Holding the right hand out, palm upward, then touching the thumb and tips of the fingers together and slowly moving the hand up and down means “wait a minute.”



As in many other Arab countries, placing the right hand over the heart is a gesture of greeting used alone or to accompany a handshake. However, in Syria this gesture also means “no thank you.” Syrians nod their head upward or raise their eyebrows,



while making a “tsk” sound to communicate “no.” To signal “yes,” Syrians often pat their head or point to their eyes. Generally, foreign nationals should avoid gesturing with the left hand (see *Time and Space*) and showing the

soles of feet or shoes to Syrians.

### Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) and click on “Resources” for access to language training and other resources.

## Arabic Pronunciation and Transliteration

Transliteration is the process of spelling out Arabic words using the Roman (Latin) alphabet. The table below shows sounds or letters having no English equivalent or that vary from MSA pronunciations. When texting or writing informally online in Romanized Arabic, Syrians frequently replace certain Arabic letters with numbers, also depicted below.

Arabic Letter	Transliteration and Description	Number (if applicable)	Example
ا	a	2	<b>Africa</b>
ع	'a or aa	3	sound from deep in the throat as in the name 'Ali or the instrument 'oud
خ	kh; strong "h"	5	loch (as pronounced in Scotland)
ط	ṭ or t	6	<b>tar</b>
ح	ḥ or h; whispered "h"	7	<b>hoot</b>
ق	g (pronounced as a glottal stop in Levantine Arabic and as "g" in MSA)	8	pause in the middle of "uh-oh" (in MSA pronounced like <b>cough</b> and transliterated q)
ص	ṣ or s	9	<b>saw</b>
غ	gh; like the guttural French "r"		Paris (as pronounced by a French person)
ذ	dH; Soft "th"		<b>this</b>
ء	' (glottal stop)		pause in the middle of "uh-oh"
ج	y (or j)		<b>yes</b>
ك	ch (or k)		<b>chin</b>

## Useful Words and Phrases

English	Arabic (Romanized)
Hello (May peace be upon you)	Salaam Alaykum
Response: And upon you be peace	Wa Alaykum as-Salam
How are you?	Keefak (m) / keefik (f)?
Hi	Marhaba
Good morning	Sabah al-khayr
Good afternoon / evening	Masaa' al-khayr
My name is...	Ismee...
Yes	Aywa
No	La
Please	Min fadlak (m) / fadlik (f)
Thank you	Shukran
You're welcome	Ahlayn
Good night (when leaving)	Tusbih (m) / Tusbihi (f) 'al-khayr
Where are you from?	Min wayn inteh (m) / inti (f)?
Where do you live?	Wayn saakin (m) / saakineh (f)?
I am American	Ana amreeki (m) / amreekiyya (f)
Do you speak (English / Arabic)?	Btahki inkileezi / 'arabi?
Now	Halla'
Today	Al-yaum
Tomorrow	Bukra
Yesterday	Mbaarih
The meal was very good	Ikteer tayyib al-aki
Look!	Talla' (m) / Talla'i (f)! Shuuf (m) / shuufi (f)!
Excuse me	Law samaht (m) / samahti (f)
Pardon?	'Afwan?
I don't understand you	Ma fahimit 'alayk (m) / 'alayki (f)
What?	Shu?
Where?	Wayn?
How?	Keef?
Me / you	Ana / Inteh (m) / inti (f)
Him / her	Huweh (m) / hiyeh (f)
What time is it now?	Addaysh as-saa'a?

## 7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

### Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 86.4%
- Male: 91.7%
- Female: 81% (2015 estimate)

### Early Education

Ancient Natufians, Akkadians, and Babylonians (see *History and Myth*) informally transmitted values, beliefs, historical knowledge, and a sense of community to younger generations. While early empires likely used an ancient alphabet developed in the region, during the Seleucid Empire that began in 333 BC (see *History and Myth*), Syria became a center for Greek language, culture, and education. Around 200 AD, the Romans (see *History and Myth*) founded schools in Antioch and Damascus, and Syrian education flourished.

With the spread of Islam in the 7th century (see *History and Myth*), instruction for children was formalized, with teachers giving lessons in Qur'anic verses, Islamic rituals and duties, and Arabic calligraphy to the children of elite Muslim families. Some male children received religious primary school instruction at a **kuttab**, traditional Islamic school. Advanced



students attended **madrasas**; more comprehensive schools designed to build a Syrian civil service workforce.

Instruction for the region's Christians remained informal until the 18th century, when French monks established missionary schools. Beginning around 1839, Ottoman authorities allowed other foreign Christian schools to open during the **Tanzimat** ("reorganization") movement (see *History and Myth*), increasing educational opportunities for Christian and other non-Muslim students. Some Muslims also attended the foreign-run missionary schools, since they offered quality education.

However, the Ottomans sought to both limit the influence of the foreign religious schools and produce soldiers and bureaucrats to administer the empire across the provinces, founding public schools in the mid-late 19th century. By 1890, public school enrollment doubled that of religious schools.

### 20th Century Education

In the early 20th century, the Ottomans promoted higher educational instruction in Turkish and French, until their empire collapsed during World War I (see *History and Myth*). During a brief period of independence (see *History and Myth*), in 1920, King Faisal bin Ali implemented extensive educational reforms, replacing Turkish with Arabic as the official language and establishing new schools, such as the Arab Academy in Damascus. After ousting Faisal later that year, French authorities reformed the education system again, requiring French-language instruction, and in 1923, founded Syrian University by merging Ottoman law and medical universities.



In 1958, Syrian University split into northern Aleppo University and southern Damascus University, further expanding the reach of higher education. However, during Syria's 1958-61 union with Egypt as the United Arab Republic (see *History and Myth*), the government banned Kurdish language publications, restricting the cultural and linguistic identity of Syrian Kurds (see *Political and Social Relations*).

After consolidating power in 1970, President Hafez al-Assad used education to promote the Arab Socialist ideals of the Ba'ath Party (see *History and Myth*). The 1973 constitution stipulated that education should create a socialist, nationalist Arab generation. As such, Assad continued restrictions on the Kurdish language, expanding the prohibition to schools. In 1976, Assad instituted a 5-year plan to improve primary school enrollment, and in 1981, made 6 years of primary education compulsory. By the late 1980s, nearly all boys and 85% of girls of the appropriate age were enrolled in primary school.

## Modern Education System

After Bashar al-Assad became President in 2000 (see *History and Myth*), his regime further promoted the expansion of the educational system, and in 2002, extended compulsory education to 9 years. Further, the regime has promoted women's education, and more women have enrolled in university than ever before. While the Assad regime focuses less on Syrian military history, it continued to promote Arab Socialism and the history of the ruling Ba'ath Party.



In 2009, only 2 years before the start of the civil war (see *History and Myth*), educational spending consisted of some 5.1% of GDP, slightly more than the global average of 4.3%. Since 2011,

many Syrian children left the country with their families as refugees or became internally displaced people. Accordingly, as of 2023, over 2.4 million Syrian children are not enrolled in school. Further, over 7,000 schools have been damaged or coopted during the conflict, with some 40% no longer used for educational purposes. In northwestern Syria, some students attend school in tents.

Nevertheless, Syrian government schools have continued to operate during the war, though primarily in regime-controlled areas (see *Political and Social Relations*). Schools are frequently overcrowded and under-resourced, and often remain open for two shifts per day. As of 2017, some 42.9% of schools use the Syrian government's curriculum.

**Pre-Primary:** Children aged 4-5 may attend private pre-primary programs, as there is no public option. As a result of the war, the already low enrollment rate in pre-primary programs dropped from about 9% in 2010 to 5.4% in 2013.

**Basic Education:** Basic education is free, comprised of primary (grades 1-6) and intermediate (grades 7-9). Following primary school, instruction is segregated by gender, with boys and girls attending separate classes or schools. In 2010, the primary school enrollment rate was 93%, similar to Turkey's rate of about 96% in the same year. By 2019, enrollment had dropped to 64%.

**Secondary Education:** Secondary school consists of grades 10-12, and students choose between two tracks: “general,” for university preparation, or “technical,” for industrial, commercial, and home economics professions. At the end of either track, students take the **Thanawiya Amma** exam for admission to a post-secondary program, where certain scores qualify students for specific majors. In 2022, lower secondary school completion for boys is near 40% and 47% for girls.

**Post-Secondary Education:** Damascus University is the oldest and largest post-secondary educational institute in Syria. Since the start of the war, Kurdish and other opposition groups (see *Political and Social Relations*) established new universities that do not receive state funding. However, these institutions are not officially accredited, making it challenging for students to find jobs following completion of a degree. The Assad regime’s repression of public institutions has especially affected higher education. Universities often face censorship, as pro-regime student organizations monitor campuses for dissent. In addition, many universities are unable to retain quality professors due to a lack of qualified personnel and declining salaries.

### **Non-Regime Education**

The war has politicized education in Syria, with many opposition groups modifying or creating their own curricula, sometimes hampering



educational progress. Some students living in opposition-controlled areas must cross into government-controlled territory for national exams, at times making them targets. In 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as Daesh, ISIL, and IS) kidnapped 186 Kurdish students on buses returning from Aleppo and forced them to attend extremist schools led by female ISIS members.

In opposition-controlled areas, many students attend schools that still receive government funding and use the official curriculum. As of 2017, some 43.4% of all schools in Syria use a modified curriculum that eliminates Ba’ath Party history. Although the internationally recognized Syrian National Council

government (see *Political and Social Relations*) issues certificates to secondary school graduates, only Turkey recognizes them. Opposition groups founded Free Aleppo University and Idlib University to provide higher education to students in opposition-controlled areas. Since the government retook some territory (see *History and Myth*), these universities have closed.



While some Kurdish schools in northeastern Syria use a United Nations (UN) curriculum, many others use the newly created Rojava curriculum, named for the region controlled by a Kurdish government (see *Political and Social*

*Relations*). As of 2017, some 10.4% of schools in Syria use the Rojava curriculum, which allows for instruction in Kurdish or Aramaic (see *Language and Communication*). Compared to the government curriculum, the Rojava curriculum alters the political educational content, does not teach Arab history, and covers some controversial topics like Kurdish feminism. Kurds also founded the 2-year Rojava University, with its main campus in Qamishli, near the Turkish border. As of early 2023, the Assad regime and other countries do not recognize Kurdish schools.

The UN hosts a self-learning curriculum covering math, science, Arabic, and English, designed for students who are unable to attend school in-person due to the war. As of late 2020, some 14,250 students study through this program. In addition, the UN runs some 103 schools for Palestinian refugees in Syria.

## Religious Education

Government-run schools are officially non-sectarian but require instruction on Islam or Christianity, with separate classes for Muslim and Christian students. While the Ministry of Religious Endowments develops the religion curriculum for public schools, it allows Druze and Christians to operate some of these schools. Some members of other religious groups attend private schools, where they receive instruction on secular or religious content.



## 8. TIME AND SPACE

### Overview

Syrians view strong interpersonal connections and respect for hierarchy as key to conducting business. In general, public displays of affection are inappropriate, though social touching among friends and family is common.

### Time and Work

The Syrian work week runs from Sunday-Thursday, and business hours vary by establishment type. While public sector employees generally work from 9am-3pm, private businesses typically open from 9am-5pm. Most shops are open Saturday-Thursday and operate according to the owner's preference, usually running from midmorning until late evening, often with a midday break. If open at all, businesses have limited hours on Fridays, the Muslim holy day, and the workday is often shorter during the holy month of Ramadan (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Generally, banks open 8:30am-2pm, Saturday-Thursday.



**Working Environment:** Syrian labor laws establish an 8-hour workday and a maximum 48-hour workweek, with government-set overtime pay. Other benefits include holiday bonus pay, 2-4 weeks of paid vacation, and a variable minimum wage based on job type and educational level. However, the civil war (see *History and Myth*) has impacted the formal economy, with an increasing number of Syrians depending on unregulated, or informal, employment (see *Economics and Resources*). An absence of government oversight or legal recourse for these informal workers has made workplace discrimination, sexual harassment, and unsafe labor practices increasingly common.

**Time Zone:** Syria adheres to Eastern European Time (EET), which is 2 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 7 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST). Syria observes Eastern European Summer Time (EEST) from the end of March-October, when Syria is 3 hours ahead of GMT.

**Lunar Calendar:** Syrian Muslims use the *Hijri* (Islamic) calendar to track Muslim holidays. Since it is based on lunar phases, dates fall 11 days earlier each year in relation to the Western calendar. The Islamic calendar's 12 months each have 30 days or fewer. Days begin at sunset on what the Western calendar would show as the previous day. For example, each new week begins at sunset on Saturday, and the Muslim holy day of Friday begins on Thursday evening.

### National Holidays

- January 1: New Year's Day
- March 8: Revolution Day
- March 20: Teachers' Day
- March 21: Mothers' Day
- March / April: Easter
- April 17: Independence Day
- April / May: Orthodox Easter
- May 1: Labor Day
- May 6: Martyrs' Day
- October 6: Anniversary of the 1973 War with Israel (see *History and Myth*)
- December 25: Christmas
- December 31: New Year's Eve

Variable dates according to the lunar calendar:

- ***Eid al-Fitr***: End of Ramadan
- ***Eid al-Adha***: Festival of Sacrifice
- ***Awal Muharram***: *Hijri* New Year

### Time and Business

Syrians tend to have a relaxed approach to time, considering schedules and deadlines less important than relationships and social obligations. As a result, lengthy introductions, small talk, and interruptions may delay the start or progress of meetings. Workplaces are typically hierarchical, and subordinate staff's inability to confirm an agreement without management's approval may prolong negotiations and decision-making.

## Public and Personal Space

Syria maintains gender segregation in some public spaces, though the practice is not always strictly enforced. Many schools above the primary level provide segregated instruction (see *Learning and Knowledge*). Similarly, mosques may designate separate areas for men and women to pray, and traditional coffee shops (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*) cater exclusively to male clientele. Most Syrians maintain an arm's length when conversing with strangers, but stand closer to family and friends. Friends of the same gender may maintain little personal space when interacting.

**Touch:** Unrelated Syrians of the opposite sex tend to refrain from touching, even during greetings (see *Language and Communication*). Close friends and relatives often touch while interacting, and friends of the same gender may hold hands in public. Syrians tend to use only the right hand when eating, gesturing, passing and accepting items, and shaking hands, as the left hand is reserved for sanitary purposes. Foreign nationals should adhere to this custom to avoid offense.

**Eye Contact:** While Syrians consider direct eye contact during greetings a demonstration of sincerity and interest, foreign nationals should avoid prolonged staring and winking.

## Photographs

Mosques, airports, government offices, and military installations typically prohibit photography. Foreign nationals should obtain permission before photographing a Syrian.



## Driving

Like Americans, Syrians drive on the right side of the road. Conditions are often poor, with roads lacking adequate signage and illumination. Other hazards include unmarked lanes, potholes, and drivers who

disregard traffic laws. Lax traffic law enforcement and degraded roads and transportation infrastructure (see *Technology and Material*) has almost tripled the number of roadside deaths since war began in 2011. In 2021, Syria's rate of traffic-related deaths was 30 per 100,000 people, the more than neighboring Lebanon (8) and higher than the US (14).

## 9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

### Overview

Syria's clothing, sport, music, and art reflect its unique history, religious and ethnic diversity, and the country's place in the modern global economy.

### Dress and Appearance

For everyday dress, Syrians wear either Western or traditional attire. As standards of dress tend to be conservative, both male and female visitors should also dress conservatively, avoiding shorts, mini-skirts, and sleeveless tops, except while visiting private beaches or pools.



**Men:** Today, Syrian men mostly dress in Western-style slacks or jeans with collared knit or woven shirts, usually with long sleeves. A few men dress in traditional clothing, which includes the **kaftan**, a long gown that is often white in the summer to keep the wearer cool and dark and made of heavier fabric for the winter. Other traditional dress includes the **shirwal** (loose cotton shirt and pants), which can include an **abaye** (cloak), and a **hatta** (headscarf) with an **agal** (rope) to hold it in place. Alternatively, some men wear a **keffiyeh**, a checkered headscarf, which Palestinian farmers traditionally wear.

**Women:** Traditional women's clothing includes a **thob**, a long, loose dress made from heavy dark-colored cotton, and a **hijab** (headscarf). Women's **kaftans** are long, buttoned coats, often worn in cooler months. Some Syrian women choose to dress in modern Western-style clothing such as jeans, colorful designer dresses, and high heels, sometimes combined with a **hijab**.

### Recreation and Leisure

Syrians tend to spend their leisure time with family or friends, picnicking (particularly on Fridays), shopping and bargaining at local markets, eating out, and vacationing. Day trips to rural

areas, beaches, or historical sites are popular outdoor activities. Syrian men often spend time at coffee shops, considered an essential part of Syrian life. In addition to coffee, tea, and tobacco, coffee shops provide a social atmosphere and leisure activities such as card games, backgammon, and dominoes.

**Holidays:** Syrians celebrate a wide array of religious holidays that reflect the country's religious diversity (see *Time and Space*). While most Muslims celebrate the holidays Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr (see *Religion and Spirituality*), only Shi'a Muslims commemorate Ashura.

Among Christians, Easter and Christmas are central holidays, though customs and dates of celebration vary by tradition (see *Time and Space*). A four week fast from dairy and meat typically precedes mass on Christmas Eve, and on Christmas Day, many Christians visit friends and family.

Kurds celebrate the Spring Equinox, the beginning of the Kurdish new year, known as **Newroz**. As the most important holiday in Kurdish culture, *Newroz* celebrations include days of

eating, dancing around ceremonial bonfires, playing games, and listening to poetry and stories. Many Kurds visit relatives' graves and make amends for past disputes during *Newroz*.

Other holidays celebrate important dates in Syrian

history. Independence Day commemorates the end of the French colonial mandate over Syria in 1946 (see *History and Myth*), and Revolution Day marks the Ba'ath Party's 1963 rise to power (see *History and Myth*). Both holidays feature parades, speeches, and rallies.

### Sports and Games

Syrians participate in a wide variety of sports such as baseball, track and field, basketball, weightlifting, martial arts, swimming, and tennis. After becoming President in 2000, Bashar al-Assad encouraged Syrians to participate in athletics, renovating and



building sports complexes across the country. In the Olympics, Syrians have medaled in boxing, sprinting, and wrestling.

**Soccer:** Known as “football” in the region, soccer is Syria’s most popular sport and pastime, and many Syrian children learn to play at a young age. While families often play at gatherings, even those who do not directly participate tend to be active spectators, and most Syrians have a favorite team. Although the Syrian men’s national team has never qualified for the World Cup, it has competed in the West Asian Football Federation Championship (WAFFC), the Arab Nations Cup, the Pan Arab Games, and the Mediterranean Games, winning the WAFFC in 2012. Since the 2011 beginning of the civil war (see *History and Myth*), Syria has not hosted any games.



**Traditional Games:** An ancient West Asian boardgame, **tawle** (backgammon) involves two players, who attempt to clear their markers from the board. Other popular traditional pastimes include **shatranj** (chess) and **dama** (a variant of checkers).

## Music

**Traditional:** Singers typically accompany traditional Syrian music, which commonly features string instruments. Traditional music is meant to induce a state of emotional ecstasy, called **tarab**, in the listener, which is only created by the best singers, known as **mutribin** (male) and **mutribat** (female). While the **oud** (a pear-shaped lute) is essential in most Syrian music, other traditional instruments include the **kanun** (a trapezoidal string instrument related to the zither) and **nay** (reed pipe). Traditional percussion instruments include tambourines and a variety of drums, ordinarily made of animal hides stretched over bases of clay, metal, or wood.

**Modern:** Many Syrians listen to Western or Arabic pop and other regional music genres. Two of Syria’s most popular musicians are George Wassouf, a Syrian-Lebanese singer, who has

produced more than 30 albums, and Rouwaida Attieh, a Syrian singer known for her deep, distinctive voice.

## Dance

Syria's most important dance is the **dabke** (or **dabkah**), a traditional folk dance with regional variations that may have originated when neighbors gathered to stamp mud into cracks in thatched roofs. Today, the **dabke** is a group dance performed in a line, with a leader who waves a handkerchief or string of beads to direct the rest of the dancers. The style of the **dabke** varies. Although men and women sometimes dance together at large gatherings, professional dancers typically perform in single-sex groups. While men often show off athletic prowess, women perform movements that demonstrate their agility and grace. In addition, some female dance groups showcase an array of



movements to impress the mothers of potential grooms, but they typically exhibit more modest dances when performing in front of men.

A popular Kurdish dance is the **govend**, often performed at weddings and other large events. It is a lively and fast-paced group dance performed in a circle. Most of the dancers hold hands while surrounding two additional dancers in the center.

## Cinema

Although most Syrian-made films have not achieved mainstream success, Syrian filmmakers have produced internationally acclaimed films, such as **al-Hudud** (The Borders), a political satire about a traveler trapped between two fictional countries. Today, cinema largely focuses on the experiences of Syrian people during the war, through documentaries and fiction films. Mohammad Ali Atassi and Ziad Homsî's 2014 film **Baladna al-Rahib** (Our Terrible Country) follows a refugee's physical and mental journey from Damascus to Turkey.

## Literature

Following the arrival of Arabs beginning in the 7th century (see *History and Myth*), a rich tradition of written and oral Arabic poetry emerged, with most early poetry focusing on the universal

themes of love, grief, peace, and war. For centuries, Syria has been home to influential, and often controversial, Arabic literature. Abu al-Ala al-Ma'arri (973-1057), a blind poet, wrote philosophical poems and stories that rejected mainstream Islamic beliefs, for example, condemning the **hajj** pilgrimage to Mecca (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Despite the controversial views depicted in his work, today, al-Ma'arri is regarded as one of the Arab world's most influential poets.

In the 20th century, Arabic writing and poetry often served as a form of dissent against various oppressive governments in Syria. Ahmad Said, also known by pen name “Adonis,” is a revolutionary poet, who broke from traditional Arabic poetic style by incorporating prose in his writing. In the 1950s, he criticized the government, resulting in his imprisonment. Ghada al-Sammam became famous for fiction addressing Syria's political and economic problems, as well as her struggle as one of Syria's only prominent female authors. Zakaria Tamer also frequently criticized government, writing about class struggles and political grievances in short stories and children's books. The Bashar al-Assad regime (see *History and Myth*) banned publication of Tamer's works, which it believed too critical of its government.



### Folk Arts and Handicrafts

Syria has a rich tradition of folk arts and crafts. Common crafts include ceramics, stonework, metalwork, wood, leather, blown glass, and textiles. Before the civil war, the Syrian government invested in independent craftsmen, recognizing the cultural importance of Syrian folk art. Metalwork, such as Arabic-style coffee pots (**dallah**), is one of the most popular crafts sold throughout Syria. Furthermore, some major cities are known for producing distinctive fabrics: Damascus, for elaborate, quality silks and brocades known as silk damask (named for the city), in addition to woven cloth known as **ghabani**; Homs, for heavy silk, wool, and cotton headscarves or headbands (**hamsiyah** or **kasrawaniyah**); and Aleppo, for **hamsiyah** fabrics, often decorated in distinctive block-print designs.



## 10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

### Sustenance Overview

Meals in Syria are often significant social events. Traditional Syrian cuisine reflects the country's multicultural history, with Arab, Turkish, French, and Mediterranean influences. Dishes generally incorporate fresh, local ingredients seasoned with aromatic spices.

### Dining Customs

Most Syrians eat three daily meals and snack throughout the day. Traditionally, the mid-day meal is the largest, with friends and family lingering over the food to enjoy conversation and companionship. When invited to a Syrian home, guests usually arrive a few minutes late and present the host with a small gift, such as sweets, fresh fruit, or honey.



A meal typically consists of a large collection of starters (**mezze**), flatbread, and main courses that all diners share. Most Syrians avoid using the left hand to eat or pass food (see *Time and Space*). Hosts usually insist on providing guests with additional servings of food, coffee, or tea as a gesture of hospitality, and politeness dictates guests oblige and sample all dishes offered. Further, leaving as soon as the meal concludes is considered rude. Instead, guests should remain to share extended conversation with other diners.

### Diet

Bread is Syria's most common staple, served alongside most dishes. While there are dozens of varieties, a common form is **khubz** (pita or flatbread), which diners tear into pieces and use to scoop dips like hummus (blended chickpeas and sesame paste) and **labneh** (thick, creamy yogurt garnished with olive oil or served strained with diced cucumber, fresh mint, and crushed

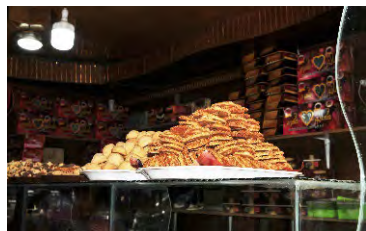
garlic). Other traditional breads include **kaak** (crispy flatbread topped with sesame seeds) and **manakish** (flatbread typically spiced with **za'tar**, a mixture of thyme, marjoram, and sumac).

Besides bread, most meals include vegetables and/or an animal protein such as lamb, chicken, or fish. Prepared in a variety of ways, rice also accompanies many dishes. Common herbs and spices include mint, parsley, garlic, cinnamon, black pepper, oregano, nutmeg, and allspice. Fresh fruit is a typical snack, and common fruits include figs, tangerines, oranges, apples, melons, pomegranates, and peaches. Observant Muslims consume neither pork nor alcohol. In addition, they adhere to particular rules of animal slaughter and meat preparation to ensure that food is **halal**, allowed by Islamic law.

### Popular Dishes and Meals

For breakfast, Syrians eat a variety of sweet and savory pastries like **manakish** or croissants with **za'tar**. Other common breakfast foods include **falafel** (a deep-fried mixture of chickpeas with garlic, cumin, and parsley), **fuul** (fava beans mixed with lemon, olive oil, garlic, and cumin), and an assortment of olives or preserved fruits and vegetables.

As the largest meal, lunch traditionally starts with several *mezze*



such as **tabbouleh** (a salad of cracked wheat, parsley, mint, onions, shallots, and tomatoes, dressed with lemon juice and olive oil); **salatah arabiyyah** (a salad of diced green peppers and white onions, tomatoes, olive oil, and black pepper);

**shanklish** (aged goat's or cow's milk cheese, rolled in **za'tar** and Aleppo pepper); and **yabrak** (grape leaves stuffed with spiced beef and rice), olives, and small pizzas. A popular regional dish, **kibbeh**, features ground lamb or beef mixed with onion, cracked wheat, and spices, served raw, fried, or baked in pastry dough. Other common main dishes include **fattah** (*khubz*, strained yogurt, steamed chickpeas, cumin, and vegetable or meat

toppings), **kebabs** (skewered seasoned meat), and grilled fish. Dinner is often a smaller meal, and typically includes leftovers from lunch or similar dishes.

For dessert or a sweet snack, Syrians eat **baklava** (a pastry of layered filo dough, nuts, and rose-water syrup), **booza** (chewy ice cream made with plant resin and orchid flour, topped with pistachios), or **kanafeh** (shredded filo dough layered with soft cheese and syrup). Due to the historical French presence (see *History and Myth*), **macarons** (almond cookies) flavored with anise are also common. During the holy month of Ramadan (see *Religion and Spirituality*) **maamoul** (shortbread cookies filled with dates or nuts) are popular.

## Beverages

Syrians often drink traditional Arabian or Turkish coffee served black and heavily laden with sugar or black tea sweetened with sugar. Many Syrians also drink lemonade or fresh-squeezed seasonal fruit juices. **Jallab** (date, carob, and grape molasses mixed with rose water served over ice) is a common drink offered at Syrian food stalls. Dairy-based drinks such as **rayib** (sour buttermilk) are also popular. **Yerba mate**, a caffeinated tea-like drink native to South America, is common among the Druze (see *Religion and Spirituality*). If Syrians consume alcohol, **arak** (an anise-flavored spirit) is a popular choice, often served with *mezze*.

## Eating Out

Restaurants and cafes remain popular sites for socializing with family and friends, despite building damage, security



constraints, and food shortages caused by the civil war (see *History and Myth*). Coffee shops offering **shisha** (flavored tobacco smoked through a water pipe) are common gathering spots for Syrian men. Ice cream parlors are popular in cities and provide a place for women and children to socialize. Street stalls offer casual fare and snacks such as fresh fruit, **falafel**, **saj** (a thin bread with *za'tar* or **muhammara** – ground walnuts and peppers) baked over a large metal dome and **shawarma** (meat

grilled on a rotating spit, sliced, and wrapped in soft flatbread with yogurt and vegetables). A 10% tip for good service is expected in most restaurants and other eateries.

## Health Overview

Prior to the 21st century, the Syrian government had established a generally well-functioning healthcare infrastructure, providing free basic care for all citizens. After a severe drought in 2006 (see *Political and Social Relations*), and since the 2011 onset of



war, the quality of healthcare has declined. Besides extensive physical damages resulting from the conflict, there is a lack of funding, shortages of essential

medicines and equipment, and ongoing emigration of trained medical professionals.

This breakdown in medical care is apparent in the recent decline in life expectancy. While the average Syrian lived to be over 74 in 2006, life expectancy fell to a low of 70 in 2014, though it has since risen above 72, still lower than neighboring Jordan (76) and Lebanon (78). The severe droughts have caused migration to overcrowded cities, straining medical services and negatively affecting healthcare outcomes. The maternal mortality rate rose from 27 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2000 to 20 in 2023 (compared to the US rate of 17). Efforts to reduce infant mortality have been more successful, with deaths per 1,000 live births decreasing from 30 in 1990 to 19 in 2023, just over the Middle East North Africa (MENA) regional average (18). While an improvement, this level is almost three times higher than the US rate.

## Traditional Medicine

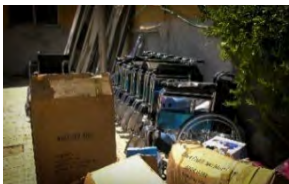
Traditional medicine consists of the knowledge, practices, and skills derived from a native population's beliefs, experiences, and theories. Traditional Syrian medicine relies on herbal treatments to identify and cure the causes of illness, both physical and spiritual. Besides herbal remedies, common treatment methods include acupuncture (a process in which a practitioner inserts very thin needles into a patient's skin) and

***hijama*** (also known as wet cupping, the process of applying heated cups to the skin to extract toxins, improve blood flow, and alleviate pain). Some traditional Syrian treatments incorporate Islamic practices such as reciting the Qur'an or drinking holy water from the Zamzam well, a holy site near the Ka'aba in Mecca, Saudi Arabia (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

## Modern Healthcare System

Although the Syrian constitution gives all citizens the right to healthcare, the government is unable to provide adequate health services to all Syrians. In 2022 Syria spent 4% of GDP on healthcare, below the MENA average of 5% and far less than the US (17%). While most wealthy Syrians have access to quality care in private hospitals and clinics in urban areas, high up-front costs make these facilities inaccessible for most. Rural and lower-income citizens primarily rely on overburdened public healthcare facilities run by the Ministry of Health (MoH) and frequently understaffed, damaged from conflict, lack the proper equipment to offer comprehensive care, and have lax enforcement of sanitary standards.

Before the civil war, the MoH managed a robust pharmaceutical industry, which met some 90% of domestic medicine needs. Because the war largely destroyed the industry and international sanctions have prevented some medical imports (see *Economics and Resources*), many Syrians do not have access to basic medicines. Similarly, sanctions have made it difficult to import medical equipment or replace machinery that the conflict has damaged or destroyed, forcing many Syrians to forego necessary medical procedures.



Further, the ruling Assad government and Russian forces have routinely targeted hospitals in areas which opposition groups hold (see *Political and Social Relations*), severely damaging preexisting healthcare networks. Since early 2023, only 61% of all public hospitals remained functional. Attacks on healthcare centers and medical professionals also have caused many doctors and nurses to flee Syria. By early 2021, some 70% of

health professionals had left the country. As a result, many Syrians pay bribes to receive treatment at public hospitals. Some Syrians seek international assistance for basic medical treatment, either in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights (see *Political and Social Relations*) or in refugee camps in Turkey.

**Health Challenges:** In Syria, non-communicable “lifestyle” diseases account for about 75% of all deaths. In 2019, cardiovascular diseases caused about 25% of deaths, while other prominent illnesses included diabetes, cancer, and chronic respiratory diseases. In 2021 it was estimated that 15% of Syrians have diabetes.

The war has made combating infectious diseases more difficult. Mass internal displacement (see *History and Myth*) has forced



many Syrians to live in crowded substandard housing, some without access to adequate plumbing and sewage disposal (see *Family and Kinship*). Inadequate housing and the destruction of hospitals has led to a series of tuberculosis, typhoid, and hepatitis A outbreaks that require international assistance. As of 2023, the World Health Organization has confirmed some 57,423 cases of COVID-19, the disease caused by

coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, resulting in some 3,163 deaths. The Syrian government has no independent monitoring body tracking infections and is unable to document cases in territory outside of its control, leading international aid groups to speculate that infection and death rates are much higher.

The war has also led to an increase in external causes of death. As of early 2024, as many as 617,910 Syrians have died in the war. Many of them have died in combat, as the result of aerial bombing, shelling between armed groups, and chemical attacks conducted by the Assad government (see *History and Myth*). In 2015, bombs and missiles were the leading cause of death for Syrian women and children. In 2018, estimates indicated that some 15% of Syrians had permanent disabilities as a direct result of the conflict.

## 11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

### Overview

For centuries, the area of modern-day Syria had an agrarian and trade-based economy, first emerging as an important regional center around 3000 BC (see *History and Myth*). Scholars believe ancient Syrians participated in an extensive trade network with Damascus (Syria's capital today) at its center. Under Greek and then Muslim rule, Syrian economic power grew through foreign trade. Beginning in the 16th century, the Ottomans (see *History and Myth*) further developed Syria's agricultural and trade sectors, exporting cotton and silk to Europe for centuries. Meanwhile, Damascus and Aleppo grew as significant regional markets.



In the early 20th century, the Syrian economy declined during World War I due to a naval blockade and Ottoman resource plundering (see *History and Myth*). During the subsequent French colonial rule, French authorities invested in Syrian schools, roads, and cities. Following the occupation by Allied forces during World War II, some local manufacturers flourished, catering to the needs of the soldiers. However, the Syrian economy could not support massive industrial growth during the war due to a lack of physical infrastructure and financial resources.

Following Syria's independence from the French in 1946 (see *History and Myth*), the newly formed government began investing in agriculture, developing new irrigation techniques, along with textile, paper, chemicals, and construction industries. However, the growth was primarily limited to large companies. Rural Syrians did not benefit as much as city dwellers, primarily due to the implementation of an inefficient sharecropping model.

Amid discontent with growing inequality, the Ba'ath Party rose to power in 1963 (see *History and Myth*), pursuing a socialist

economic framework that included land distribution and the nationalization of private banks. With a series of 5-year plans, the government sought to grow the economy through state-run industries, pursuing a similar economic model as its socialist allies. In 1973, with help from the Soviet Union (present-day Russia), the Syrian government completed the construction of the Euphrates Dam, which increased irrigation for agricultural use. Further, by 1985, some 40% of industrial laborers worked for state-run companies.



Nevertheless, in the same year, Syria's government announced a shift towards a market-oriented economic policy. Under the free-market reforms, farmers no longer had to deliver crops to state-run companies, and producers could more easily

export their goods. The government began diversifying crops beyond cotton and invested heavily in irrigation studies, often with the support of the World Bank or the United Nations. Despite the reforms, Syria's economy collapsed due to oil shortages from supply cuts during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War (see *History and Myth*). Lower remittances and seasonal droughts further resulted in stagnant growth across sectors. This economic stagnation prompted the administration to further liberalize the economy in the 1990s.

Upon taking office in 2000, President Bashar al-Assad pursued more reforms. In 2001, Syria legalized private banks and joined the World Trade Organization, attracting foreign investment to the country. In 2005, the government formalized its pursuit of this social market economy strategy, and in 2009, launched the country's first stock exchange. Due to these changes, GDP doubled between 2005-10. Despite economic growth, corruption was rampant, and although the liberal economic policies strengthened the banking, construction, and tourism sectors, many small businesses did not benefit much from the changes.

Since the start of the civil war in 2011 (see *History and Myth*), key industries and supply chains have collapsed due to the ruin



of infrastructure and lack of workers who fled Syria. After reaching a peak of \$60.2 billion in 2010, GDP fell to \$12.3 billion in 2016. The US and other countries have imposed sanctions on Syria, further affecting the economy (see *Political and Social Relations*). However, the regime evades some sanctions by using illegal transit routes, shell companies (businesses created to hold funds and manage another entity's financial transactions), and intermediaries to smuggle goods into Syria.

Despite Assad's initial attempts at economic liberalization, sanctions and war have caused the regime to take a more centralized approach, creating trade barriers and increasing import tariffs. Public-private partnerships have become the main mechanism for economic activity, and only businesses favorable to the regime have prospered. As of 2018, just nine business leaders controlled some 90% of the Syrian economy.

These restrictive measures and mounting US and international sanctions since 2011 have resulted in a significant decline in trade. However, Russia and Iran have helped sustain the Syrian economy, often by avoiding sanctions (see *Political and Social Relations*). In 2019, Syria signed a long-term contract with a Russian company to expand the Tartus port and has imported oil from Iran during shortages.

Because many Syrians had deposited their savings in Lebanese banks, when Lebanon's financial system crashed in 2019, Syria entered a financial crisis. As a result, between 2019-20, the Syrian pound lost 70% of its value. In 2020, the US again increased sanctions, targeting more businesses and individuals affiliated with the Syrian regime (see *Political and Social Relations*). These sanctions and restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic (see *Sustenance and Health*) led to another massive depreciation of the Syrian pound, with inflation reaching about 200%. As a result, the Syrian government was unable to afford Russian grain imports, leading to a grain and bread shortage,



forcing many Syrians to stand in long lines at state-run bakeries. The Syrian government eventually created a bread distribution policy, allotting families between 1-4 bread bundles per day.



Even the grain-rich Kurdish territory (see *Political and Social Relations*) experienced protests over the rising price of flour in late 2020. In early 2021, Kurdish authorities agreed to sell subsidized flour to bakeries.

In 2024, unemployment was estimated at 13% of the workforce, though many Syrians work informal jobs or become soldiers. Even for Syrians who manage to find jobs, current salaries are nearly worthless due to rising inflation. As of

2024, international observers estimate that over 90% of Syrians live below the international poverty line of \$1.90 per day. Due to the failing economy and instability in the educational system (see *Learning and Knowledge*), 1 in 10 families relies on child labor. Syrians also rely on remittances from relatives living abroad, which totaled \$1.6 billion in 2019, surpassing the estimated total income from salaries. Further, the government requires Syrians to exchange foreign-currency remittances for Syrian pounds at state-run banks, which decreases the value of the payments.

As of early 2021, international observers predict the rebuilding of Syria will cost between \$350-400 billion. Although Russia and Iran have engaged in construction projects, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted progress. Further, the government is dependent on Kurdish authorities for some 14,000 barrels of oil per day. With most oil reserves and grain fields outside of regime control, Syria's economic growth potential is limited.

## Services

Accounting for an estimated 45% of GDP in 2022 and 62% of employment, services comprise the economy's largest sector. Key subsectors include banking, retail, and shipping. Tourism was an important industry before the war.

**Banking:** Syria has 14 private and state-owned banks. The government caps foreign ownership of private banks at 51%. In

late 2019, private banks held about \$1.13 billion, a reduction from \$13.8 billion in 2010. Investment in the banking sector has declined, primarily due to the depreciation of the Syrian pound, market instability, and effects of the 2019 Lebanese financial crisis on the Syrian financial sector.

### **Agriculture**

As the second largest sector of the economy, agriculture accounted for some 43% of GDP in 2022 and about 15% of the labor force. The agricultural sector faces disruptions in shipping routes affecting the export of goods and import of farm machinery. In 2020, agricultural production was approximately half the level in 2011.



**Farming:** As of 2018, some 25% of Syrian land is arable. Prior to 2008, Syria exported wheat, but due to droughts and Kurdish control of most wheat fields in recent years, the Syrian regime has imported 1.1 million tons of wheat annually. Syrian farmers also grow cotton, lentils, tomatoes, potatoes, and other crops.

### **Industry**

Industry accounted for about 12% of GDP in 2022 and 23% of employment. Key subsectors include energy, mining, and manufacturing, which has been in decline since the start of the war. As of 2018, industrial production was 20% of its pre-2011 level. In cities like Aleppo, companies struggle to stay in business due to a lack of electricity and skilled workers.

**Oil and Natural Gas:** While Syria has some 2.5 billion barrels of oil reserves, conflict and mismanagement have caused a rapid decline in daily production, which fell from 368,000 barrels in 2011 to under 100,000 today. To cover shortages, the Syrian government imports oil from Iran, despite international sanctions on both countries. As of 2021, the regime does not control most of the country's oil reserves, which are located in northern Syria.

**Mining:** Syria is home to one of the world's largest reserves of phosphates. However, the sector has been limited by weather trends, poor cultivation techniques, and mismanagement. In

2018, the Syrian government gave a Russian company access to a large phosphate mine near Palmyra, and Iranian companies have also received access to phosphate mines. While Syria did not export phosphate in 2016, it exported \$43.2 million worth in 2022. Other natural resources include iron ore and asphalt.

**Manufacturing:** Many Syrian manufacturers fled to Egypt and began operating there during the war, leaving behind formerly lucrative businesses and investing some \$800 million in Egypt between 2012-18. The Syrian government tried to incentivize manufacturers to return to Syria to rebuild domestic industries, but the efforts largely failed. As of 2018, the sector is operating at some 35% of its pre-war level.

### Currency

The Syrian pound (£S, LS), also known as the Syrian lira, is



issued in nine banknote values (5, 10, 25, 50, 100, 200, 500, 1000, and 5,000) and five coins (1, 2, 5, 10, and 25). While in 2011, \$1 traded for £S47, by mid-2025, the exchange rate had

fallen to £S13.002. The Syrian government recently released the £S5,000 banknote to keep up with rising inflation. In northern Syria, opposition groups often use the Turkish lira to avoid using the depreciating Syrian pound. The US Dollar is also commonly used, especially for real estate transactions.

### Foreign Trade

Totalling \$4.7 billion in 2022, Syria's imports primarily consisted of cigarettes, refined petroleum, and foodstuffs from Turkey (45%), United Arab Emirates (9.63%), and China (9%). In the same year, exports totaled \$771 million, and consisted of olive oil, fruits, nuts, cereals, and other agricultural products sold to Turkey (29%), Kuwait (15%), Lebanon (14%).

### Foreign Aid

In 2021, Syria received some \$9.7 billion in official development assistance, with Turkey, Germany, the US, the European Union, and the United Kingdom serving as top donors. In 2022, the US provided some \$830 million, a majority earmarked for humanitarian aid to Syrians.

## 12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

### Overview

A decade of civil war has caused extensive damage to Syria's physical infrastructure and telecommunications systems. While the constitution protects free speech and press, the government routinely restricts those freedoms.

### Transportation

Few Syrians travel by privately-owned vehicle. Instead, the most common forms of transportation are foot, bicycles, motorcycles, taxis, **servees** (minibuses), and buses. Prior to the outbreak of civil war in 2011 (see *History and Myth*), most cities had reliable public transportation systems, with buses running on set routes with standardized fares. However, due to the war, a breakdown in services coupled with increased fuel prices has caused many Syrians to depend on costly unregulated taxis and *servees*. While air-conditioned coach buses and *servees* provide scheduled service between major cities, the government has repurposed many of these buses to evacuate citizens from opposition-held areas (see *Political and Social Relations*).



**Roadways:** Since ancient times, the region has been at the crossroads of significant trade routes linking Asia with North Africa and Europe. Today, Syria's road system includes some 44,000 mi of paved and unpaved roads. Many roads connect major cities in the West and along the coast. The most important road is the M5 motorway, which links the cities of Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo. The M4 highway runs parallel to the Turkish border, connecting Syria's interior to Iraq.

**Railways:** The French began building Syria's first railroads in the late 19th century (see *History and Myth*). In the early 20th century, the Ottomans built the Hijaz rail line, connecting

Damascus to Amman (the capital of neighboring Jordan) and the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Today, Syria has a well-developed rail system, with some 1,200 miles of track that connect major cities and ports, which is used primarily to transport freight.

**Ports and Waterways:** Syria's major seaports are Latakia, Tartus, and Baniyas, all on the Mediterranean Sea. While the ports are mainly commercial, Tartus hosts a large Russian naval facility, and just south of Latakia is a Russian-operated air base.

**Airways:** Syria has 42 airports, and 24 have paved runways. Damascus International Airport is the country's busiest, followed by Aleppo International Airport, the only other airport that offers international flights. The national flag carrier, Syria Air, provides

daily flights between Aleppo and Damascus. Since the outbreak of the civil war, most Syrians cannot afford air travel and most international flights service only nearby Lebanon, Egypt, and Kuwait.



### Energy

In 2023, Syria generated some 96% of its electricity from fossil fuels, with most of the remaining 5% produced by hydroelectric plants. While Syria has an estimated 2.5 billion barrels of oil reserves, the civil war has ruined the country's petroleum extraction industry, with opposition groups controlling much of the country's production (see *Economics and Resources*).

### Media

Although Syria's constitution guarantees freedom of press, the media faces significant restrictions. The government controls most outlets and prohibits privately owned media from covering politics or other sensitive topics. Further, the government routinely persecutes journalists, who some opposition groups also frequently harass and threaten with violence, leading many to self-censor. Online, the government monitors citizens' social media use and blocks access to content deemed critical of President Assad. In a 2023 ranking of press freedoms, Syria

placed 179 of 180 countries, significantly worse than neighboring Jordan (147) and Lebanon (132).

**Print Media:** Syria's most widely circulated newspapers include government-operated dailies, *Al Ba'ath*, *Al Thawra*, and *Tishrin*. However, the opposition newspaper *Enab Baladi*, based in neighboring Turkey, circulates in opposition-held areas and among Syrian refugees abroad. While no print newspapers publish in English, the government runs the *Syria Times*, an online English-language news site.



**Radio and TV:** Radio is popular in Syria, which has a variety of government-run stations operating throughout the country. While *Radio Damascus* and *Voice of the People* are government-owned stations that broadcast news, the government permits 12 private radio stations to feature local music, sports, and non-political entertainment. However, radio stations in opposition-held areas and digital opposition broadcasts based in Turkey are also available in northern Syria. The government has two state-run cable television networks, although satellite television is a popular way for Syrians to access news and programming from other countries. Approximately two-thirds of households having a satellite connection in 2018.

### Telecommunications

War has destroyed portions of Syria's telecommunications infrastructure, resulting in relatively low levels of penetration in rural areas. In 2021, Syria had some 13 landlines and 80 mobile cellular subscriptions per 100 people.

**Internet:** Some 36% of Syrians regularly used the Internet in 2024. Most Syrians access the web through fixed-line connections, as mobile broadband penetration only covered 15% of the country in 2021. The government frequently monitors, blocks, and censors content published on the Internet. In 2018, the Syrian government established special courts that hear cases pertaining to communications and technology, which media watchdogs claim have limited online freedom of speech.



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