Syria in Perspective
An Orientation Guide

Technology Integration Division
June 2011
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Chapter 1: Geography

Introduction

Located on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea in the Middle East, Syria occupies a sensitive geopolitical region that has traditionally been a crossroads between Asia, Africa, and Europe. Modern-day Syria was once part of a larger geographical territory that encompassed the coastal and inland areas along the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Known as Greater Syria, or the Levant, this region roughly included the current states of Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, as well as the present-day Palestinian territories and a portion of southern Turkey.¹ In its modern form, Syria occupies the northern portion of the Greater Syrian region.

Most of Syria is semi-arid, desert plateau, punctuated by numerous rivers and mountains. The mountains, Jabal an Nusayriyah and the Anti-Lebanon Range in particular, shape the country’s climate by preventing much of the Mediterranean winds and rains from passing into Syria’s interior. Along the coast, summers are hot and winters are rainy. The higher elevations receive rain and snow. East of the mountains, temperatures are more extreme and the air is typically dry. Throughout Syria, the spring and fall seasons are generally mild and pleasant as the temperature gradually increases or decreases according to season.

Location and Area

Syria is bound by five neighbors. The country shares its northern border with Turkey, and to the east and southeast, it shares a border with Iraq. To the south lies Jordan. On Syria’s far southwestern edge lies the Golan Heights region, which Israel has occupied since 1967. Site of Syria’s ongoing territorial dispute with Israel, the strategic Golan Heights includes three main tributaries of the Jordan River, a major water supply for Israel. The Golan Heights border between Syria and Israel measures 76 km (47 mi). Lebanon, which also claims a portion of Golan Heights, lies between the Mediterranean Sea and Syria’s western border.² Syria’s short Mediterranean coastline (193 km or 120 mi) begins at Lebanon’s northern border and runs to the southern border of Turkey.

¹ The extent of Greater Syria varies according to source.
As a whole, Syria’s total surface area measures 185,180 sq km (71,498 sq mi), (including a 1,295 sq km (500 sq mi) region of Golan Heights). At this size, Syria is slightly larger than the state of North Dakota.

**Geographic Divisions and Topographic Features**

Syria’s topography demonstrates significant diversity as one moves from the Mediterranean coast (in the west) to the Syrian Desert (in the southeast). The western region of the country is characterized by a narrow coastal plain and two major mountain chains. The expansive eastern region largely consists of steppe or desert plateau interspersed with river basin, low elevation mountain ranges, and occasional oases.

**Coastal Plain**

Bounded by mountains to the immediate east, a narrow plain runs along Syria’s Mediterranean coast from Turkey in the north to Lebanon in the south. The width of the plain varies according to the reach of the nearby mountains; the plain is widest in the north near the port city of Latakia and in the south near the Lebanese border. Because of its extremely fertile soil and Mediterranean climate, the coastal plain is the site of intense agricultural development. It is also densely populated. The terrain along the coastline varies from sandy shores to rugged, rocky promontories and cliffs.

**Mountains**

The Jabal an Nusayriyah mountain range rises from the coastal plain to form a rugged north–south boundary running parallel to the coast. The peaks of the Jabal an Nusayriyah average 1,212 m (3,976 ft), with a highpoint of 1,524 m (5,000 ft) marking the northern end of the range. The range’s western slope, indented with deep ravines, receives significant moisture from the Mediterranean Sea. Numerous historic castles and fortresses built by either Arabs or Crusaders populate the mountains of this region. The range’s eastern slope descends rapidly into the richly fertile Ghab Depression, which is part of the Great Rift Valley. At the southern

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5 Terri Dougherty, “From Sea to Desert,” in *Syria* (San Diego: Thomson Gale, 2004), 11–12.


7 Terry Carter, Lara Dunston, and Andrew Humphreys, “Environment,” in *Syria and Lebanon* (Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 2004), 57.
end of the range, the Jabal an Nusayriyah descends into Homs Gap, a traditional trade
and passage route separating the Jabal an Nusayriyah and another major Syrian range to
the south, the Anti-Lebanon Mountains. 8

Running roughly northeast–southwest, the Anti-Lebanon Mountains form the boundary
between Syria and Lebanon. Jabal al-Shaykh, also known as Mt. Hermon (2,814 m; 9,232
ft), is located in the southern reaches of this range, which averages 2,000 m (6,500 ft). 9
These mountains are often capped with snow in winter months. From Mt. Hermon, the
range descends southward into the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights region.

Additional ranges populate the southern and central areas of Syria. The Jabal al-Arab
range, also known as the Jabal Druze, is in the far south, near the Jordanian border. These
volcanic peaks are the traditional home of the Druze, one of Syria’s many religious
groups. 10 The Jabal ar Ruwaq, the Jabal Abu Rujmayn, and the Jabal Bishri are low
elevation ranges that extend northeastward across the central plateau and southern
desert. 11

Eastern Plateau and the Syrian Desert

East of the western mountains and the Ghab Depression, northern Syria largely consists of
semiarid to arid plateau, with vegetation ranging from agricultural crops to grass and shrub. In the
north and northeast, the Euphrates River and its tributaries intersect the plateau and carry precious
water through the region, allowing for agricultural development and human settlement.
The far northeastern region of Syria is the Jazira Plain. Located between the Euphrates and Tigris
Rivers, this expanse of grassland is an important agricultural region, particularly for
cereal crops. As the northern region of Mesopotamia, the Jazira Plain extends
southeastward into Iraq. 12

Moving south from the Euphrates River Basin, the terrain transitions from steppe into the
Syrian Desert, which comprises most of southeastern Syria and extends into Iraq and
Jordan. The terrain in this region is dry, rocky, and largely barren, although there are
occasional oases and some patches of scrub grass. (The oases were once caravan towns

8 The name Anti-Lebanon Mountains means that the range lies geographically opposite the Lebanon
Mountain range.

http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578856/Syria#

http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578856/Syria#

http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+sv0030)

12 Warwick Ball, “Chapter 1: Introduction,” in Syria: A Historical and Architectural Guide (Northampton,
on the Silk Road trade route.) Small populations of Bedouin, a tribe of nomadic pastoralists, live in this area.\textsuperscript{13} Originating in the southwest, a few low elevation mountain ranges extend across the desert plateau towards the northeast. The Hawran, a volcanic lava field interspersed with patches of fertile soil, is in the southwest near the Jabal al-Arab range and the Syrian–Jordanian border.\textsuperscript{14} In the far southwest is the contested region of Golan Heights, which consists of foothills descending into plateau. The most important regional cities in the far southwest are As Suwayda and Dara’a, which became the epicenter of mass anti-government protests in the spring of 2011.

\textit{The Fertile Crescent}

The cultivated region of the country extends in an arc from the Jazira plain and the Euphrates River basin through northern Syria and south along the coastal plains. This area is part of the Fertile Crescent. Stretching from Mesopotamia in Iraq to the Nile Valley in Egypt, the Fertile Crescent is a swath of productive, hospitable land bordered by inhospitable desert. Endowed with precious water resources, the region has given rise to some of the world’s earliest civilizations.\textsuperscript{15} Today, Syria’s population remains heavily centered in pockets within the Fertile Crescent, namely the coastal plain, the historic cities of Aleppo and Damascus, and the Jazira.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{Rivers and Lakes}

\textit{Euphrates River}

The Euphrates River, or Nahr al-Furat, is the principal source of water in Syria; it is responsible for roughly 80% of the country’s water supply.\textsuperscript{17} Although only a fraction of its length is in Syria, the Euphrates is the country’s longest river. In north-central Syria, a large dam on the Euphrates feeds a massive reservoir called Buhayrat al Assad, or Lake Assad. At roughly 60 km in length, the reservoir is the nation’s largest body of water.\textsuperscript{18} Constructed in the 1960s and 1970s, the Euphrates Dam (also known as the Tabqa Dam) allows for intensive irrigation and serves as a source of hydroelectric power. To the east, two rivers, the Balikh and the Khabur, flow southward into the Euphrates as left-bank tributaries.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{13} Terri Dougherty, “From Sea to Desert,” in \textit{Syria} (San Diego: Thomson Gale, 2004), 10.


\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Encyclopædia Britannica Online}, “Fertile Crescent,” 2008, \url{http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/205250/Fertile-Crescent#}


\textsuperscript{18} Terry Carter, Lara Dunston, and Andrew Humphreys, “Palmyra to the Euphrates,” in \textit{Syria and Lebanon} (Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 2004), 216.

Seasonal waterways, known as *wadis*, may also flow east and west into the Euphrates from the desert.\(^{20}\)

**Orontes River**

The Orontes River, or Nahr al-Asi, is an essential water source for western Syria. Originating in Lebanon, the Orontes enters Syria near Homs Gap and flows northward through the Ghab Depression and into Turkey, where it empties into the Mediterranean. On its route, the river supplies the Syrian cities of Homs and Hama; each city uses dams to direct irrigation water into their respective regions.\(^ {21}\) Lake Qatinnah, a reservoir located southwest of Homs, is supplied by the Orontes, as is Lake Rastan, a reservoir found between Homs and Hama. In the north, the river is an important source of irrigation water in the heavily cultivated Ghab Depression.

**Barada River**

Originating in the Anti-Lebanon Mountains, the Barada River supplies water to Damascus, the capital of Syria. As the river approaches Damascus from the west, a series of ancient channels directs its flow across a large expanse of land, creating the Al-Ghutah Oasis. Before reaching Damascus, the river is fed by the Fijah Spring, a source of drinking water for the city. Beyond Damascus, the river drains into the desert.\(^ {22}\)

**Yarmuk River**

In the southwest, the Yarmuk River forms a small portion of the Syrian–Jordanian border before flowing into the Jordan River as a tributary. The river originates in Syria, from the volcanic lava plateau near the Jabal al-Arab range.\(^ {23}\) Regional springs that supply the Yarmuk are used for irrigation in the Hawran Plateau.\(^ {24}\)

**Al-Kabir River**

The Al-Kabir River forms a substantial segment of the Syrian–Lebanese border, which runs roughly east–west from the northern end of the Lebanon Mountains to the Mediterranean coast. Fed by mountain springs and snowmelt, the river flows westward through the coastal Akkar Plain and empties into the Mediterranean Sea. Pollution from raw sewage and agricultural and industrial chemicals

\(^{21}\) Alison Behnke, “The Land,” in *Syria in Pictures* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 2005), 12.
has detrimentally affected the river, which remains an important source of water in the region.25

_Underground Springs_

Underground springs and rivers are a significant source of drinking and irrigation water in Syria, and they often contribute to surface rivers. The Ghab Depression is known for its wealth of subterranean water resources, as numerous springs and underground rivers contribute to the regional supply.26 Springs also occur occasionally in the desert, creating sources for precious oases.

_Lakes_

The largest natural lake in Syria is Lake al-Jabbul, a seasonal saline lake located to the southeast of Aleppo. Other saline lakes are found outside the cities of Damascus and Al Hasakah. A small freshwater lake, Lake Muzayrib, lies to the northwest of Daraa.27

_Climate_

Forming a barrier between the humid Mediterranean coast and the arid eastern plateau, the mountain ranges in Syria’s west help shape the country’s climate. Specifically, the dual mountain chains of the Jabal an Nusayriyah and the Anti-Lebanon Range prevent Mediterranean winds and rains from passing into Syria’s interior. Thus, the climate of the coastal plains and western slope tend to be wetter and milder than that of the eastern slope and plateau, which experience drier conditions and greater extremes in temperature.

Syria’s Mediterranean climate cools the hot, humid conditions of the coastal plain during the summer (May–August) and causes temperatures to drop below freezing in the mountains during winter (November–February).28 Along the coast, the average daily high is 29°C (84°F) during summer, while winter temperatures range from 9–20°C (48–68°F).29 In the western mountains, average summer temperatures (22°C; 72°F) are cooler than anywhere else in the country.

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In the near eastern plateau, the cities of Damascus and Aleppo experience average daily highs of 33–37°C (91–99°F) in the summer and average daily lows of 1–4°C (34–40°F) in the winter. Further east, in the desert, average daily highs range from 37–40°C (99–104°F) in the summer while winter temperatures drop to freezing levels. Temperature extremes often occur when hot, sand-bearing winds (called khamsin) blow in from the Arabian Desert during the summer months.

Syria’s rainy season runs from November–May and December–February receive the most precipitation. The coastal plains and mountains receive approximately 76–102 cm (30–40 in) of rainfall per year. With the mountains trapping Mediterranean moisture on the western slope, the eastern plateau experiences markedly less rainfall. In the Fertile Crescent region of the eastern plateau, annual precipitation ranges from 25–51 cm (10–20 in). Beyond the semiarid steppe, in the true desert of the southeast, annual rainfall may be as minimal as 8–13 cm (3–5 in).

**Major Cities**

Historically, most of Syria’s population lived in rural areas. Urban traditions from the Greeks, Romans, and Islamic Empires left their mark in Latakia, Tadmur, Damascus, and Aleppo, which were trade centers over the centuries, but the urbanization rate was slow. In the past few decades, however, rapid urbanization has basically split the population into rural and urban areas. Urban populations have settled mainly in pockets within the Fertile Crescent. The northwest, northeast, and southwest have the highest densities. The lowest density areas are the desert steppe, which are inhabited by oasis dwellers and the Bedouin.

**Damascus (Dimashq)**

Damascus is the capital of Syria and the nation’s center for government, commerce, and culture. It has an estimated 1.7 million people living in the city proper plus 2.7 million living in the greater metropolitan area. The city lies within the irrigated oasis of al-Ghutah. Damascus is commonly known as “al-Sham,” which refers to its relative location

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in the northwest Arabian Desert. One of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, Damascus is an intercontinental crossroads of the Middle East with a long history of trade and cultural exchange.

Today, the city exhibits a mixture of antiquity and modernity. The famous Umayyad Mosque and Straight Street are found in the old city. With such a rich heritage, the city is also a center of Islamic study and practice. Modern Damascus has rail and highway links to major cities within Syria and to neighboring countries. As such, it is a marketing hub for handicrafts and products in the cement, food processing, textiles, and chemical industries.

The city’s population has rapidly expanded in recent decades and infrastructure, water supply, and services have been severely strained. The region also suffers pollution problems. Furthermore, urban sprawl has eliminated much of the surrounding farmlands and vegetation.

In recent years, Damascus has been the site of several terrorist attacks, including bombings in 2006 and 2008. The city is also headquarters for certain terrorist organizations, including Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) all of whom Syria supports as “national liberation movements.”

**Aleppo (Halab)**

Located on the plateau in northwestern Syria, Aleppo (population 4.6 million) is an important regional hub for commerce and industry. Like Damascus, Aleppo is thought to be one of the oldest continuously populated cities in the world. For centuries, the city was a major trading post on intercontinental commercial routes, and, like Damascus, it has been occupied by a number of different peoples and powers. Throughout its history Aleppo has also suffered a number of devastating earthquakes, which, at various times, leveled the city and killed large numbers of inhabitants.

Aleppo’s ancient center, or Old City, is surrounded by the modern metropolis, which contains a central district known as

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38 Terry Carter, Lara Dunston, and Andrew Humphreys, “Damascus,” in Syria and Lebanon (Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 2004), 77.
the New City. Aleppo’s most prominent feature is a large citadel constructed on a raised mound in the northeastern quarter of the Old City. Also located in the Old City, Aleppo’s *souq*, or bazaar, is one of the most famous in the Middle East due to its immense size and authenticity. Today, it remains the center of the city’s commercial activity.\(^{44}\)

Major components of Aleppo’s local industry include textile manufacturing, most famously of silk, and food processing, predominantly of nuts and dried fruits. The city’s *souq* acts as a market for regional agricultural produce, which is heavily supported by the nearby Euphrates River and al-Assad reservoir to the east. Aleppo is an important transportation corridor for the region. Aleppo is also a center for intellectual pursuits, as it is home to a major university, several *madrassas*, or Islamic theological schools, and other educational institutions.\(^{45}\) Aleppo has a significant Christian population, including many descendents of Armenians expelled from nearby Turkey in the early 20th century.\(^{46}\)

*Homs (Hims)*

Homs, is situated in the Orontes River Valley in the western region of the country. Homs Gap lies directly west of Homs, making the city a major transit point for travel between the coast and the interior, as well as between Aleppo and Damascus. The Orontes River and nearby reservoir, Lake Qatinnah, are essential for supplying the city and the fertile farmlands in the surrounding region. Local produce ranges from fruits and vegetables to grains, such as wheat and corn, and cotton.\(^{47}\) However, Homs is better known as a major industrial hub, most notably as the site of Syria’s largest oil refinery. Silk manufacturing and the production of fertilizers (using phosphates) are also important components of local industry.\(^{48}\) The city is also home to a major military academy. The population of the greater Homs region is approximately 1.7 million.\(^{49}\)

Before the advent of Islam, Homs was a hub for Christian practice, and the city retains a small Christian population to this day. In terms of architecture and layout, much of the old city has been torn down and removed. Although not within the city itself, a major regional monument is the Krak des Chevaliers, a Crusader fortress located in the nearby Jabal an Nusayriyah. The city is home to a mosque built in honor of Khalid ibn al-Walid,

\(^{44}\) Terry Carter, Lara Dunston, and Andrew Humphreys, “Aleppo,” in *Syria and Lebanon* (Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 2004), 178, 181.


\(^{46}\) Terry Carter, Lara Dunston, and Andrew Humphreys, “Aleppo,” in *Syria and Lebanon* (Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 2004), 173.


\(^{48}\) Terri Dougherty, “From Sea to Desert,” in *Syria* (San Diego: Thomson Gale, 2004), 16.

a revered Arab general known as “the sword of Allah.” Al-Walid famously brought Islam to Syria in 636 C.E.\(^50\)

**Latakia (Al-Ladhiqiyyah)**

Located on a harbor on Syria’s northern Mediterranean coast, Latakia is the country’s chief port city. Numerous earthquakes and prolonged battles between Muslims and Christian Crusaders severely damaged much of the city’s ancient architecture. Today, the Roman ruins of the Temple of Bacchus and the Triumphal Arch are virtually the only remaining artifacts.\(^51\)

The fertile coastal plain surrounding the city is a major agricultural region, particularly for the production of tobacco, fruits, cotton, and grains. These goods make up many of the city’s primary exports. Latakia’s other industries include vegetable oil processing, cotton ginning, sponge fishing, and tourism.\(^52\) With its Mediterranean location and influx of diverse cultures, Latakia is known as the most cosmopolitan and least conservative city in Syria.

**Hama (Hamah)**

Hama is located north of Homs in the Orontes Valley. The Orontes River flows through the center of Hama, providing for the city’s famous gardens and tree-lined river banks. Along the river, the city retains a number of huge medieval waterwheels, known as noria—formerly used to irrigate the surrounding region. Like Homs, Hama serves as a marketplace and processing center for the produce grown in the fertile Orontes Valley; major crops include grains, cotton, fruits, and vegetables. Textile manufacturing, cement production, and flour milling are components of local industry. As a center of Sunni Islam, the majority Islamic sect in Syria, Hama is known for its traditional and conservative character. The city’s history is marked by a recent, notorious event when, in 1982, the al-Assad regime violently suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood insurgent group. After weeks of fighting between Syrian soldiers and Muslim Brotherhood rebels, thousands of people were left dead and up to one-fourth of Hama’s old city was destroyed.\(^53\)

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\(^{50}\) Terry Carter, Lara Dunston, and Andrew Humphreys, “Orontes Valley,” in *Syria and Lebanon* (Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 2004), 155–158.

\(^{51}\) Terry Carter, Lara Dunston, and Andrew Humphreys, “The Coast and Mountains,” in *Syria and Lebanon* (Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 2004), 143–144.


Environmental Concerns

Syria’s many environmental concerns largely stem from overuse or mismanagement of the nation’s limited land, water, and timber resources. Agriculture remains a major component of the Syrian economy, and its intensive practices and monopolization of resources has produced a number of detrimental effects.

Syria uses most of its annual water supply for agricultural purposes, largely for the irrigation of cereal crops. The resulting depletion of some regional water sources, including freshwater springs, and overall declines in groundwater levels have led to serious shortages. In some areas, water deficiencies have forced agricultural activity to cease, thus requiring local residents to relocate. The pollution of groundwater and surface rivers with raw sewage, agricultural additives, and industrial chemicals has further strained the country’s water supply. In addition, as underground aquifers have been depleted, the salinity of the groundwater has increased and overall water quality has declined. This, in turn, has led to increased health concerns and higher costs for water treatment.54

Intensive agricultural and industrial practices have seriously affected the land as well. In some areas, the long-term use of rudimentary irrigation methods has increased the salinity of the soil; this has reduced its fertility and diminished overall crop yields.55 Deforestation (largely due to demand for timber) and the overgrazing and unsustainable development of rangelands in the Syrian steppe have also led to serious degradation.56, 57

Air pollution, particularly in the large cities of Damascus and Aleppo, is also a problem, in part due to a prevalence of older vehicles that produce higher levels of emissions.58 Syria has made some effort to combat these trends. Overall, the country has had some

success, such as in its reforestation and water sanitation programs. In any case, as climate conditions have become more extreme and the Syrian population continues to grow, the country will continue to face serious environmental threats.

Natural Hazards

Syria’s climate and geographic location make it vulnerable to a variety of natural disasters, including droughts, floods, earthquakes, dust storms, and sandstorms. Syria is prone to periods of limited rainfall, and with its inherently hot and dry conditions, it occasionally suffers devastating droughts. Most recently, in 2007 and 2008, a severe drought affected 1.3 million people and diminished the nation’s wheat yields.

Floods are also a serious hazard in Syria, particularly during the winter rainy season and the spring, when the snow melts. In recent years, the most infamous flood was manmade. In June of 2002, the Zeyzoun Dam in northwestern Syria burst. The flood wiped out five villages in its wake and killed 80 people.

Situated within the region where the Arabian, African, and Eurasian continental plates converge, Syria is exposed to significant seismic activity. Specifically, Damascus is located near the Dead Sea Fault System and its active arm, the Sergaya fault. While the majority of recent earthquakes have been minor, the region has experienced major seismic events in the past. In 1759, a massive earthquake (estimated at more than 7.0 on the Richter scale) destroyed Damascus and the Lebanese city of Beirut. In the 12th century, an earthquake near Aleppo killed upwards of 230,000 people in one of the

deadliest seismic events in world history.\textsuperscript{65} Today, Syria’s western region continues to be the most susceptible to seismic activity.\textsuperscript{66}

Dust storms and sandstorms are also significant natural disaster threats in Syria. Spawned by the \textit{khamsin} desert winds, sandstorms can blow at great speeds and carry enough sand to darken the sky and decrease visibility to zero. In addition to damage caused by strong winds, sandstorms also frequently lead to traffic accidents and can cause serious respiratory issues for persons exposed to the air.

\textsuperscript{65} Earthquake Hazards Program, United States Geologic Survey, “Most Destructive Known Earthquakes on Record in the World,” 16 July 2008, \url{http://earthquake.usgs.gov/regional/world/most_destructive.php}

Chapter 1: Assessment

1. Modern-day Syria was once part of a larger geographical territory known as Greater Syria.

True

In its modern form, Syria occupies the northern portion of the former Greater Syrian region. Greater Syria, or the Levant, roughly included the current states of Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, as well as the present-day Palestinian territories and a portion of southern Turkey.

2. The cultivated region of Syria extends in an arc known as the Fertile Crescent.

True

The cultivated region of Syria that extends in an arc from the Jazira Plain and the Euphrates River basin through northern Syria and south along the coastal plains is part of a region known as the Fertile Crescent. Syria’s population remains heavily centered in pockets within the Fertile Crescent.

3. Underground springs are the principal source of water for all of Syria.

False

The Euphrates River, or Nahr al-Furat, is Syria’s longest river and principal source of water. It is responsible for roughly 80% of the country’s water supply.

4. Damascus is the capital of Syria and the nation’s center for government, commerce, culture, and Islamic study.

True

Damascus is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. It has a long history as an important site of trade and cultural exchange along the intercontinental crossroads of the Middle East.

5. Syria has carefully managed the use of its limited land, water, and timber resources.

False

Syria’s many environmental concerns, such as water shortages, deforestation, overgrazing, water pollution, soil erosion, and desertification, largely stem from overuse or mismanagement of the nation’s natural resources.
Chapter 2: History

Introduction

Syria is a relatively modern country, having existed as an independent entity only in the years since World War II. However, the region known as Syria, which is not congruent with the borders of modern Syria, has existed for millennia and has one of the world’s richest histories. Cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, and Hama are among the world’s oldest inhabited places and have been occupied by countless invaders through the centuries. Religion has also played an essential role in Syria’s history, a theme that continues today. The world’s three major monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) have had important historical chapters take place within the Syrian landscape. In addition, several modern-day Islamic and Christian religious communities emerged from ancient Syria.

Ebla

Between 3500 and 3100 B.C.E., urban culture was gaining a foothold in the city of Ebla, some 53 km (33 mi) southwest of the present city of Aleppo.67 An excavation begun in the 1960s unearthed 17,000 cuneiform tablets that have provided an unparalleled insight into the economic, social, and political developments of that time.68 The discoveries at Ebla also had linguistic importance, as Eblaite, the language of Ebla, proved to be much older than Amorite, at the time considered to be the oldest known Semitic language.69

Ebla’s importance as a commercial center connected it to trading centers as far away as Egypt to the south, modern-day Iran to the east, and the Aegean Sea to the west.70,71
Waves of Invaders

At roughly the same time Ebla was expanding, so, too, was the Akkadian civilization in Mesopotamia. There is conflicting evidence on which ruler actually carried out Ebla’s destruction; either the Akkadian King Sargon or his grandson Naram-Sin conquered and laid waste to the city between 2200 and 2300 B.C.E. Ebla was rebuilt but did not thrive until it was once again sacked by invading Amorites around 2000 B.C.E. 72, 73

For much of the latter half of the second millennium B.C.E., modern-day Syria became the battlefield upon which numerous dynasties vied for power. The region’s importance as a commercial crossroads provided motivation for regional rulers to extend their domain over the area. 74 First to arrive were the Hittites. They came from the north in what is today Turkey and destroyed many of the Amorite cities in northern Syria and southern-most Turkey (e.g., Ebla, Aleppo, Alalakh) around 1600 B.C.E. 75 During the early part of the 13th century B.C.E, the Hittites and Egyptians battled for supremacy at the Battle of Kadesh, located near the modern city of Homs along the Orontes River. 76, 77

To the east, in the Jazira Plain, lay the Mitanni kingdom, whose center was located on the Khabur River (a major tributary of the Euphrates). This kingdom was populated by the Hurrians, a group of people thought to have moved westward from northern Mesopotamia. 78 During the mid-14th to early 13th centuries B.C.E., however, this kingdom was conquered first by the Hittites and then by Assyria, the former Mitanni vassal state lying to the east. 79

76 Troy Fox, “The Actual Battle of Kadesh (The Battle of Kadesh, Part II),” TourEgypt.net, n.d., http://touregypt.net/featurestories/kadesh.htm
Aramaeans, Assyrians, and Persians

By the end of the 11th century B.C.E., a group of tribespeople with shadowy historical origins began to form states in northern Syria southward to the Anti-Lebanon Mountains along the modern-day Lebanon border. These tribal people, known collectively as Aramaeans, briefly ruled much of modern-day Syria, including a southern principality whose capital was Damascus.80 Ultimately, however, a revitalized Assyrian kingdom gained control over all of their Syrian lands by the late 8th century B.C.E.81 Nonetheless, the cultural influence of the Aramaeans continued well beyond the demise of their power. Well into the first millennium C.E., Aramaic, the Aramaean language, remained the lingua franca in much of Greater Syria (roughly equivalent to modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and Palestine).82 Even today, Aramaic is spoken in a few Christian villages in Syria, located in the hills not far from Damascus.83

Assyrian dominance over Mesopotamia and ultimately most of the Middle East reached its peak in the late 8th century B.C.E., but it declined quickly thereafter.84 Near the end of the 7th century B.C.E., Assyria was conquered by the Babylonians, who themselves were defeated less than a century later by the Persian forces of Čyrus the Great.85 For the next two centuries, the Syrian lands were part of the Persian Achaemenid Empire, one of the largest land empires in history.86 Under Persian rule, Syrian cities and villages were given a certain degree of sovereignty. This pattern was periodically repeated over the succeeding centuries as new foreign rulers conquered the region.87

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Ancient Greek Conquest

When Alexander the Great arrived in the land of Syria in 333 B.C.E., he brought not just his army and administration, but also a brand new worldview and philosophy of life: Hellenism. As Greek colonizers came to the new lands, a synthesis of Greek and native Syrian cultures took place; the Syrian people had their first exposure to Greek thought and “Western” culture. After Alexander’s death in 323, his military officers battled for supremacy within the conquered territories. One of these military leaders was Seleucus I Nicator. In the last part of the 4th century B.C.E., Nicator consolidated a large kingdom that included most of modern-day Syria (known historically as the Seleucid Empire). Much of the next century, however, was marked by a series of wars between the forces of the Seleucid Dynasty and the Ptolemaic Dynasty of Egypt (another Greek successor state from Alexander’s conquests).

The Seleucid era in Syria was marked by the promotion of Greek culture, the development of a streamlined administrative structure that consolidated military and civilian power, and the founding of several cities. Perhaps most notable of the new cities was Antioch, which served as the Seleucid principal capital. Constant fighting during the wars with Egypt, however, took its toll over time. The Seleucid Dynasty’s decline began in earnest in the early 2nd century B.C.E. with the first defeats to Roman forces. The empire continued to shrink until 64 B.C.E., when the Romans finally completed their takeover of the Seleucid lands.

The Roman and Byzantine Era

Syria was a Roman province for over four centuries, although its borders changed several times during that period. At this time, Antioch was the capital and premier city of the province. It was surpassed only by Rome and Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul) in terms of size and importance within the Roman Empire.90 Damascus also continued to grow because of its importance as a trading center on the route between Europe and the Parthian cities of Mesopotamia. Like Antioch, Damascus also became a center for the early Christian community.91

In 330 C.E. Constantine I, the first Christian Emperor of the Roman Empire, inaugurated the Empire’s new capital at the rebuilt ancient city of Byzantium, which was later renamed Constantinople.92 During the more than three centuries of Byzantine rule, Syria was the base for several attacks against Persian Sassanid Empire forces to the east, as well as the target of reciprocal Sassanid military campaigns. In 540 C.E., Antioch was captured and briefly held by the armies of Sassanid ruler Khosrow I.93 Approximately 70 years later, the Sassanids, now under the leadership of Khosrow II, once again conquered Antioch and much of the remaining eastern Byzantine Empire. However, the military success of the Sassanids in the early part of the 7th century was fleeting. By the time the Sassanid armies were fully beaten back by the forces of Byzantine Emperor Heraclius around 628 C.E., both sides had exhausted their treasuries on the military, leaving them vulnerable to a new invading force marching north from the Arabian Peninsula.94,95

The Spread of Islam

In the early decades of the 7th century C.E., in the Arabian oasis city of Mecca, a local merchant known as Muhammad (later given the title of Prophet) began to teach about the revelations that he had received from the archangel Gabriel while fasting and meditating in a nearby cave. The collection of these revelations formed the basis of the Quran, the fundamental religious text of Islam. At the time of Muhammad’s teachings, a significant portion of the Meccan economy was based on pilgrimages to the Kaaba, a local polytheistic temple that held idols sacred to local tribal religions. The monotheistic message of the Prophet Muhammad, in which there was no god but Allah, was foreign to the desert tribespeople of the time. Thus, Muhammad and his followers encountered resistance and even persecution as a result of his teachings. In 622 the Prophet Muhammad journeyed to the northern city of Yathrib (modern-day Medina), where the first Muslim community took root over the next six years. An increasing number of conversions, as well as military excursions against pockets of resistance, ultimately united Mecca and most of the rest of the Arabian Peninsula under Islam by the time of the Prophet’s death in 632.96

After Muhammad’s death, Islam spread quickly through the neighboring regions of the Middle East. In 635, Byzantine Damascus surrendered to Khalid Ibn Al-Walid, one of the Prophet’s generals, and by 640, the remainder of Syria was firmly under the control of Arab Muslim forces. In exchange for payment of a poll tax, all residents of the newly conquered lands were guaranteed their personal safety and the safety of their possessions and churches. For members of some Christian sects, such as the Nestorians and Jacobites, conditions actually improved under Arab Muslim rule compared to the Byzantine era.97

Mu’awiya, of the Umayyad clan, was appointed by the Caliph98 Umar as the first governor of the Syrian territories in 639, making Damascus his capital. However, harmony did not reign in the newly expanding Muslim empire. After Umar was assassinated in 644, his successor, Uthman, was chosen by a six-man shura (council) as an apparent compromise choice over other, more likely candidates within the group.99 Like Mu’awiya, Uthman was a member of the Umayyad clan. As caliph, he led the effort to collect, compile, and codify an official version of the Quran. In 656, Uthman, too, was

98 The word “caliph” (Arabic khaleefa) means “successor.” For Sunni Muslims, the four rashidun (“rightly guided”) caliphs were the first four leaders of the Muslim community after the Prophet Muhammad died. The first was Abu Bakr; the second, Umar; the third, Uthman; and the fourth, Ali. Shi’a Muslims deny the legitimacy of the first three caliphs and consider Ali their first imam.
assassinated by Egyptian rebels in his Medina home, and Ali, cousin and son-in-law to the late Prophet Muhammad, was chosen as the new caliph.

As Uthman’s kin, Mu’awiya was obliged to revenge his murder. When Ali, the new caliph, did not apprehend Uthman’s killers, Mu’awiya refused to recognize Ali as the caliph. Ali’s response was to invade Syria. His army was met by that of Mu’awiya at the Battle of Siffin on the Euphrates River near the present-day Iraqi–Syrian border. Both the battle itself and the mutually agreed-upon arbitration after the battle proved indecisive in the struggle for the caliphate. Ali was subsequently slain in 661 by a group of his former followers who considered his decision to arbitrate the caliphate a repudiation of the Quran. After Ali’s death, Mu’awiya proclaimed himself the first Umayyad caliph, with his capital at Damascus. Ali’s followers, meanwhile, broke away from Sunni Islam, forming the Shi’a (“party of Ali”) branch of Islam.

The Umayyad Era

The Muslim world expanded ever more widely and rapidly thereafter. During the 89-year period known as the Umayyad Era (661–750), Muslim armies marched across the Middle East and Africa; they sailed to Europe and conquered Spain; they penetrated Central Asia, northwest India, and reached the doorstep of China. All these campaigns were based out of Syria, and it was the Syrian army itself that supplied most of the manpower. Art and architecture also flourished under Umayyad rule. Two of the most famous buildings from this era, still standing today, are the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. During the Umayyad Dynasty, most Syrians converted to Islam and Damascus underwent an Arabization process. Arabic replaced Aramaic and Greek as the principal language of Syria, Arabic coinage replaced the old Byzantine and Sassanid currency, and Arabs took on many of the financial administrative duties formerly carried out by Greeks and Persians. By the mid 8th century, however, dissent from within, and resentment from without, weakened the Umayyad grip on power. The Abbasids, a dynasty of Meccan origin aided militarily by forces from northeast Persia, applied the

final blow when they defeated the Umayyads in 750 at the Battle of the Great Kab River in Mesopotamia. The Abbasids thereafter established a new caliphate in Baghdad that lasted for 500 years, in which Syria was merely a province. Nonetheless, periods of resistance against Abbasid authority periodically occurred within the Syrian lands.

**Fatimid Rule**

The rulers of the Fatimid Dynasty belonged to the Isma‘ili sect of the Shi‘ites and claimed descent from Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad and wife of Ali, the first Shi‘a imam. Their empire originated during the early 10th century in the area of North Africa now occupied by eastern Algeria, Tunisia, and western Libya. After several failed attempts, the Fatimids conquered Egypt in 969 and shortly thereafter established the new city of Cairo as their capital. From Egypt, the Fatimid forces drove north, conquering Damascus and southern Syria in 978. They remained until 1076. Aleppo and northern Syria became the scene of an ongoing struggle for supremacy between the Fatimid and the Byzantine Empire after the Hamdānid Dynasty began its final decline. Small principalities were able to take hold in this region for several decades owing to the lack of a dominant central power.

The Seljuk Turks, a sultanate led by the rulers of Turkmen tribespeople, migrated from Central Asia to Persia and ultimately pushed westward into Mesopotamia and Anatolia. During the last half of the 11th century, the Seljuks ended the Fatimid period in Syria. Their presence in Syria, however, was short lived. Toward the end of the 11th century, under pressure from European Christian Crusaders, the Seljuk Empire began to fragment, eventually devolving into small principalities in central Anatolia. The Crusaders, meanwhile, entered the Near East region and began occupation of coastal areas and cities such as Antioch, Jerusalem, Edessa, and Al-Karak. Here they formed what became

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known as the Crusader states.113 Notably, the cities of Aleppo and Damascus were besieged by Crusader forces, but never fell.114, 115

**Saladin, the Ayyubids, and the Mamluks**

Kurdish warrior Salah al-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyubi, known in the West as Saladin, led the Muslim forces to defeat the Crusaders and take back Muslim cities. The Crusaders surrendered Jerusalem to Saladin in 1187, and much of the remainder of the Crusader states fell shortly thereafter (although subsequent Crusades briefly regained some territory).116 Saladin, as founder of the Ayyubid Dynasty, ultimately ruled the Muslim lands from the Tigris, beyond the Nile to North Africa, and south to the Sudan. He died of malaria in 1192 and the Ayyubid Empire began to break apart.117

The successors to the Ayyubids in Egypt were the Mamluks, a dynasty founded by the Turkish generals of slave armies, who were able to repel the initial invasions of the Mongols in 1260 and eventually extended their dominance through Syria to the Euphrates River in the 1300s.118, 119 A second Mongol invasion, under the military leadership of Tamerlane (also known as Timur), was more successful. Tamerlane invaded Syria in 1401, and in the process devastated Aleppo and Damascus. After the Mongols left Syria, the Mamluks reclaimed the lost territories, but a weakened financial foundation and internal decay left their armies vulnerable when the Ottoman Turks under Sultan Selim I invaded in 1516–17.120, 121

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The Ottoman Era

The era of the Ottoman Empire in Syria lasted 400 years, with only one significant interruption. Agriculture improved for awhile in parts of Syria under Ottoman administration, and Aleppo thrived as a trading center with Europe. Damascus gained a special role within the Ottoman world because of its position as the starting point for Muslims making the annual Hajj (“pilgrimage”) to Mecca. Over time, however, economic and political stagnation set in within the Ottoman domain. Ottoman central administration of Syria’s provinces slackened; janissaries (the Sultan’s elite soldiers), lost their discipline and deteriorated into a law unto themselves; taxes increasingly burdened villages as mülzizim (“tax farmers”) abused their powers.122, 123 By the early 19th century, the Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul lost control of the hinterlands, and Bedouin tribesmen from the Arabian deserts rode in to fill the vacuum. While Aleppo and Damascus maintained their security and wealth, the outlying cities and villages fell prey to the Bedouin marauders.124

During the 1830s, the Ottomans were chased out of Greater Syria by the forces of Egypt’s ruling pasha (“leader”) Muhammad Ali. For nearly 10 years, his son Ibrahim Pasha ruled Syria, but in 1841 European forces intervened, assisting the Ottoman armies in forcing the Egyptians to withdraw from Syria.125 European influence in Ottoman-held Syria continued to grow, with local Catholic and Orthodox populations placed under the protectorships of France and Russia, respectively. European goods also began to flood into the region, disrupting the local economy. Many Muslims grew resentful towards Christian and Jewish merchants who had established trade agreements with the Europeans.126

End of the Ottoman Era

During the last 25 years of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century, the Ottoman Empire was ruled by Sultan Abdulhamid II. As he came to power, the Empire found itself effectively bankrupt. The financial problems that had been building for decades within the Empire accelerated as a result of the hugely expensive Crimean War with Russia. It was financed through European loans that continued after the war and eventually built up a staggering load of debt.\textsuperscript{127, 128} Abdulhamid II created a European-administered debt bureau that managed the debt repayment and was in charge of collecting taxes and overseeing revenues in some Ottoman provinces. As the Ottoman economy increasingly came under European domination, the Sultan embraced Pan-Islamism, a broad ideology advocating the unification of all Muslim lands. Most European empires now had Muslim lands within their areas of control; they feared the unrest that might occur if subjects grasped their ethnic or religious identities, and pressed for nationhood on this basis.

The colonial powers, including the Ottomans, had good reason to fear such nationalist movements. Within Syria itself, the philosophy of Pan-Islamism—which the Sultan viewed only as a tool to solidify internal support within what was left of his empire—was willingly adopted by many in this largely Muslim region.\textsuperscript{129, 130} Ultimately, however, it did not deter the stirrings of an independence movement among the Syrian Arabs, especially after the Young Turk revolution in 1908 led to the effective dissolution of the power of the Ottoman sultanate. Relations between Turks and Arabs worsened after the revolution, and Arab nationalist political parties began to emerge in Syria, Egypt, Constantinople, and even Paris.\textsuperscript{131} The Ottoman Empire’s entrance into World War I on the side of Germany and Austria (the Central Powers) gave hope to Syrian Arab nationalists that independence would be obtained after the war if the Ottomans/Germans/Austrians were defeated.\textsuperscript{132}

\textsuperscript{129} Naqshbandi.org, “Abdulhamid II,” n.d., \url{http://www.naqshbandi.org/ottomans/khalifa/s34_detail.htm}
World War I

During World War I, Syrian Arab nationalists aligned themselves with Hussein, the Sharif of Hejaz (Red Sea coast of Arabia), who was virtually alone among Arab leaders in deciding to fight against the Ottoman Turks. Hussein’s army, with assistance from British officer, T.E. Lawrence (later known as Lawrence of Arabia) and under the command of Hussein’s son Faisal, captured the strategically important Red Sea port of Aqaba. In October 1918, Faisal’s forces triumphantly entered Damascus. Arab nationalists, especially Syrians, rejoiced that the day of their sovereignty had finally arrived. But it was not to be. Faisal was named King of Syria in March 1920, but his reign was short because of European meddling. In 1916, the British and French had signed the Sykes-Picot agreement, a document that, in advance, carved out spheres of influence in the Middle East after the war was to end. Under the agreement, Syria and Lebanon fell within the French mandate. When the French invaded Damascus in July 1920, Faisal went into exile in London. One year later, he was named king of the new government of Iraq, a region under the British sphere of influence that included much of the ancient region of Mesopotamia.

The French Mandate

During the 1920s, Syrian calls for independence became more forceful. The French mandate over Syria, under the auspices of the League of Nations, asserted that the French government help Syria prepare for eventual self-governance. However, in the view of most Muslim Syrians, the French were not expediting that process. Syrian nationalists also resented the dismemberment of Greater Syria under the French and British mandates, which had removed Palestine, Lebanon, and Transjordan (modern-day Jordan). In 1925, a Syrian nationalist revolt, initiated by Druze rebels in southern Syria, erupted and continued to simmer for two years.

In much of the first half of the 1930s, negotiations between the French and Syrian nationalists over a framework for ultimate independence were unsuccessful. But with a change of the French government in 1936, these negotiations quickly turned fruitful. An agreement outlining the terms and details of

Syrian independence was reached in 1936. The Syrian government quickly signed off on the agreement, but the French parliament never ratified it.

As Europe slipped into another World War, Syria became a base of operations in the conflict, only this time under Allied control. After the French government fell to Germany in 1941, British, British Commonwealth, and Free French forces invaded Syria in order to gain control of the region before the Germans. Both the British and Free French proclaimed Syrian independence upon entering Syria, and Syrians quickly set up a government. In 1945, the French delayed in transferring final control of armed forces in Syria, bombing Damascus when the Syrians refused to negotiate a treaty, and establishing French rights within Syria after independence. British leader Winston Churchill then threatened to use British forces to aid the Syrian government if the French attacks did not stop, which they soon did. In 1946, the French finally left Syria, and to this day, Syrians celebrate Evacuation Day every April 17, marking the end of French occupation.

**Coups**

In 1948, Syria participated in the war against the newly formed state of Israel and was defeated along with its Arab allies. In the aftermath of Arab defeat in Palestine, popular discontent rose among Syrians against the democratically elected civilian government, which the army blamed for its defeat. In March 1949 military forces loyal to Army Chief of Staff Husni al-Za’im removed President Shuhri al-Quwatli from office in the first of a long series of coups d'état—three in 1949 alone. Motivation for these coups emanated from the divisive issue of Syrian political unity with Iraq, an idea whose popularity or lack thereof exposed the geographic, religious, and political divisions among the Syrian population. The leader of the third coup, Colonel Adib al-Shishakli, initially kept a low profile and let the political establishment bicker among themselves as popular discontent grew. One of al-Shishakli’s civilian political allies during this time was Akram al-Hawrani, founder of the

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136 Free French Forces were fighters during WWII that continued to fight Axis forces after France surrendered to Germany.
Arab Socialist Party, who rather unsuccessfully pushed for land reform measures. In 1951, al-Shishakli staged a second coup against the political leadership of the country and actively took control of the country in a military dictatorship. All political parties except al-Shishakli’s were banned and political dissent was aggressively squelched. As Syrian political leaders, including al-Hawrani, fled the country, al-Shishakli’s heavy-handed tactics began to backfire. By 1954, al-Shishakli’s base of support had dwindled, and he faced increasing opposition within the Syrian army. In February of that year, he was overthrown and forced into exile.

The Baathists

As the Syrian government continued to undergo frequent changes, alternative political organizations were formed. Among these groups were the Baathists. Even prior to Syrian independence, the pan-Arab unity movement had spawned several political groups, one of which was the Baath (Arabic for “renaissance”) Party, whose platform promoted political nonalignment, a secular embrace of Islamic values, and anti-imperialism. Economically, the Baathists advanced a socialist agenda, a stance that was reinforced in 1953 when the Baath Party merged with al-Hawrani’s Arab Socialist Party (ASP). The party found its strongest support, particularly after the merger with the ASP, among the poorer groups within Syria: Druzes, Alawites (a Shi’ite Muslim sect mostly living in the coastal mountain regions near Latakia), and peasant Sunnis and Christians.

By 1957, with Syria once again under a parliamentary system, the Baath Party obtained a fragile position of political primacy within a left-wing political alliance that controlled...
the Syrian government. The party, however, was already beginning to falter because of internal disarray and dissension, and its leadership position was being challenged by the growth of the Syrian Communist Party, a Baath Party ally in the alliance that was increasingly viewed as a political rival.

In 1958, the Baath Party proposed a political union to Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, a pan-Arabist leader who was extremely popular in Syria. Thus was created the United Arab Republic (UAR), a three-and-a-half year experiment in nation building that drove not only the Syrian Community Party out of existence, but also the Baathists. Syria became very much the lesser partner in this new nation. In 1961, as Nasser continued moving forward toward the complete political and economic integration of Syria into the Egyptian-dominated UAR, a coup d’état led by conservative Syrian army officers took place in Damascus. Nasser, whose ambivalence toward the Egypt–Syria union never seemed to fade, did not resist the Syrian secession from the UAR.

**Baath Ascendancy**

After the political break with Egypt, the Baath Party began to reform itself. The secession splintered the vanguard of the old Baath Party, with those favoring the split with Egypt leaving or being forced out of the new party. One such individual was al-Hawrani, who left to restart the Arab Socialist Party. Within the Syrian military, a group of mid-level officers had formed a clandestine Baathist cell while serving in Egypt during the UAR era. As the conservative senior officers who staged the 1961 coup were relieved of their high-level positions, this Baathist group began to consolidate power. Among the officers were Alawis Salah al-Jadid and Hafez al-Assad, who within a few years battled for control of the Syrian government. In March 1963, the military Baathists staged a coup, and the reborn Baath Party gained power.

**Power Struggle**

Over the next few years, two factions within the Baath party—one that promoted Arab nationalism and a slow approach to socialism and another that was more concerned about

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advancing socialist reforms than re-establishing Arab unity—battled for party supremacy. The former group became known as the pan-Arab “nationalists,” while the latter was referred to as the “regionalists.” In 1966, Amin al-Hafiz, the Baathist military leader and most powerful figure among the nationalists, was overthrown in a bloody coup. Alawis Salah al-Jadid, the military leader of the regionalists, became the Baath Party leader, and the true power behind the civilian government. Hafez al-Assad, Hafiz’s fellow Alawite military colleague, took over as Minister of Defense.\textsuperscript{158}

Soon thereafter, however, the two men began to engage in a power struggle that lasted nearly four years. During the 1967 Six-Day War against Israel, the Syrian Air Force was destroyed, and Israel took control of the Golan Heights from Syria. Syria’s crushing losses as part of the pan-Arab forces during this time contributed to the turning point in their relationship. Both men, as part of the Baathist military leadership, found themselves on the defensive following the war and needing to rebuild their power bases. Assad, whose views were now closer to the more moderate nationalists than the fervently socialist Jadid, focused on placing key supporters within the military leadership. Jadid, on the other hand, firmed up his support within the civilian political structure.\textsuperscript{159}

The culminating events in this long-running political struggle came in 1970. In September of that year, Jadid’s civilian political leaders ordered a Syrian tank force into Jordan to support Palestinian guerilla forces that were being expelled from the country by the army of King Hussein (an event known henceforth by Palestinian leaders as “Black September”). Assad and his associates, who were against this action, refused to lend air support to the expeditionary force, and the Syrian tanks were forced to beat a hasty and embarrassing retreat. In November, Jadid and the Baath Party leadership tried to remove Assad, but they were instead deposed by Assad’s military supporters. This “Correction Movement,” as it was referred to, ushered in three decades of Assad rule in Syria.\textsuperscript{160,161}


**The Early Assad Years**

By 1971, Assad had firmly consolidated his control of the Baath Party and the Syrian government. In March of that year Assad became president after a sweeping victory in the first of a long string of unopposed elections during his tenure. He quickly bolstered relations with Egypt, Libya, and the Soviet Union, using Moscow as a source of military support for rebuilding Syria’s armed forces.¹⁶²

Both Syria and Egypt continued to nurse their grievances with Israel, particularly over the territory from their countries (Golan Heights for Syria, the Sinai Peninsula and Suez Canal for Egypt) that was still under Israeli control from the 1967 war. In October 1973, both countries launched an attack against Israel. In April 1974, a U.S.-brokered disengagement agreement between Syria and Israel returned the now-demolished Golan Heights city of Quneitra to Syria, which was viewed as a triumph for the Syrian people.¹⁶³

**Lebanon**

During 1975–1976, Syrian military forces became increasingly involved in the escalating civil war between Lebanese Christian Maronite and Muslim militias. Syria initially took on a diplomatic, peace-keeping role, but this soon evolved to active military support for the Christian right against the Palestinian and Muslim left. Syria’s position proved unpopular in the Arab world, including among Syria’s own Sunni Muslim population.

By 1978, Syria had switched sides in the Lebanese conflict and was now supporting Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) forces and the Muslim militias. As the civil war began to subside during the late 1980s, Syria still was militarily in control of a large part of Lebanon. Syria pledged in the 1989 Ta’if Accord, which laid the groundwork for the end to the Lebanese Civil War, to withdraw their forces to the eastern Bekaa Valley of Lebanon by the end of 1992. Ultimately this pledge was not fulfilled—Syrian soldiers remained in Lebanon for another 16 years.¹⁶⁴,¹⁶⁵


¹⁶³ “Return to Quneitra,” *Time*, 8 July 1974, [http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,943909-1,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,943909-1,00.html)

**Opposition Forces**

As Sunni Muslim dissatisfaction with the Assad regime continued into the mid- to late 1970s, several opposition groups emerged in Syrian cities. Most notable was the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni fundamentalist organization. During the late 1970s, violent attacks aimed at Syrian governmental and Baath Party targets as well as Alawites continued to escalate. 166 Muslim Brotherhood attacks in Aleppo continued into 1980 and eventually spread to other cities, such as Hama, Homs, and the eastern city of Dayr az Zawr.

Violence continued to increase through 1981 and into 1982, triggering demonstrations and strikes in Sunni-dominant cities. For a time, it appeared that Syria, like Lebanon, might be on the path to civil war.167 Ultimately, a brutal governmental response to a Muslim Brotherhood attack against government forces in Hama crippled the anti-Assad movement. After the ambush, Syrian forces were ordered to attack Hama, leaving much of the old city in ruins. The number of deaths from the Hama action was estimated between 10,000 and 25,000 people.168 No similar dissident movements have arisen since the fighting at Hama.169

**Bashar al-Assad**

Hafiz al-Assad died in June 2000. His 34-year-old son, Bashar, became the new Syrian President upon his death. After coming to power, Bashar al-Assad began to push forward modest reforms, primarily economic. Syria has long been dependent on oil exports, but declining oil reserves have increased the pressure to diversify the economy. The Baath Party continues to hold a monopoly on political power within Syria, although some baby steps have been taken to loosen the tight restrictions on political expression.170

During 2005, Assad’s government came under intense pressure from Western and Arab countries after former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri was assassinated by car bomb in

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February. Syria was widely suspected of having played a role in the death of Hariri, who had expressed anger at Syria for its role in keeping pro-Syrian Lebanese President Émile Lahoud in office beyond his constitutional term limit. Hariri’s death also triggered massive street protests in Lebanon against Syria’s continued presence in the country. These demonstrations, collectively named the Cedar Revolution, were augmented by increased international pressure for Syria to uphold a 2004 UN Security Council resolution calling for all foreign nations to pull their forces out of Lebanon.

**Recent Events**

Ultimately, the uproar over Hariri’s death forced Syria to back down. In April 2005, the approximately 14,000 Syrian troops remaining in Lebanon left the country. Meanwhile, a preliminary report of a United Nations investigation into Hariri’s death implicated several senior Syrian intelligence and administration figures, including Bashar al-Assad’s brother and brother-in-law, in the bombing. While Assad’s rule was shaken by the fallout from the Hariri assassination, he managed to avoid having international economic sanctions placed on Syria, except for the United States, which first established sanctions in 2004.

In the aftermath of the Hariri assassination and its follow-up investigation, Syria strengthened its ties with Iran, a move that Western nations and many of the primarily Sunni Muslim countries of the Middle East viewed with concern. Both Syria and Iran are key supporters of Hamas and Hezbollah, which the United States and several other countries have listed as terrorist organizations.

In 2008, it was announced that Syria and Israel had initiated indirect peace talks, with Turkey serving as intermediary. The talks began only months after Israel, with possible assistance from North Korea, bombed a suspected nuclear reactor under construction in

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In late 2010 and early 2011, mass protests against political repression, corruption, and poverty erupted throughout the Middle East. Popular uprisings led to the fall of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and the Hosni Mubarak regime in Egypt. In Libya, the demonstrations turned into an armed insurgency with Colonel Qaddafi and his supporters on one side and the rebels and NATO on the other. In mid-March 2011, protests broke out in Syria and expanded across the nation with the southern city of Dara’a quickly becoming the hotspot. The rallies began on 16 March as a silent protest by families of prisoners held by the state. Two days later, the demonstrations had spread to Dara’a and along with those in other cities they grew into an anti-regime pro-democracy movement. Despite the brutal government crackdown that killed hundreds and international appeals for caution and restraint, the protests continue as of May 2011 without international or regional intervention.

Chapter 2: Assessment

1. The cultural influence of the Aramaeans continued well beyond the demise of their power.

True

Well into the first millennium C.E., Aramaic, the Aramaean language, remained the lingua franca in much of Greater Syria (roughly equivalent to modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and Palestine). Even today, Aramaic is spoken in a few Christian villages in Syria, located in the hills not far from Damascus.

2. During the Umayyad Era, the Muslim world shrank significantly.

False

During the 89-year period known as the Umayyad Era (661–750 C.E.), Muslim armies marched across the Middle East and Africa; they sailed to Europe and conquered Spain; they penetrated Central Asia, northwest India, and reached the doorstep of China. All these campaigns were based out of Syria, and it was the Syrian army itself that supplied most of the manpower.

3. The Ottoman Empire in Syria was interrupted by various empires and dynasties fighting for control of Greater Syria.

False

The era of the Ottoman Empire in Syria lasted 400 years, with only one significant interruption. Over time, however, economic and political stagnation occurred in the Ottoman domain, and Syria in particular became something of a backwater. By the early 19th century, the Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul lost control of the hinterlands, and outlying cities and villages fell prey to Bedouin marauders.

4. During World War I, Syrian Arab nationalists aligned themselves with Hussein, the Sharif of Hejaz (Red Sea coast of Arabia).

True

Hussein was virtually alone among Arab leaders in deciding to fight against the Ottoman Turks. Hussein’s army, with assistance from British officer, T.E. Lawrence (also known as Lawrence of Arabia) and under the command of Hussein’s son Faisal, captured the strategically important Red Sea port of Aqaba. In October 1918, Faisal’s forces triumphantly entered Damascus.
5. The death of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri triggered massive street protests in Lebanon against Syria’s continued presence in the country.

**True**

These demonstrations in 2005, collectively named the Cedar Revolution, were augmented by increased international pressure for Syria to uphold a 2004 UN Security Council resolution calling for all foreign nations to pull their forces out of Lebanon.
Chapter 3: Economy

Introduction

Syria has had a centralized and state-run economy since the Baath (Arabic for Renaissance) Party emerged as a major political force in the 1960s. Thereafter, Syria maintained the Baath socialist agenda for the economy but also moved toward industrialization and socialist transformation. Syria implemented its first five-year economic plan in 1960 with limited results.¹⁸⁰, ¹⁸¹ The government nationalized major industries and foreign investment and the country experienced a loss of capital, skilled workers, and administrators as centralized planning increased. The country received a boost, however, during the 1970s with higher oil prices. The economy shifted away from being agriculture-based to one focused on the industrial, commercial, and services sectors. Internal and external crises during the 1980s, as well as continued military and security spending and government bureaucracy, again slowed down the economy.

Syria has since then implemented a number of modest reforms to modernize and transform its economy. These reforms include opening private banks, consolidating exchange rates, reducing lending interest rates, establishing stock markets, and removing some barriers to trade. Nonetheless, government still retains control over major industries and regulates businesses in the private sector. Moreover, the reforms have not been enough to eradicate poverty, substantially reduce unemployment, or increase the standard of living. Despite strong economic growth in the past few years, the government has had to reduce subsidies and the inefficient and corrupt nature of the economy has led to both low investment and industrial and agricultural productivity rates.¹⁸², ¹⁸³ Recently, the global economic recession, a prolonged drought, and civil unrest has also negatively impacted the economy. Syria’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP –purchasing power parity) was an estimated USD 106.4 billion in 2010 with 4% real growth rate.

¹⁸⁰ Five-year plans were the “Soviet economic practice of planning to augment agricultural and industrial output by designated quotas for a limited period of usually five years. Nations other than the former USSR and the Soviet bloc members, especially developing countries, have adopted such plans for four, five, or more years.” (AllRefer.com, “Five-Year Plan, Russian, Soviet, and CIS History,” 2003, http://reference.allrefer.com/encyclopedia/F/FiveYear.html


Resources

Petroleum and Natural Gas

Petroleum and natural gas are Syria’s most important natural resources. In the 1980s, large oil fields were discovered and oil began playing a significant role in the economy. The Syrian government formed partnerships with international oil companies, including ConocoPhillips and Shell, to assist in the development of its oil industry, from extraction to refinement. Ever since, crude oil has been the dominant Syrian export. In 2009, Syria exported an estimated 148,000 barrels of oil per day, mainly to European countries. \(^{184}\)

Most Syrian oil fields are located in the northeastern region of the country with refineries in the cities of Baniyas and Homs. Smaller fields are located in the central regions. Syria’s total crude oil output hit its highest point in 1995 at 610,000 barrels per day (bbd). \(^{185}\) Since then, oil production has declined, falling to an estimated 368,000 bbd in 2009. \(^{186}\) Syria’s oil reserves are being gradually depleted. Oil reserves stood at 2.5 billion barrels in January 2010 but may be used up by 2030. \(^{187, 188}\) The Syrian oil ministry has been accelerating efforts to switch domestic power plants and industrial use to natural gas, so that Syria’s crude oil may continue to generate export revenue. \(^{189}\) All of Syria’s natural gas production is currently used domestically, and plans are being made to dramatically increase this production over the next few years by bringing more gas fields online. \(^{190}\) Natural gas reserves are at 8.5 trillion cubic feet. \(^{191}\)

Phosphate Rock

Syria is the world’s ninth leading producer of phosphate rock. Much of the phosphate rock is exported and the remainder used for local production of phosphate fertilizers and

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phosphoric acid.\textsuperscript{192} In 2009, Syria generated roughly 1.9\% of the world’s production of phosphate rock, most of which comes from desert mines located southwest of Palmyra.\textsuperscript{193, 194} These mines are operated by the government-owned General Company for Phosphates and Mines, which also manages Syria’s salt production, from a mine located near the Euphrates River city of Dayr al-Zawr. Other mining and mineral processing operations within Syria include cement, gypsum, marble, and silica. Steel was produced at plants in Hama and the Mediterranean port cities of Latakia and Tartus.

\textbf{Services}

The services sector comprised an estimated 55\% of GDP and 67\% of the labor force in 2010. Services is the largest sector of Syria’s economy and includes government services. Tourism is becoming increasingly important in the services sector, stimulated by privatization in real estate, trade, and insurance.

\textbf{Tourism}

With numerous ancient historical sites, religious shrines of several religions, and a warm Mediterranean coastline, Syria has ample potential to develop a strong tourism industry. Facing declining oil export revenues, the Syrian government has placed increased emphasis on developing its tourist infrastructure.\textsuperscript{195} Five Syrian locations are World Heritage Sites, including the ancient parts of Damascus and Aleppo, the nation’s two largest cities.

Presently, most travelers to Syria come from neighboring Middle East countries.\textsuperscript{196} Visitors from the U.S. and Europe are beginning to increase in numbers, but the lingering bad publicity concerning the government’s state support of what the U.S. considers terrorist groups continues to dampen tourism.\textsuperscript{197} Nevertheless, in 2008, Syria had 5.4 million visitors.\textsuperscript{198}

\textsuperscript{192} Nation’s Encyclopedia, “Syria—Mining,” n.d., \url{http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Asia-and-Oceania/Syria-MINING.html}
\textsuperscript{195} Katie Hunt, “Long Isolated Syria Warms to Tourism,” BBC News, 18 November 2008, \url{http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/7706757.stm}
\textsuperscript{197} Syria Ministry of Tourism, “Foreign Tourists Flock to Syria Despite Troubles,” Reuters, 16 July 2005, \url{http://www.syriatourism.org/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=277}
Banking

Syria’s banking system is predominantly government-owned and administered although private banks are currently the leaders of financial sector growth. The Central Bank of Syria, the main bank, issues the Syrian currency: the Syrian pound. The Central Bank is the governing body for many specialized branch banks.

Privately held banks were granted permission to operate within Syria in 2001, as long as a Syrian majority held interest in the bank. 199 Fourteen private banks now operate in the country. 200, 201 These private institutions continue to follow the directions and leadership of the Central Bank. Along with privatization, the Syrian government has started to permit banks to deal in hard currency, and foreign investors can now open accounts using foreign currency. 202 In 2005, the first Islamic banks, which do not charge interest, were established in Syria. 203 In the same year, private companies (foreign and domestic) gained access to the insurance sector. Since then, private banks’ assets have grown considerably at about 25% in 2010. 204

In May 2004, the Commercial Bank of Syria (CBS) was accused by the United States Department of the Treasury of allowing terrorist organizations to launder illegal proceeds generated from sale of Iraqi oil by Saddam Hussein’s regime. 205 As a result, all U.S. banks (including overseas affiliates), financial institutions, and citizens were subsequently banned from holding accounts in the CBS. Syria’s government, claims that it does uphold international standards for monitoring and policing money laundering. As evidence, it points to a law passed in 2004 establishing an Anti-Money-Laundering Commission. 206, 207

Stock Market

The Central Bank’s new willingness to trade in hard currencies was a start toward the establishment of a national stock exchange. The Syrian Securities and Exchange Commission (SSEC) has been a legal entity since June 2005. The stock exchange in Syria is seen as a way to attract money “in an economy that still offers few investment prospects.” The Damascus Stock Exchange opened in March 2009.

Industry

Much of Syria’s industrial production is related to its mineral and energy resources (e.g., refined oil products, fertilizers, cement, and other building materials). Most of these are produced in Damascus. Manufacturing makes up a smaller portion of the economy. The two largest manufacturing segments are textiles and clothing, and food and beverage processing. The textile mills are located mainly in Damascus, Aleppo, Hims, and Hamah. Syria also has long been known for its beautiful handicrafts—items such as mother-of-pearl inlays, hand engravings, silk brocades, and swords and blades—but production of most of these items has declined since large-scale manufacturing was introduced.

Agriculture

Syrian’s agricultural sector produces 17% of Syria’s GDP and employs the same percentage of the country’s work force. Although infrastructure development, investment, and subsidies have made Syria an exporter of agricultural products, Syria still faces several challenges in furthering the development of agriculture. First, the desert limits the amount of arable land to about 25% of the country’s total area. Second, the percentage of irrigated fields is only 30%, leaving a large percentage of Syria’s crops dependent on rain-fed sources. Low rainfall and drought limit food production. Drought in 2008 dramatically decreased wheat production - Syria is now a net importer of wheat whereas before it was a net exporter. Finally, major water

209 http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578856/Syria
resources, such as the Orontes and Euphrates Rivers, do not originate in Syria, causing complex water-sharing disputes.

The modernization of irrigation practices is critical for Syria to increase its total food production. To this end, the Syrian government invested about USD 600 million from 2001 to 2005 in modernizing irrigation systems, changing from open canal systems to pressurized systems. Water shortages, in part due to inefficient and antiquated irrigation systems, have already led to decreased cotton planting.

The majority of Syrian farms, unlike many Syrian businesses, are privately owned; nevertheless, the state continues to exert extensive marketing controls on crops deemed to be “strategic.” Syria’s main crops include cotton (the largest cash crop), grains (mostly wheat and barley), lentils, olives, sugar beets, chickpeas, grapes, pistachio nuts, and citrus fruit. Animal products include beef, lamb, eggs, poultry, and milk.

Another agricultural problem is that some farmers do not regularly practice crop rotation, which causes the depletion of vital nutrients in the soil. Some believe that government agricultural subsidies contribute to this situation, because they often encourage farmers to plant the same crop each growing season.

Trade

Syria currently has a negative trade balance. The trade deficit is due in part to the global economic crisis and the drought. Exports for 2010 are estimated at USD 12.84 billion while imports are forecast at USD 13.57 billion. The trade deficit is offset by income from foreign aid, remittances from abroad, and tourism.219 Syria is not a member of the World Trade Organization yet (it recently obtained observer status) but does have regional free trade agreements with India, Belarus, and Slovakia.

Syria’s export total for 2009 was USD 10.85 billion, down 30% from the previous year.220 Crude oil was Syria’s main export commodity. Other important exported products included refined oil products, minerals, raw cotton, fruits, olives, and grains.221 In terms of commodity groups, agricultural products, fuels and mining products, and manufactures made up roughly equal portions of total exports in 2009, with fuels and mining leading by just a few percentage points.222 Syria’s largest export partner in 2009 was Iraq (30%). Other export partners included Lebanon, Germany, Italy, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and France.223

In 2009, Syria imported goods worth USD 15.29 billion, a reduction of 16% from 2008. In addition to machinery and equipment for transportation, other key imports included metal and metal products, food and livestock, chemicals, and textiles. Manufactures made up about half of the total imports in 2009, followed by fuels and mining products (24%), and agricultural products (20%). Saudi Arabia was Syria’s largest import partner, supplying 10% of all Syrian imports. Other main import partners are China, Turkey, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Ukraine, Italy, Russia, Germany, and Lebanon.

Trade with Iran

Syria is developing stronger economic, trade, and energy ties with Iran, a country with whom it shares political views on certain regional and global issues. A highly publicized bilateral trade agreement went into effect in 2004 and a draft free trade agreement followed in August 2010. Iran has invested in power generation, concrete production, and urban transportation in Syria and also partnered in joint ventures such as the Syrian-Iranian Vehicle Company and Syrian-Iranian Motor Company. A joint Iranian-Syrian bank is in the planning stages. In the field of energy, Syria and Iran have recently agreed on a natural gas deal that would establish a pipeline from Iran to Syria through Iraq. In all, bilateral trade between the two nations stood at USD 350 million in 2009, slightly more than the U.S.-Syria trade in goods. By March 2011, bilateral trade had increased to USD 3 billion.

Standard of Living

Syria has a lower middle-income population living in an economy that has been improving since 2005. Many have benefited from the government's investments in and liberalization and diversification of the socialist economy. Western-style malls have opened in Damascus, and private-sector banking and insurance industries have taken root. Nevertheless, for the large percentage of the Syrian population living outside the wealthier neighborhoods of Damascus, poverty, rather than prosperity, remains the daily reality. About 30% of the population is employed in government or the public sector with low salaries and wages. The average monthly public sector worker salary is about USD 320. In the past, wages

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have neither kept up with inflation nor with the cost of living. Syria has increased public sector wages numerous times—the latest by USD 32 in the wake of the spring 2011 mass demonstrations—but it may not be enough for all Syrians to make ends meet.

In 2005, 30% of Syrians lived in poverty while 11% lived below the subsistence level. With unemployment at a high 8.3% (2010 estimate), inflation at 5.9%, population growth rate at .9%, and economic growth at 4%, creating jobs has been a challenge. Some of the reasons for Syria’s inflation problems include reduced food harvests due to drought, a reduction in government fuel subsidies, and a large influx of refugees from Iraq who have driven up rents in large cities such as Damascus. Syria faces a housing shortage due to high real estate prices, refugee migrants, and domestic urban migration. The shortage has led to informal housing structures or slums around larger cities. Many of these areas lack basic services such as running water and electricity.

Both the government and Syrians have taken some steps to alleviate poverty. The government provides subsidies for basic commodities but they are difficult to sustain due to the increasing gap between production and consumption. Given the overall tough economic situation at home, large numbers of Syrians have long worked outside the country and sent remittances back to their families. Lebanon has been a popular destination for Syrian workers since the 1950s. Some have work permits, while others work there illegally.

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Investment

Syria hopes to increase investment in tourism, services, and natural gas in order to diversify its economy. In the past few years, Syria has taken a number of steps toward attracting new investments. In 2007, the Syrian government permitted investors to obtain loans from foreign banks and to repay those loans using local banks. A year later, Syria established a one-stop shop to facilitate the investment application process and minimize bureaucratic hurdles. A number of steps in 2010 have also encouraged investment: the government divided Syria into four development zones and set the minimum investment capital for each zone, enacted a new labor law that was more business-friendly, permitted private sector investment in electricity, and established a holding company for investment called “Syria for Investment” with offices within and outside of Syria. Today, most sectors are open to investment. Nevertheless, a number of factors undermine the investment climate in Syria. These include corruption, lack of transparency in and the arbitrary nature of investment laws, bureaucracy, political violence, and the absence of an independent judiciary.

Transportation

Syria has good basic transportation infrastructure but is striving to improve it. In late 2010, Syria was considering financing from the World Bank for the first time to develop its infrastructure. Syria currently has 104 airports of which 29 are paved. International connections (to European, Asian, and other Arab countries) are available at Damascus and Aleppo airports. Syria also has a well-developed railway system. Railways measure 2,052 km (1,275 mi) of which about 90% is standard gauge. Trains connect many cities in Syria but they are slower although cheaper than buses. There are 97,401 km (60,522 mi) of roadways but only 20% of it is paved. Major ports and terminals in Syria include Baniyas, Latakia, Tartus.

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Overall, traveling in Syria requires some care and caution. Public transportation may be crowded and buses or trains may not run on time. On the road, drivers may not follow all traffic laws or yield to entering traffic in traffic circles. Even when drivers do observe traffic signs and signals, high speeds and the unpredictable nature of traffic can make for hazardous conditions.

**Economic Outlook**

Syria has historically maintained a socialist state-dominated economy while transitioning toward a social market economy. In the past two decades the Syrian government has released some control on the economy. Among other reforms, it has established private banks, cut interest rates, and allowed privatization of some business sectors. In order to receive support from the West, however, Syria will need to comply with the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Act by ceasing to support terrorist groups. Alongside this, future long-term economic challenges to the Syrian economy include rising budget deficit, declining oil production, high unemployment rates, corruption, an overstaffed and poorly performing public sector, increased pressure on water supplies because of population growth, and water pollution. In October 2010, the Syrian State Planning Commission stated that a 2001 five-year plan would prioritize infrastructure, health, education, and social services, while stimulating industrial production and agriculture. With the recent civil conflicts, these plans may or may not change.

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Chapter 3: Assessment

1. Syria implemented “five-year” economic plans.

True

Syria has had a centralized and state-run economy since the Baath (Arabic for Renaissance) Party emerged as a major political force in the 1960s. Syria implemented its first five-year economic plan in 1960 with limited results. After the Baath Party implemented their socialist economic agenda, the country experienced a loss of capital, skilled workers, and administrators as centralized planning increased.

2. Crude oil is Syria’s main export commodity.

True

Syria’s crude oil output hit its highest point in 1995 at 610,000 barrels per day (bbd). However, since then, oil production has been declining, falling to an estimated 369,000 bbd in 2009.

3. Recent strong economic growth has meant increased industrial and agricultural production.

False

Despite strong economic growth in the past few years, the government has had to reduce subsidies and the inefficient and corrupt nature of the economy has led to both low investment and industrial and agricultural productivity rates.

4. Prosperity, rather than poverty, has become the daily reality even for the large percentage of the Syrian population living outside the wealthier neighborhoods of Damascus.

False

The average worker’s monthly salary in the public sector is about USD 320. Wages have neither kept up with inflation nor with the cost of living. The gap between these two measures highlights the difficulties that many Syrians face in making ends meet.

5. Privately owned banks are not authorized to operate within Syria’s borders.

False

Privately held banks were granted permission to operate in Syria in 2001, as long as a majority interest in the bank was held by Syrian citizens. These private institutions continue to follow the directions and leadership of the Central Bank.
Chapter 4: Society

Ethnic Groups

Syria’s population is fairly cohesive by heritage, but the different religious and ethnic communities have kept their identities. Arabic people represent 90% of the population and the rest is composed of Kurds, Armenians, and others. As for religious affiliation, Sunni Muslims make up 74% of the population; the Shia, Alawite, Druze, and other Muslim sects total about 16% of all Syrians; and Christians represent the remaining 10% of the population. Syrian Christians are mostly Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, or Greek Catholic. There are tiny, remnant Jewish communities in Damascus, Al Qamishli, and Aleppo.247 Arabic is spoken by most, but the sizable Kurdish and Armenian populations have kept their languages.248

The geographic distribution of the different groups of people in Syria includes the Syrian Arabs dominant in the western and central areas. Most of the Kurdish population live in the east. The mountainous regions and valleys are populated largely by Christians. The Druze concentrate in the south, while most Armenians live in Aleppo.

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Political Refugees

Syria has an increasing refugee problem. Refugees in Syria are mainly from two countries: Palestine and Iraq.\textsuperscript{249} More Iraqi refugees have been entering Syria than any other country in the region since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.\textsuperscript{250} In late 2007, the numbers of Iraqi refugees entering Syria began dropping sharply as Syria tightened its visa requirements. In addition, some Iraqis began voluntarily returning to Iraq around this time, possibly because of the improving security situation in parts of the country.\textsuperscript{251}

The refugee problem in Syria is causing rents to soar, schools to become overcrowded, and real estate values to spiral upward. Some of the wealthier Iraqi refugees have bought property in Damascus and built large homes. Real estate prices in the area rose 50\% in 2004, seemingly as a result of the population influx.\textsuperscript{252} Crime and health problems are also rising in slum areas where refugees have settled, mainly around Damascus. Many refugee children cannot find a place in the public schools and are forced to live on the street, leading to further problems.

Literature and Arts

Poetry

Syria’s literary tradition is rich, and the recitation of poetry dates back to ancient times. Many modern Syrian poets and writers have moved to Lebanon, where freedom of expression is not as limited as in Syria, and where most of the Arab publications are produced.\textsuperscript{253}

One Syrian poet, Nizar Qabbani became a national hero under President Hafez al-Assad, who hailed Qabbani across Syria as one of the nation’s greatest poets. Qabbani’s poetry used simple language and represented the cause of women long before that topic was addressed by others. Another famous modern Arab

\textsuperscript{253} Citizen and Immigration Canada, Cultural Profiles Project, “Cultural Profile of Syria: Arts and Literature,” n.d., \url{http://www.cp-pc.ca/english/syria/arts.html}
poet, Omar Abou Riche, was Syria’s Ambassador to Washington in 1962.

**Syrian Music**

Syrian singers and musicians have made major contributions to the Arabic world of music. One of the most famous Syrian singers was Farid el-Atrash, whose songs are still famous throughout the Middle East. He also acted and sang in Syrian and Egyptian movies. Mayyada Hennawi is another name that attracts many listeners, as do George Wassouf and Asala Nasri, whose recordings can also be heard on Arabic radio and TV stations all around the Middle East and beyond.

**Social Customs**

**Hospitality**

Arab hospitality is world famous, and Syria honors this tradition to the fullest. A visitor to any and every home in Syria will be welcomed and honored. The host family will offer the guest the very best food and drink that they can afford and will go to great lengths to assure the comfort of their guest. When offered tea, coffee, or something to eat, it is the custom to politely refuse it the first time. The host will offer a second time, and again, the guest, with the utmost delicacy, should turn it down. A third time, the host will ask, “Not even a cup of coffee?” or some such thing, and at this point, the guest should relent and gratefully accept his host’s generosity.

The Arabic expression *ahlan wa-sahlan* means “welcome,” and the host will probably repeat this phrase several times during the visit, as if to remind the guest to relax in the knowledge that the host is honored to have him there. It is not necessary for the visitor to bring a gift to his host, but it is acceptable and a nice thing to do. In the case of non-Muslim families, a good bottle of wine or *araq* (the local variety of anisette liquor) is appropriate, but not among Muslims, for whom alcoholic beverages are forbidden.

**Syrian Food**

Grains, vegetables, and fruit form the basis of most Syrian food. Another staple food is hummus, which is offered as an appetizer dip or with the main entree with other vegetables. The main ingredient of hummus is a purée of garbanzo beans, to which tahini (a smooth paste made from sesame seeds), lemon, garlic and other spices are added according to taste.

Another famous Syrian dish is *labneh*, or salty yogurt balls in olive oil. They are served with fresh parsley or vegetables. Fresh vegetables stuffed with meat and rice are also found in Syrian cuisine. Syrian food is generally healthy, low in fat and cholesterol, and easy to prepare. The main course is usually followed by Arabic coffee or *shai* (Arabic tea) and pastries.
Syrian desserts are often made of honey-soaked pastry filled with nuts and other ingredients. One of the most well-known and popular Arabic pastries is baklava, which is thought to date back to the Assyrians around the 8th century B.C.E.\textsuperscript{254} *Halawat al-Jibna* is a doughy pastry filled with cream cheese and usually covered in syrup.

**Male–Female Relationships**

In Syria, marriage is the only respectable context for male-female relationships. Dating, per se, is rare, and premarital sex is virtually unheard of. Almost no children are born out of wedlock. Boys and girls go to separate schools, though university classes are coeducational. Syria is a socially conservative society; as long as visitors recognize and respect this reality, they will feel most welcome. For example, if a foreign male visitor in Damascus meets a Syrian woman in a public place and finds her interesting, he should not pursue his interest. Do not invite her for a cup of tea. Do not flirt. This would dishonor the woman and her family.

**Arranged Marriages**

Marriage in Syria is still largely an arranged affair. The mother and other female relatives of the young man seek marriage candidates, preferably from among cousins, or failing that, then from the daughters of close friends and trusted neighbors. If his mother is not alive, then his aunt takes this responsibility upon herself. Once a candidate is identified, women from the groom’s family visit the girl’s family to meet her and her mother.\textsuperscript{255} The young man’s mother learns of the candidate’s good attributes, qualities, and abilities and determines if she would make a good wife for her son. If that is the case, the two mothers set a date for the young man and both of his parents to come calling to meet her family. This is the first step.


The Process of Engagement

Most families will not force a young woman to marry against her will. If both young people agree that they want to go ahead, then the two fathers step in and play their role. The young man’s father visits the father to discuss all aspects of the wedding, not just the time, date, and place, but also the dowry, the steps of the process, the preparations for the bride, and maraseem al-zawaj (the rituals of the marriage).

The engagement period extends from the moment the young man and woman agree to marry until the wedding day. During this engagement, the couple visits each other’s families and get to know them better. In Syria, marriage is not merely the bond between two individuals; rather, marriage is a bond between families. For that reason, the parents are consulted at every step of the process, and the extended families from the two sides meet repeatedly and exchange hospitality and gifts. Unlike in Western countries, generally speaking, there is not a lot of opportunity for the engaged couple to be alone together; in fact, they may not even meet each other before the actual wedding ceremony. Another difference is that it is the groom’s parents who are responsible for all the expenses of the wedding.

Differences in Marriage Tradition Between Christians and Muslims

Engagement procedures apply to both Muslim and Christian families. In Syria, a person is known by his family, not by his religion. Muslim or Christian, he or she is known as the son or daughter of a certain person, or the father or mother of a certain person. In other aspects, however, Christian and Muslim marriages do differ in significant ways.

The Christian Wedding

Christians marry in the church and invite friends and relatives to attend the wedding ceremony. After the ceremony, the wedding party gathers—men, women, and children all together—for a reception and feast.

The Muslim Wedding

Muslims do not necessarily marry in a mosque. An imam (Muslim prayer leader) meets with the bride, groom, and the parents, either in his office or at the home of the groom, and reviews the marriage contract to verify its validity. He recites certain suras (chapters) or ayat (verses) from the Quran and signs the documents to legalize the marriage. There is no party at this ceremony. The groom and bride return separately to their respective parents’ houses, attended by their siblings, and perhaps their closest cousins and dearest friends. The parties are held the next day. For conservative Muslim families there are
separate parties for the men and the women, because most of the women are veiled and should not be the focus of men’s attention.

Polygamy is permitted among Muslims, and men may have as many as four wives. This practice, however, has become less and less common in present-day Syria.

**Sports**

Syrians are big sports fans, both in terms of participation and spectatorship. Basketball, volleyball, badminton, tennis, wrestling, boxing, body building, and football (soccer) are the most popular sports. It is worth noting that soccer is not played in Syria quite as widely as it is in other Arab countries, such as Egypt, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, Syrian interest in soccer is keen enough to have established and maintained an extensive league with some 120 clubs made up of 25,000 players, 1,500 trainers, and 425 referees.256

Regardless of what sports Syrians prefer to play, when it comes to watching the professionals, *qurat al-qadam* (soccer) is number one.

Chapter 4: Assessment

1. Syria’s population is fairly cohesive by heritage.

   True

   But the different religious and ethnic communities have kept their identities. Arabic people represent 90% of the population and the rest is composed of Kurds, Armenians, and others. As for religious affiliation, Sunni Muslims make up 74% of the population; the Shi’a, Alawite, Druze, and other Muslim sects total about 16% of all Syrians; and Christians represent the remaining 10% of the population.

2. Syria, the public recitation of poetry only recently became a popular pastime.

   False

   Syria’s literary tradition is rich, and the recitation of poetry dates back to ancient times. Many modern Syrian poets and writers have moved to Lebanon, where freedom of expression is not as limited as in Syria, and where most of the Arab publications are produced.

3. The guest in an Arab home is expected to refuse refreshment more than once.

   True

   When offered tea, coffee, or something to eat, it is the custom to politely refuse it the first time. The host will offer a second time, and again, the guest, with the utmost delicacy, should turn it down. A third time, the host will ask, “Not even a cup of coffee?” or some such thing, and at this point, the guest should relent and gratefully accept his host’s generosity.

4. A typical Syrian dessert is the Arabic pastry baklava.

   True

   Syrian desserts are often made of honey-soaked pastry that is filled with nuts and other ingredients. Baklava is one of the most well-known and popular Arabic pastries. It is thought to date back to the Assyrians around the 8th century B.C.E.

5. In Syria, marriage is the only respectable context for male-female relationships.

   True

   Dating, per se, is rare, and premarital sex is virtually unheard of. Syria is a socially conservative society; as long as visitors recognize and respect this reality, they will feel most welcome. For example, if a foreign male visitor in Damascus meets a Syrian woman in a public place and finds her interesting, he should not pursue his interest. Do not invite her for a cup of tea. Do not flirt. This would dishonor the woman and her family.
Chapter 5: Security

Introduction

Syria lies at the northern end of one of the world’s most volatile regions. Modern-day Syria was once part of a larger geographical territory that encompassed the coastal and inland areas along the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Known as Greater Syria, or the Levant, this region roughly included the current states of Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, as well as the present-day Palestinian territories and a portion of southern Turkey. Over time, the boundaries of these regions changed but conflict has been a constant. In recent times, two of Syria’s neighbors—Iraq and Lebanon—have been plagued by wars that have periodically devastated their countries. In addition, Syria played an active military role in the 2011 Lebanese conflict. Syria’s southwestern neighbor, Israel, has fought three wars against Syria and its allies since 1948; it currently occupies the Golan Heights, which was Syrian territory after WWI until 1967. Syria’s relations with its other two neighbors, Turkey and Jordan, have often been frosty as well, with stand-offs over issues ranging from water rights to terrorism support. The Assad regime has also had to face internal threats, and has responded by using its feared security apparatus to relentlessly discourage dissent.

U.S.–Syrian Relations

Since Syria’s independence in 1946, U.S.–Syrian relations have both improved and soured. In 1967, the U.S. severed ties with Syria after the Six-Day War with Israel but resumed relations again in 1974 when Syria and Israel signed a disengagement agreement. In 1979, the U.S. designated Syria as a State Sponsor of Terrorism for providing support and safe haven for organizations the U.S. has designated terrorist groups, such as Hamas and Hezbollah. Relations became further strained during the 1980s with the U.S. suspecting a Syrian role in the U.S. Embassy and Marine barracks attacks in Beirut, Lebanon, and also U.S. attacks on Syrian installations in Lebanon.

257 During the Six-Day War, involving not just Israel and Syria but also Egypt and Jordan, Israel gained Jerusalem, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights, West Bank, and Sinai Peninsula. Israel gave Sinai back to Egypt in 1982.
helped secure the release of hostages aboard the hijacked Trans World Airlines flight 847 in 1986 but continued suspicion of Syrian involvement in terrorism led to administrative sanctions and the recall of the U.S. ambassador in 1986. The ambassador returned to Syria after Syria expelled terrorist group Abu Nidal Organization from the country. Relations were again improved when Syria supported the international coalition against Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War and it cooperated with U.S. counter-terrorism efforts.

During the past decade, however, relations remained difficult due in part to Syria’s continued support of terrorist groups and also because of the presence of Syrian forces in Lebanon. (Syrian troops eventually withdrew from Lebanon in 2005.) Furthermore, U.S. government and military officials frequently accused Syria of allowing Islamist fighters from other countries to freely cross its borders into Iraq. Syria’s tight suppression of internal dissent and its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction have also been ongoing concerns of the U.S. government. Consequently, Syria is under both general and specific U.S. economic sanctions. The Obama administration renewed the sanctions in May 2010 but has sought to engage Syria in dialog about ways to reduce regional tension and promote peace.

In April 2011, the U.S. extended sanctions against Syria in the wake of the government crackdown on civilian protestors in Dara’a and other parts of the country. Sanctions were imposed on Syria’s intelligence agency; President Assad’s brother, Mahir al-Assad, a commander in the Syrian Army who led the operations in Dara’a; and President Assad’s cousin, Atif Najib, former security chief in the province of Dara’a. Sanctions were also placed on the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.

263 Syria’s sanctioning by the U.S. means that any U.S. foreign aid to Syria is severely restricted; that all arms exports and sales to Syria are banned; that sales of dual-use items that could improve Syria’s military capability or its ability to assist terrorist organizations are significantly controlled; and that business or trade transactions with Syria are subject to several restrictions.
Relations with Neighboring Countries

Turkey

After decades of tension, Syria and Turkey have recently improved their political, trade, and economic ties. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, relations between Syria and Turkey were strained. The Turks claimed that Syria was actively supporting the banned separatists Kurdistan Workers’ Party in Turkey (PKK). Syria’s support of the PKK was thought to be a lever against Turkey in the ongoing water dispute between the two countries. Syria was critical of Turkey’s use of Euphrates water for irrigation, which caused higher salinity in the water entering Syria. In April 1996, as PKK guerrillas training in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley in Lebanon continued to launch terrorist strikes against military and civilian targets in southeastern Turkey. During that time, Turkey temporarily shut off the Euphrates water supply to Syria for technical reasons, resulting in water rationing in Syria.

Relations became worse before they got better. In 1988, Syrian–Turkish relations were in crisis when Turkish forces massed along the Syrian border. They threatened to invade, if Syria did not cease its support of the PKK, and expel PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, who was reported to be living in Damascus at the time. Syria eventually severed all connections to the PKK and expelled its leader. From that point forward, the two countries slowly began to develop a better relationship. Syria and Turkey now aim for a “common future” and a “complete economic cooperation package” with no visa.

restrictions. The Syrian–Turkish alliance is mutually beneficial on many levels: Turkey has a stable neighbor in regards to the PKK, cooperation with an EU candidate improves Syria’s reputation in the world, and trade between the two countries opens new markets for each. In the wake of the 2011 anti-government mass protests that began in March, Turkey remained in contact with Syrian officials, hosting some of them in Istanbul, while urging for reform and restraint. By May 2011, nearly 250 Syrian refugees had fled to Turkey due to the violence and government crackdown.

Lebanon

Despite their long shared history, Syria established formal diplomatic relations with Lebanon for the first time on 13 October 2008. Lebanon was once part of Greater Syria and both nations emerged from the French Mandate in the 1940s. With such historic ties, Syria has always held a dominant position in Lebanese politics. Syria’s role in Lebanon was reinforced by its 1976 intervention in the Lebanese civil war on behalf of the Maronite Christians, its blocking of the accord between Israel and Lebanon after Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, Israel’s withdrawal from Lebanon, and the presence of tens of thousands of Syrian troops in Lebanon. The 1991 Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation, and Coordination solidified their strong ties.

Syria assisted the Lebanese government and military in disarming the nation’s militias in the early 1990s after the end of fighting; but a few militias—most notably, Hezbollah—were allowed to keep their weapons. Hezbollah forces in southern Lebanon, in effect, gave Syria a proxy force to pressure Israel to the south, and to counter anti-Syrian


© Adam Griffman
Lebanon/Syria border
opposition parties in Lebanon.\textsuperscript{281} Towards the latter end, Hezbollah evolved a political wing that has increasingly become a significant force in Lebanese politics. In May 2008, after Hezbollah armed supporters gained control of western Beirut, a governmental power-sharing agreement was reached.

Although Syria’s relationship with Hezbollah has changed over the years, Syria continues to exert its influence in Lebanon in both the political and military arenas.\textsuperscript{282} When Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, a critic of Syria, was assassinated in 2005, many observers suspected Syrian involvement. A year later, when Hezbollah abducted two Israeli soldiers in Israel in a cross-border raid, the UN mission in Lebanon had to dramatically increase their troop presence. With no agreement yet on Syrian–Lebanon borders, Hezbollah uses Israel’s continued occupation of Shebaa to argue that Israeli forces have not yet completely left Lebanon. This justifies Hezbollah’s continued militarization and provides a rationale for continued attacks against Israeli targets.\textsuperscript{283,284}

On 13 January 2011, Hezbollah and their allies withdrew from the Lebanese cabinet, causing a total collapse of the government. The Prime Minister, Saad Hariri, was replaced by Hezbollah nominee Najib Miqati, whom parliament then approved. Miqati is believed to have agreed to Hezbollah demand that he denounce the findings of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon.\textsuperscript{285}

\textit{Israel}

Israel and Syria have no formal diplomatic relations, and have technically been at war since 1948.\textsuperscript{286} The main source of conflict between the two nations has been the disputed Golan Heights. Golan Heights is a strategic region between Syria and Israel that measures 76 km (47 mi). The Golan Heights includes three main tributaries of the Jordan River, a major water supply for Israel. Israel captured the Golan Heights during the 1967 war, annexing it in 1981. Talks, direct and indirect, have failed because Syria insists the Golan Heights must be returned to them. Israel, in return, has been looking for assurances that Syria will no longer sponsor or

\textsuperscript{286} Agence France-Presse, “Turkey Ends Syria-Israel Peace Effort Over Gaza,” Google.com, 29 December 2008, http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gFsDb9e18JBmm-qZKrVJEAmIli5w
support groups who do not recognize Israel’s right to exist as a nation, and that security and water-access issues related to the Golan Heights be agreed upon.287

The most recent negotiations, indirect talks mediated by Turkey, were delayed when the Israeli mediator resigned.288, 289 Talks were halted in December 2008, when Israeli forces began air strikes and a ground offensive in the Gaza Strip without warning.290 Since then, Israel has opted out of Turkish-mediated talks. The Israeli parliament also passed a bill that would require cessation of land in any deal to be placed on a national referendum.291

Since 1974, the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) has maintained a buffer zone between Syria and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. During this time, there have been no serious military incursions by either side across the separation zone.292 However, Israel has launched air attacks on Syria. One attack in 2003, targeted what Israel described to be an Islamic Jihad training camp. Syria denied the charge, claiming that the Israelis bombed a civilian site.293 Four years later, Israeli jets bombed a suspected nuclear site in northern Syria.294

Jordan

Despite their shared history as part of Greater Syria and their alliance against Israel in two wars, relations between Syria and Jordan have been difficult at times. In part, the friction has been based on the two countries’ frequent opposite alignments in regional geopolitical affairs. Syria has long been a champion for pan-Arab nationalism and has generally opposed the intervention of Western nations in the region. Jordan has traditionally had strong relations with the United States and Great Britain.295 Paradoxically, Jordan stood on the sidelines during the first Gulf War in 1991, whereas Syria joined the U.S.-led coalition forces that opposed Iraq. In 2003, the roles were

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290 Agence France-Presse, “Turkey Ends Syria-Israel Peace Effort Over Gaza,” Google.com, 29 December 2008, [http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gFsDh9eI8JBmm-qZKrVJEAmI1i5w](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gFsDh9eI8JBmm-qZKrVJEAmI1i5w)
somewhat reversed. Syria opposed the U.S-led invasion of Iraq; Jordan, while not publically supporting the operation, quietly offered “operational assistance” during and after the invasion. Nevertheless, despite this history of the two countries being on opposite sides of the fence, there has been a steady improvement in Syrian–Jordanian relations in recent years, as indicated by more frequent meetings between high-level officials, increased trade activity, and a higher number of border crossings between the two nations.

Syria’s continued support of Hamas, however, caused strains in its relations with Jordan. Since 1999, when current Jordanian King Abdullah II ascended to the crown, Jordan has followed a course of supporting the Palestinian cause and Palestinian moderates while keeping Hamas at a distance. Over half of Jordan’s population is of Palestinian origin, a situation that has made its relationships with Palestinian organizations highly sensitive and subject to complex political considerations. In addition, unlike Syria, Jordan has signed a peace treaty with Israel, although that agreement became a source of public protest after the December 2008–January 2009 Israeli offensive into Gaza to root out Hamas militia forces.

In mid-2008, Jordan reopened communications with Hamas, although the Israeli raid in Gaza and the resulting street support of Hamas in Amman may have forced the King’s hand. In the past few years, the King has supported the other Palestinian Authority political party, Fatah in the West Bank, moving once again to distance itself from the Hamas–Syria bloc toward the Egypt–Saudi Arabia–Fatah–U.S. axis. Fatah and Hamas had parted ways after the 2006 elections but agreed in an April 2011 deal

brokered by Turkey to build a unity government in the Palestinian territories. The union will likely affect Israel’s security.

**Iraq**

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 to overthrow the government of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was opposed by Syrian President Assad’s government. While Syria had severed relations with the Hussein government during the 1980s, when it supported Iran in its war against Iraq, political hostilities began to lessen in 2000 shortly after Bashar al-Assad became president. Around this time, Syria began receiving illegal shipments of below-market-price Iraqi oil, circumventing the UN “oil-for-food” program. In return, Syrian firms smuggled various goods, including arms, into Iraq, further subverting UN sanctions.

After fighting began in Iraq, Syria, and Damascus in particular, became a favored destination for Iraqi refugees. The massive influx has overburdened Syria’s social services and economic infrastructure and has contributed to the high rates of inflation in Syria, pushing up demand for housing, food, and other essential items.

During the height of the counter-insurgency in Iraq, a key point of division between Syria and the Iraqi government was the continued influx of foreign fighters into Iraq across the Syrian border. Despite these tensions, however, Syria and Iraq established formal diplomatic ties in November 2006, after 25 years of broken relations. Although it opposed the Iraq war, the Assad government seemingly saw greater value in working with the fragile Iraqi democracy, than in having Iraq disintegrate completely into sectarian chaos that could spill across its border. Syria has long-standing connections to many of the current political leaders in Iraq, including Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who lived in Syria for over 20 years before the fall of the Hussein regime. Iraqi Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani, President of Iraq, also lived in Syria for several years. These high-level contacts have led to increased cooperation on border security and combating crime and terrorism.

Although Syria has in the past supported Kurdish independence groups—most notably the PKK—it now speaks out against Kurdish autonomy in Iraq, fearing that such

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autonomy fuels discontent among Syria’s own population of 150,000 to 300,000 Kurds. Nevertheless, in light of the spring 2011 uprising, President Assad granted Syrian nationality to Kurds by decree.

Military

Syria has one of the Middle East’s largest military forces, although in total numbers, its military has decreased from the highs reached in the late 1990s. Syria’s military consists of the Syrian Arab Army, Syrian Arab Navy, and Syrian Arab Air and Air Defence Forces. In 2011, Syria’s armed forces had 295,000 active personnel and 314,000 reservists. Most senior level officers in Syria’s armed forces are from the same Alawite minority as President Assad. The largest part of the armed forces (400,000 active and reserve troops combined) is assigned to the Syrian Army. The Syria army has about 5,000 battle tanks, 600 reconnaissance vehicles, 1,500 armored personnel carriers, 2,500 armored infantry fighting vehicles, and 4,000 surface-to-air missiles.

For most of the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet Union was the primary supplier of arms and other equipment for the Syrian military, most of which was purchased on credit. For this reason, Syria’s military expenditures were high during this time despite a weak economy. For example, spending reached as high as 23% of the Syrian GDP in 1983. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 forced Syria to reduce its military spending. Since 1993, Syrian military spending has averaged between 4 and 7% of the national GDP. Prior to 2005, Syria owed Russia USD 13 billion for its Soviet-era military purchases; Russia has since waived USD 10 billion of this debt, reputedly in exchange for Syrian guarantees of future arms purchases from Russia.

Syria’s navy is by far the smallest of its military forces at around 5,000 members. Navy bases are located at Latakia, Tartus, and Minet el-Baida. The navy’s primary mission is to defend Syria’s major ports at Tartus and Latakia, as well as to carry out coastal patrols and surveillance. The port at Tartus has long hosted a maintenance center for the Russian navy, serving as Russia’s only naval facility in the Mediterranean Sea. In recent years, there has been rampant speculation that Syria and Russia have agreed to develop the Tartus facility into a full-scale naval base for the Russian Black Sea Fleet, whose main facility at the Ukrainian port of Sevastopol is on a lease that runs out in 2017. Russian Navy officials, however, deny that any decisions or agreements have been reached on basing their fleet’s ships in Syrian ports.

In the uprising that began in mid-March 2011, security forces launched a brutal crackdown against protesters. Six weeks later, divisions within the army became apparent as soldiers refused to fire on civilians. Their continued disobedience may become the undoing of President Assad’s regime.

**Terrorist Groups**

Syria is one of only four nations that the United States currently designates as a State Sponsor of Terrorism. According to the annual U.S. State Department report on terrorism, there are four Palestinian groups Syria provides political support for that the U.S. considers terrorist organizations: the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and another called the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command (PFLP-GC).

Other terrorist organizations and elements operate within Syria as well. Hezbollah still receives both material and political support from the Syrian government. Although the number of Al Qaeda foreign fighters transiting through Syria and to and from Iraq has declined since the height of the Iraqi insurgency between 2005 and 2007,

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320 The other three are Iran, Sudan, and Cuba.

their presence in Syria, along with former Iraqi Regime Elements, continue to be a concern to the United States. While Hamas has taken a neutral stance on Syria’s civil unrest, Hezbollah was unenthusiastic about the prospect of losing Syria’s support should there be a regime change in the country. \(^{322,323}\) Syria’s financial sector is particularly vulnerable to terrorism financing as over half of the total business transactions in the country are made in cash.

Syria itself has not been directly implicated in a terrorist action since 1986. However, interim reports on an ongoing UN investigation into Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri’s assassination have generated much speculation that Syrian governmental and intelligence officials may have been involved in some way. No final conclusions have been made though. \(^{324}\)

Despite Syria’s checkered record in providing support for organizations that carry out terrorist actions, Syria itself has been generally immune from such actions on its own soil. For many years, Damascus was considered among the most secure Middle East capitals, with assassinations or bombings seldom occurring. This relative calm was shattered in September 2008 when a car bomb on a crowded Damascus street killed 17 people. No group took credit for the attack in its immediate aftermath, but Damascus television two months later broadcast the purported confessions of 11 members of Fatah al-Islam, a radical Sunni Islamist group. One of the confessors alleged that funding had come to the group from the Future Movement, a Lebanese Sunni political group led by the son of assassinated Lebanese leader Rafiq Hariri and the largest party in Lebanon’s anti-Syrian “March 14” parliamentary coalition. \(^{325,326,327}\)

**Other Security Issues**

**Civil Unrest**

The mass demonstrations that began in March 2011 marked the first time President Assad was directly challenged by the people during his 11-year presidency. However, despite the government’s tight control on public dissent, Syria has a long history of massive human rights abuses that have plagued the nation and fomented

civil unrest. Through emergency rule, Syria has firmly restricted freedoms of expression, assembly, and association, particularly of the minority Kurd population. Political power is dominated by the Alawites, another minority group from which the President himself hails. The only legal political party is the Baath, and its coalition partners, who orchestrate popular referendums by which the president is elected for seven-year terms. Government officials and their family and friends benefit economically (sometimes illegally) from their Baath Party connections. Corruption in the government is pervasive. Ultimately, the executive branch holds all the power.

The most violent of government crackdowns was the Hama massacre of 1982. Security forces killed tens of thousands of people and demolished the Muslim Brotherhood’s opposition center. The six-year armed insurgency by anti-regime and archconservative Muslim Brotherhood was quelled in such a way that public dissent has been limited since then. However, the grievances were still there. Economic liberalization did not alleviate the plight of the poor and the thousands that are displaced by drought. In 2009, 15% of Syria’s labor force was working in Lebanon. Women, although they are guaranteed equality in the constitution, are discriminated against because of the country’s personal status laws and the penal code. Despite these conditions and some of the same issues that brought down regimes in Tunisia and Egypt (such as corruption, political repression, unemployment), the mass demonstrations during Spring 2011 were both unexpected and smaller in scope due to limited internet usage, cultural disinclination toward sectarian conflict, and Syria’s large military and police force.

Weapons of Mass Destruction

Syria is suspected of having a stockpile of chemical weapons and is pursuing biological and nuclear weapons as well. Analysts have produced supporting evidence that Syria has chemical weapons but very limited data on capabilities for biological weapons. In September 2007 Israeli forces bombed, Al Kibar (or Dair Alzour) a suspected nuclear reactor under construction in Syria’s remote northeastern desert. This facility furthered rumors that Syria was using North Korean assistance to advance its nuclear weapons program, although there is no evidence that Syria could provide fuel for the remote Al Kibar facility.

Confirming Syria’s pursuit of weapons of mass destruction has been difficult since 2008. That year, Syria barred the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) from accessing the alleged nuclear reactor after the IAEA found traces of uranium at the facility. In the next two years, the IAEA found more evidence of uranium particles at the site and reported their concern that the uranium did not come from an undeclared inventory, as the Syrians claimed, but that it could possibly be used for nuclear purposes instead. Over time, the evidence at the site deteriorated and the IAEA urged Syria’s cooperation in the investigation of the bombed site. In February 2011, Syria announced that it ‘would continue to work with’ the IAEA to ‘resolve all outstanding technical issues in accordance with’ the country’s IAEA and NPT commitments.

Sunni Islamist Groups

While Syria remains a State Sponsor of Terrorism, it does not provide indiscriminate support to all terrorist organizations. Most of the terrorist groups with members operating in Syria are Palestinian “rejectionist” groups (i.e., organizations that focus their violent activities toward Israel and do not acknowledge Israel’s right to exist as a national entity). Some of these

groups, such as Hamas and PIJ, have charters with goals that include transforming all of
the Palestine region (including modern-day Israel) into an Islamic state. Such
groups either draw inspiration from (PIJ) or are Palestinian wings (Hamas) of the Muslim
Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamist organization that operates in several countries in the
Middle East and is the ultimate source of the ideology of most modern Sunni jihadist
groups.

During the Iraq War, Lebanon and Syria were transit countries for many of the foreign
jihadists entering Iraq to support Al Qaeda their counterinsurgency. Several observers
have recently questioned whether Syria, as well as Lebanon, is now experiencing a
“blowback problem” resulting from this policy. As some of the Sunni jihadists
retreated from Iraq, where the Sunni tribes have turned against Al Qaeda, both Damascus
and the coastal Lebanese city of Tripoli were racked by bomb attacks in late 2008. In
November 2008, the Lebanese and Syrian interior ministers met in Damascus for the first
time since diplomatic relations between the two countries were established. They agreed
to form a joint commission to coordinate their efforts to fight terrorism and other

Drug and Human Trafficking

Aside from border disputes and the refugee crisis, drug and human trafficking are two other
transnational issues in Syria. Syria is on the Tier 2 Watch List as a destination and transit country for
women and children trafficked for forced labor or forced prostitution. Thousands of women from
East Africa and Southeast Asia, hired as domestic servants, are forced into involuntary servitude.
Some women from Eastern Europe, hired as cabaret dancers, are forced into prostitution.
There is also forced prostitution among the Iraqi refugee population, mainly due to
poverty and criminal gang activity. Syria continues to be a destination for child sex
tourism for Middle Eastern Countries. Syria is also a transit country for Iraqi, Southeast

http://middleeast.about.com/od/palestinepalestinians/a/me080106b.htm
340 Amy Zalman, “Terrorism Issues: A Profile of Palestinian Islamic Jihad,” About.com, 2009,
http://terrorism.about.com/od/groupsleader1/p/IslamicJihad.htm
341 Bruce Livesey, “Al Qaeda’s New Front: The Salafist Movement,” Frontline, Public Broadcasting
http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/10/17/opinion/edsyria.php
343 TheEconomist.com, “Syria and Lebanon: Jihadist Blowback?,” 2 October 2008,
344 Agence France-Presse, “Neighbors Agree to Boost Border Controls,” France24.com, 11 November
345 Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, U.S. Department of State, “Country Narratives:
Asian, and East African women and girls trafficked for forced prostitution to Europe, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait. The Syrian government has made some effort to reduce human trafficking but does not meet the minimum standards to eliminate it.

In addition to human trafficking, Syria is also a transit point for drugs. Syria is neither a consumer (illegal drug use is discouraged through harsh penalties and social stigma) nor a major producer of drugs. However, due to its porous borders, police corruption, and the political uncertainty in Iraq and Lebanon, Syria has become a trafficking route for drugs smuggled between Europe and the Persian Gulf.\textsuperscript{346} Drugs smuggled include hashish, opiates, and cocaine, and Captagon (a stimulant like amphetamine), which is trafficked to the Gulf States from Lebanon and Turkey.

Chapter 5: Assessment

1. Syria has one of the Middle East’s smallest military forces.

False

Although in total numbers, its military has decreased from the highs reached in the late 1990s, Syria has one of the Middle East’s largest military forces. In 2011, Syria’s armed forces had 295,000 active personnel and 314,000 reservists.

2. Syria established formal diplomatic relations with Lebanon for the first time in 2008.

True

Despite their long shared history, Syria established formal diplomatic relations with Lebanon for the first time on 13 October 2008. Lebanon was once part of Greater Syria and both nations emerged from the French Mandate in the 1940s.

3. Syria and Israel have no formal diplomatic relations, and technically they have been at war since 1948.

True

Central to peace talks between Israel and Syria is the status of the Golan Heights, which Syria has long insisted must be returned to them, according to the pre-1967 borders. Israel, in return, has been looking for assurances that Syria will no longer sponsor or support “rejectionist” groups that do not recognize Israel’s right to exist as a nation, and that security and water-access issues related to the Golan Heights be agreed upon.

4. After fighting began in Iraq in 2003, Syria, and Damascus in particular, became a favored destination for Iraqi refugees.

True

While no one knows for certain how many Iraqis are now living in Syria, the most recent estimate placed the total at 151,000 in January 2010. The massive influx has stressed Syria’s social services and economic infrastructure and has contributed to the high rates of inflation in Syria, pushing up demand for housing, food, and other essential items.

5. There has long been speculation that Syria has a stockpile of chemical weapons and is pursuing biological and nuclear weapons as well.

True

While there is supporting evidence for Syrian chemical weapons, there is only surmise about Syria’s biological weapons capabilities. The September 2008 Israeli bombing of a suspected nuclear reactor under construction in northeastern Syria furthered rumors that Syria was using North Korean assistance to advance its nuclear weapons program. However, there is no evidence that Syria has the ability to provide fuel for the reactor.
Final Assessment

1. Syria has an ongoing territorial dispute with Lebanon over the Golan Heights region on Syria’s far southwestern edge.

2. Syria’s topography demonstrates a significant lack of diversity, consisting entirely of one expansive desert plateau.

3. Springs in the desert are a significant source of drinking and irrigation water in Syria.

4. Damascus is often described as one of the world’s oldest continuously inhabited cities.

5. Dust storms and sandstorms are significant natural disaster threats in Syria.

6. Aramaeans ruled much of modern-day Syria, including a southern principality whose capital was Damascus.

7. During the Umayyad Dynasty, Arabic replaced Aramaic and Greek as the principal language of Syria.

8. For most of the European powers in the late 1800s, a weakened Ottoman Empire was preferable to the potential geopolitical crisis that might ensue if the empire were to collapse altogether.

9. The British and French honored the Syrian sovereignty that was established when Faisal was named King of Syria in March 1920.

10. A United Nations investigation into the death of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri cleared several senior Syrian intelligence and administration figures.

11. After the discovery of large oil fields during the 1980s, an influx of foreign companies helped institute Syria’s new economic reforms.

12. Syria’s largest import partner is Iran.

13. One problem with agricultural production in Syria is that some farmers do not regularly practice crop rotation, thus causing the depletion of vital nutrients in the soil.

14. Large numbers of Syrians have long worked outside the country and sent remittances back to their families.

15. The Syrian government does not permit banks to deal in hard currency.

16. The geographic distribution of the different groups of people in Syria has been artificially created through a government mandate.
17. Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani became a national hero under President Hafez al-Assad.

18. It is not necessary for a visitor to an Arab home to bring a gift to his host.

19. Hummus, a purée of garbanzo beans, is a popular breakfast food in Syria.

20. In Syria, the mother of the young man seeks out marriage candidates.

21. For most of the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet Union was the primary supplier of arms and other equipment for the Syrian military.

22. One particularly contentious area in the process of delineating and demarcating the border between Syria and Lebanon is the Shebaa Farms.


24. There was no division between Syria and the Iraqi government about the continued influx of foreign fighters into Iraq across the Syrian border.

25. During the Iraq War, Syria were a transit country for many of the foreign jihadists entering into Iraq to support Al Qaeda in their Iraq counterinsurgency.
Further Reading


