



## COUNTRY IN PERSPECTIVE

# SYRIA

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2019



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DEFENSE LANGUAGE INSTITUTE  
FOREIGN LANGUAGE CENTER

# COUNTRY IN PERSPECTIVE | SYRIA

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*Mediterranean Coast of Syria  
Flickr / Badreddin Alsabbagh*

## Chapter 1 | Syria in Perspective

# Geography

## Introduction

Located in the Middle East on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea, 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.<sup>1</sup> With its current boundaries, Syria occupies the northern portion of the Greater Syrian region.<sup>2, 3, 4</sup>

Most of Syria is semi-arid desert plateau punctuated by numerous rivers and mountains. The mountains, Jabal al-Nusiriyya, 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 relatively 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 the season.<sup>5, 6</sup>

Syria shares borders with five neighbors: its northern border is with Turkey; to the east and southeast, lies Iraq; to its south is Jordan; and on Syria's far southwestern edge lies the Golan Heights region, which Israel has occupied since 1967. The Golan Heights, a central part of Syria's ongoing territorial dispute with Israel, is a strategically valuable region that 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 the Golan Heights, lies between the Mediterranean Sea and Syria's western border.<sup>7</sup> Syria's short Mediterranean coastline (180 km or 110 mi) begins at Lebanon's northern border and runs to the southern border of Turkey.<sup>8</sup>



*Map of Syria and its border countries*  
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## Geographic Divisions

Syria's landscape shows significant diversity as it stretches from the Mediterranean coast in the west to the Syrian Desert in the southeast. The country features four distinct regions: coastal, mountains, interior plains, and desert.<sup>9</sup> It has a total surface area that measures 185,180 sq km (71,498 sq mi), including a 1,295 sq km (500 sq mi) region of Golan Heights.<sup>10</sup> At this size, Syria is slightly larger than the state of North Dakota.<sup>11</sup> Two mountain chains and a narrow coastal plain characterize Syria's western region, while its expansive eastern region consists of steppes or desert plateaus, interspersed with river basins, low elevation mountain ranges, and occasional oases.<sup>12, 13</sup>

## Coastal Plain

Bounded by mountains to the immediate east, a narrow coastal 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. Owing to its extremely fertile soil and Mediterranean climate, the coastal plain is the site of intense agricultural development and is densely populated. The terrain along the coastline varies from sandy shores to rugged, rocky headlands and cliffs.<sup>14</sup>



*Mediterranean Coast in Latakia*  
Wikimedia / Victor.ibrahiem.photograph

## Mountains



*Snowy Mount Hermon*  
Wikimedia / Almog

Syria's mountains generally run parallel to the Mediterranean Sea, in a north-south direction. The highest point within Syria is Mount Hermon (also known as Jabal al-Sheikh), topping out at 2,814 m (9,232 ft). With average altitudes of at least 1,000 m (3,280 ft), the mountains tend to experience significant rainfall in the winter and mild weather in the summer.<sup>15, 16</sup>

## 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. It is a cultivated region of Syria that extends in an arc from the al-Jazīrah Plain and the Euphrates River's basin through the northern region and south along its coastal plains. Endowed with precious water resources, the Fertile Crescent has given rise to some of the world's earliest civilizations.<sup>17</sup> Today, Syria's population remains heavily centered

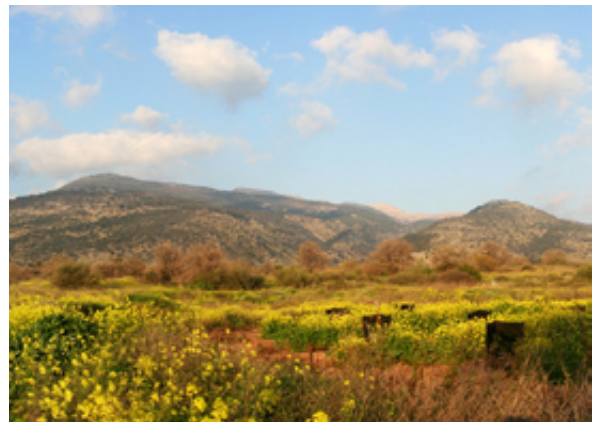


in pockets within the Fertile Crescent, namely the coastal plain, the historic cities of Aleppo and Damascus, and the al-Jazīrah region.<sup>18</sup>

## Topographical Divisions

### *Anti-Lebanon Mountains*

Running roughly northeast-southwest, the Anti-Lebanon Mountains form the boundary between Syria and Lebanon. Mt. Hermon (2,814 m or 9,232 ft), is situated in the southern reaches of this range, which average heights of 2,000 m (6,500 ft). Snow often caps these mountains in the winter months. From Mt. Hermon, the range descends southward into the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights region.<sup>19</sup>



*View of Golan Heights with Mount Hermon*  
Wikimedia / Beivushtang

### *Jabal al-Nusiriyya Mountains*



*Tell Qeni (1803 m) is the highest point of Jabal al-Druze*  
Wikimedia / KFZ1310

The Jabal al-Nusiriyya mountain range rises from Syria's coastal plain to form a rugged boundary parallel to the coast. The peaks of the Jabal al-Nusiriyya average 1,212 m (3,976 ft), with a high point of 1,524 m (5,000 ft) marking the northern end of the range.<sup>20</sup> The range's western slope, indented with deep ravines, receives significant moisture from the Mediterranean Sea. Numerous historical castles and fortresses built by either Arabs or Crusaders are located in the mountains

of this region. The range's eastern slope descends rapidly into the richly fertile Ghāb Depression, which is part of the Great Rift Valley.<sup>21</sup> Between the southern end of the Jabal al-Nusiriyya and the northern slope of the Anti-Lebanon Mountains lies the Homs Gap, a natural passage from the coastal plain to the interior.<sup>22</sup>

Additional mountain ranges stretch across the southern and central areas of Syria. The Jabal al-Arab range, also known as the Jabal al-Drūz, is in the far south, near

the Jordanian border. The Druze, one of Syria's religious groups, make these volcanic peaks their traditional home.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

### *Eastern Plateau and the Syrian Desert*

East of the western mountains and the Ghāb Depression, northern Syria largely consists of semiarid to arid plateaus, with vegetation ranging from agricultural crops to grass and scrub. 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 al-Jazīrah Plain sits in the far northeastern region of the country. Located between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, this expanse of grassland is an important agricultural region, particularly for cereal grain crops. As the northern region of Mesopotamia, the al-Jazīrah Plain extends southeastward into Iraq.<sup>25</sup>



*Eastern Plateau, Dayr az Zawr  
Flickr / Egisto Sani*



*View of the Syrian Desert  
Wikimedia / yeowatzup*

Moving south from the Euphrates River basin, the terrain transitions from steppes 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. Small populations of Bedouin, nomadic pastoralists, live in this area.<sup>26</sup> Originating in the southwest, a few low elevation mountain ranges extend across the desert plateau toward 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.<sup>27</sup> In the far southwest is Golan Heights, a contested region featuring foothills that descend into a plateau.<sup>28, 29</sup>

The most important regional cities in the far southwest are Sweida and Daraa, which became the epicenter of mass anti-government protests in 2011 that would ignite Syria's ongoing civil war.<sup>30, 31</sup>

## 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 al-Nusiriyya and the Anti-Lebanon Mountains 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.<sup>32, 33</sup>



*Syria's Mediterranean climate, Tartus  
Flickr / Taras Kalapun*

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). 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). In the western mountains, summer temperatures average at 22°C (72°F) and are cooler than elsewhere in the country.

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. Farther 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.<sup>34</sup> Temperature extremes often occur when hot, sand-bearing winds called khamsin blow in from the Arabian Desert during the summer months.<sup>35, 36, 37</sup>

Syria's rainy season runs from November to April; most precipitation falls from October to April. 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 to 51 cm

(10-20 in). Beyond the semiarid steppes, in the true desert of the southeast, annual rainfall may be as minimal as 8-13 cm (3-5 in).<sup>38, 39, 40</sup>

## Bodies of Water

### *Euphrates River*

The Euphrates River, or Nahr al-Furat, is the principal water source in Syria, responsible for roughly 80% of the country's water supply.<sup>41</sup> Although only a fraction of its length is in Syria, the Euphrates is the country's longest river flowing for 710 km (440 mi) inside Syria. In north-central Syria, a large dam on the Euphrates feeds the massive Buhayrat al Assad reservoir, also known as Lake Assad. At roughly 60 km (37 mi) in length, the reservoir is the nation's largest body of water.<sup>42</sup> Constructed in the 1960s and 1970s, the Euphrates Dam (also known as the Tabaqa Dam) allows for intensive irrigation and serves as a source of hydroelectric power.<sup>43</sup> To the east, the Balikh and the Khabur rivers flow southward into the Euphrates as left-bank tributaries.<sup>44</sup> Seasonal waterways, or wadis, may also flow east and west into the Euphrates from the desert.<sup>45</sup>



*Euphrates River: A floating point connecting the west bank to the Mesopotamia, Halabiye  
Flickr / Egisto Sani*

### *Orontes River*



*The Roman Bridge on the Orontes River  
Flickr / Egisto Sani*

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 Ghāb Depression and into Turkey, where it empties into the Mediterranean.<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> 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 Ghāb Depression.<sup>48, 49</sup>

### *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, several ancient channels direct its flow across a large expanse of land, creating the Al-Ghutah Oasis. The Fijah Spring augments the river's flow before it reaches Damascus. Beyond Damascus, the river drains into the desert.<sup>50, 51</sup>



*Barada River, Damascus  
Flick / Shadi HIJAZI*

### *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.<sup>52</sup> Regional springs that supply the Yarmuk also supply water to irrigate the Hawran Plateau.<sup>53</sup>

### *Al-Kabir River*



*Al-Kabir River  
موشلك نوب ورمع / Wikimedia*

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 has detrimentally affected the river, which remains an important source of water in the region.<sup>54</sup>

## Lake al-Jabbul

The largest natural lake in Syria is Lake al-Jabbul, a seasonal saline lake located to the southeast of Aleppo. Other saline lakes are located outside the cities of Damascus and Al Hasakah. A small freshwater lake, Lake Muzayrib, lies to the northwest of Daraa.<sup>55</sup>



Lake al-Jabbul going dry in August leaving salt crystals  
Flickr / Hovic

## 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 Ghāb Depression is known for its wealth of subterranean water resources. These resources take the shape of numerous springs and underground rivers that contribute to the regional supply. Springs also occur occasionally in the desert, creating small oases.<sup>56</sup>

## Major Cities



View of Damascus  
Wikimedia / Aziz1005

Historically, most of Syria's population has lived in rural areas. More urbanized nations such as 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, urbanization has accelerated, and the rural-to-urban ratio in population is approaching 50%. Urban populations have settled mainly in sections of the Fertile Crescent, with the highest densities found in the northwest, northeast, and southwest. The lowest density areas are the desert steppes, inhabited by oasis dwellers and the *Bedouin*.<sup>57</sup>

## Damascus (Dimashq)



City of Damascus  
Flickr / Dan

Damascus is the capital of Syria and the nation's center for government, commerce, and culture. It has an estimated 1.6 million people living in the city proper, in addition to 2.6 million living in the greater metropolitan area.<sup>58</sup> The city lies within the irrigated oasis of al-Ghutah. Damascus is commonly referred to as “al-Sham,” Arabic for “north” or “left,” because of its location relative to Mecca and the Arabian Peninsula. 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. The city's population has rapidly expanded in recent decades, causing its infrastructure, water supply, and services to experience significant strain. The region also suffers from pollution problems. Furthermore, urban sprawl has eliminated much of the surrounding farmlands and vegetation.<sup>59, 60</sup>

Since the start of Syria's civil war in 2011, Damascus has been both the nerve center and symbol of the government's fight against the rebels. After the civil war began in 2011, parts of Damascus fell under the control of jihadists and other anti-government rebels. In 2012, heavy fighting took place in the south of the city as government forces countered rebel advances. In 2018, after President Bashar al-Assad regained momentum with Russian and Iranian help, government forces declared Damascus and the surrounding area secure after clearing remnants of jihadist forces from the suburbs.<sup>61, 62, 63</sup>

## Aleppo (Halab)

Located on the plateau in northwestern Syria, Aleppo is an important regional hub for commerce and industry. Like Damascus, Aleppo is considered one of the oldest continuously populated cities in the world.<sup>64</sup> For centuries, the city was a major trading post on intercontinental commercial routes, and, like Damascus, numerous occupying entities have controlled it at various times. Throughout its history, Aleppo has also suffered a number of devastating earthquakes, which, at various times, leveled the city and killed large numbers of its inhabitants.<sup>65</sup>



*Ancient Aleppo*  
*Wikimedia / Preacher lad*

Before 2011, major components of Aleppo's local industry included textile manufacturing, most famously silk and food processing (predominantly nuts and dried fruits). The city was a market for regional agricultural produce, heavily supported by the nearby Euphrates River and al-Assad reservoir to the east. Aleppo was also an important regional transportation corridor. It was also a center for intellectual pursuits, as it was home to a major university, several madrassas,

or Islamic theological schools, and other educational institutions.<sup>66</sup> The city had a significant Christian population, including many descendants of Armenians expelled from nearby Turkey in the early 20th century.<sup>67</sup>

Aleppo's ancient center, or Old City, was surrounded by the modern metropolis with a central district known as the New City. Aleppo's most prominent feature was a large citadel constructed on a raised mound in the northeastern quarter of the Old City. Also located in the Old City, Aleppo's souk, or bazaar, was one of the most famous in the Middle East due to its immense size and authenticity.<sup>68, 69</sup>

The Syrian Civil War has devastated Aleppo.<sup>70</sup> The conflict reached a disastrous highpoint in 2016 when government forces fought a fierce month-long battle to retake the eastern region of the city from rebels. The clash killed hundreds, left entire neighborhoods in ruins, created thousands of refugees, and set off a daunting humanitarian crisis. Many of the Old City's historic structures, including the citadel and souk, were severely damaged or destroyed.<sup>71, 72</sup> Aleppo has begun to recover slowly, but basic services are still lacking, and once-thriving industrial facilities remain shuttered or destroyed.<sup>73, 74</sup> Of the pre-war population of 3.2 million, less than 2 million remains.<sup>75</sup>



*View of Citadel and City of Aleppo*  
*Flickr / Elias S*



## Homs (Hims)

Homs is situated in the Orontes River Valley, part of Syria's western region. The 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.<sup>76</sup>



City Centre and the Old Clock Tower in Homs  
Flickr / Elias S

Before the advent of Islam, Homs was a hub for Christianity. Although much of the city's older architecture and layout no longer exist, a small Christian population remains there to this day. The city is home to a mosque built in honor of Khalid ibn al-Walid, a revered Arab general known as "the sword of Allah." Al-Walid famously brought Islam to Syria in 636 CE. In nearby Jabal al-Nusiriyya is Krak des Chevaliers, a major regional monument that served primarily as a medieval fortress during the Crusades.<sup>77</sup>



City of Homs  
Flickr / irishmexi

Before 2011, Homs was a major industrial hub, most notably as the site of Syria's largest oil refinery. Silk manufacturing and the production of fertilizers (using phosphates) were also important components of its local industry.<sup>78</sup> The city was also home to a major military academy.<sup>79</sup> In 2011, Homs residents enthusiastically embraced the call to topple the Assad regime and the city became known as the "home of the revolution."<sup>80</sup> There followed a three-year

siege, in which government forces reduced much of the city to rubble with artillery and air strikes.<sup>81</sup> Beginning in 2014, a significant portion of the population fled as government forces completely reclaimed the city by 2017. The city has lost approximately 70% of its pre-war population. Today, authorities have rebuilt important mosques and churches and a historic marketplace, but most residential neighborhoods remain in ruins.<sup>82, 83, 84</sup>

## Latakia (Al-Ladhiqiyah)



A modern neighborhood in Latakia  
Wikimedia / Zozo2kx

Located on Syria's northern Mediterranean coast, Latakia is the country's chief port city. The natural harbor has been important in regional maritime trade since the time of the Phoenicians (3,000 BCE). 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.<sup>85</sup>

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 the city's primary exports. Latakia's other industries include vegetable oil processing, cotton ginning, sponge fishing, and tourism.<sup>86</sup> With its Mediterranean location and influx of diverse cultures, Latakia is one of Syria's most cosmopolitan and easy-going cities. Situated in staunchly pro-Assad territory, the city has been largely spared the ravages of the civil war. In 2015, Russia began using a nearby air base in its efforts to bolster the Assad regime. As the conflict drags on, war-weary Syrians, especially Assad loyalists, have taken vacations to Latakia seeking a measure of normalcy.<sup>87, 88</sup>

## 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 riverbanks. 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



Medieval waterwheels, known as *noria* in Hama  
Wikimedia Commons

crops include grains, cotton, fruits, and vegetables. Textile manufacturing, cement production, and flour milling are also components of the local industry.<sup>89</sup>

As a center of Sunni Islam, the majority Islamic sect in Syria, Hama reflects this relationship in its traditional and ancestral culture. In 1982, the Hafez al-Assad regime sent armed forces to Hama in order to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni insurgent group. After weeks of fighting between Syrian soldiers and Muslim Brotherhood rebels, the battles left thousands of casualties and an estimated quarter of Hama's old city destroyed.<sup>90, 91</sup>

Hama and the surrounding areas have been the focal point of numerous attacks and counterattacks in the complex struggle among Syrian government troops, rebels, jihadists, and the Islamic State terrorists (ISIS). In 2018, a powerful missile attack, attributed to Israel, destroyed an Iranian-controlled arms depot near Hama. As of 2019, the city was under Syrian government control.<sup>92, 93, 94</sup>

## Environmental Concerns

Before the onset of the civil war, the country's many environmental concerns stemmed from overuse or mismanagement of the limited land, water, and timber resources.<sup>95, 96, 97</sup> The civil war has exacerbated Syria's environmental problems. The fighting has depleted or destroyed many of its natural resources and severely degraded the environment. Syrian authorities have neglected environmental protections, and essential resources like water have become tools of war. The warring parties have sought control of dams and reservoirs, and the Syrian government has been accused of contaminating and cutting off Damascus's water supply, in addition to bombing strategic water facilities.<sup>98, 99</sup>



*Farmers pumping from the Qwaq River, south of Aleppo  
Flickr / Water Alternatives*

Intensive agricultural and industrial practices have seriously affected the land as well. In some areas, the extended use of rudimentary irrigation methods increased the salinity of the soil, reduced land fertility and diminished overall crop yields.<sup>100</sup>



*Polluted city by wastes  
Flickr / Murtada al Mousawy*

Deforestation, resulting from the demand for timber and wartime fuel shortages, and the overgrazing and unsustainable development of rangelands in the steppes has led to serious soil degradation.<sup>101, 102, 103</sup> With the removal of trees and surface vegetation, many areas were exposed to erosive forces, which has heightened the risk of desertification. About half of the country's surface area is estimated to be affected or threatened by desertification.<sup>104</sup>

Air pollution, particularly in Damascus and Aleppo, is also a major environmental concern, in part due to a prevalence of older vehicles that produce higher levels of emissions.<sup>105, 106</sup>

## 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.<sup>107, 108, 109</sup> Syria is also prone to periods of limited rainfall, and with its inherently hot and dry conditions, it occasionally suffers devastating droughts.<sup>110, 111</sup>



*Drought, Deir Sounbol, Idlib  
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

Drought and water shortages may be among the instigators of the socioeconomic resentments that fueled the civil war.<sup>112, 113, 114</sup> A multi-season drought that began in 2006 diminished wheat yields and drove approximately 1.5 million Syrians, mostly rural farmers, and herders, to migrate to urban areas such as Aleppo, Damascus, Hama, and Homs. This migration led to increased unemployment and a lower GDP, fueling the grievances that drove protesters onto the streets in 2011.<sup>115, 116</sup>

Floods are also a serious hazard in Syria, particularly during the winter rainy season and the spring, when the snow melts. In June of 2002, the Zeyzoun Dam in

northwestern Syria burst. The flood wiped out five villages in its wake and killed 80 people.<sup>117, 118</sup> In December 2018, torrential rains in northern Syria led to floods that destroyed parts of 11 refugee camps for people displaced by the civil war, leaving tens of thousands without shelter.<sup>119, 120</sup>



*Dust storms, Anderin  
Flickr / AlxVuk*

Syria experiences significant seismic activity because of its location in the region where the Arabian, African, and Eurasian continental plates converge.

Damascus, for example, sits near the Dead Sea Fault System and its active arm, the Sergaya fault.<sup>121</sup> While 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.<sup>122</sup> In 1138, an earthquake near Aleppo killed some 230,000 people in one of the deadliest seismic events in world history.<sup>123</sup>

Dust storms and sandstorms are also significant natural disaster threats in Syria. Spawned by the *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. In August 2017, a giant dust storm covered seven Middle Eastern countries including Syria, leading to deaths, hospitalizations, and disruptions at ports and airports.<sup>124, 125</sup>

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## Syria in Perspective

# Chapter 1 | Geography

## Assessment

1. The Euphrates is Syria's longest river.
2. The city of Aleppo was spared most of the violence of the Syrian civil war.
3. The terrain of the scarcely populated coastal region is dry, rocky, and largely barren.
4. A severe drought was among the factors that led to the Syrian civil war.
5. The Golan Heights lie between Syria and Israel.

*Assessment Answers: 1. True; 2. True; 3. False; 4. True; 5. True*



*Ancient section of Aleppo City  
Flickr / Craig Jenkins*

## Chapter 2 | Syria in Perspective

# History

## Introduction

Syria has one of the world's richest histories. Cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, and Hama are among the world's oldest continuously inhabited places and have been occupied by a variety of invaders through the centuries. Syria's past and present have been shaped by religion, most notably Islam. Though Syria can trace its roots back to prehistory, it only became an independent nation in 1946. The Al-Assad family, from the Alawite sect of Islam, has ruled the country since 1970. In early 2011, a series of anti-government protests inspired by the Arab Spring spread throughout the country and grew into a brutal civil war that has devastated the country and sent millions into exile.<sup>1</sup>

## Ancient Syria

The centuries between 3500 and 3100 BCE saw the rise of the first cities in western Syria. The discovery of the Ebla kingdom's archive, a collection of correspondence written on clay tablets and dating to around 2400 BCE, revealed a sophisticated civilization that had extensive trading links stretching as far as Egypt, Iran, and the Aegean Sea. Ebla was destroyed by invading Amorites around 2000 BCE.<sup>2, 3, 4</sup>



*Ruin of Ebla kingdom's royal palace  
Wikimedia / Marina Milella*

For much of the latter half of the second millennium BCE, Syria was a battlefield upon which numerous dynasties clashed.<sup>5</sup> The Hittites fought the Egyptians for control over the area during in the 13th century BCE.<sup>6</sup> By the end of the 11th century BCE, different tribes, known collectively as the Aramaeans, ruled the area. By the late 8th century BCE, the Assyrian kingdom gained control of the Aramaean's lands.<sup>7, 8, 9</sup> The Assyrians were then defeated by the Babylonians near the end of the 7th century BCE, and the Babylonians were subsequently defeated by the Persians.<sup>10, 11, 12</sup>



*The Roman Theatre at Bosra, dating from the 2nd century  
Flickr / (Ergo)*

Alexander the Great conquered the region in 333 BCE. After his death in 323 BCE, one of Alexander's military leaders, Seleucus I Nicator, consolidated the Greek-influenced Seleucid Empire and made Antioch the capital.<sup>13</sup> This era was distinguished by the promotion of Greek culture. The Seleucids' reign ended in 64 BCE when the Romans completed their takeover of the region.<sup>14</sup>

Syria was a Roman province for over four centuries with Antioch as its capital.<sup>15</sup>

Damascus also continued to grow as a trading center. During the first three centuries of the Common Era, Antioch and Damascus became the center of early Christianity.<sup>16</sup>

In 330 CE, Constantine I, the first Christian emperor of the Roman Empire, inaugurated the new capital city of Byzantium (later renamed Constantinople).<sup>17</sup> During the more

than three centuries of Byzantine rule, the Persian Sassanid Empire tried to conquer Syria.<sup>18</sup> By 628, the Sassanid armies were definitively defeated by the Byzantine emperor Heraclius. Centuries of warfare, however, left both sides vulnerable to a new invading force that was marching north from the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>19, 20</sup>

## The Spread of Islam



*Umayyad Mosque in Damascus  
Flickr / Emily & Michael Dziedzic*

In 636, Damascus surrendered to Hazrat Khalid Ibn al-Walid, one of the Prophet Muhammad's generals, and by 640, the remainder of Syria was firmly under the control of Arab Muslim forces.<sup>21</sup> The first governor of the Syrian territories selected Damascus as his capital.<sup>22, 23</sup>

During the Umayyad Era (661-750), most Syrians converted to Islam, and Damascus underwent an Arabization process.<sup>24</sup> Arabic replaced Aramaic and Greek as

the principal language of Syria, Arabic coinage replaced the Byzantine and Sassanid currency, and Arabs took over the financial, administrative duties.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup>

In 750, the Abbasids, a dynasty of Meccan origin, defeated the Umayyads and established a 500-year caliphate in Baghdad. Syria became a province known for periodically resisting Abbasid authority.<sup>27, 28, 29</sup>

The Fatimid Dynasty, which belonged to the Isma'ili sect of the Shi'ites, conquered Damascus and southern Syria in 978.<sup>30</sup> During their rule, Aleppo and northern Syria were at the center of the struggle for supremacy between the Fatimid and Byzantine empires.<sup>31, 32</sup>

In 1076, the Seljuk Turks—a sultanate led by rulers of Turkmen tribes—ended the Fatimid period in Syria, but their presence was short-lived. Toward the end of the 11th century, under pressure from European Christian Crusaders, the Seljuk Empire fragmented and eventually broke into small principalities.<sup>33</sup> The Crusaders then formed what became known as the Crusader states.<sup>34, 35</sup>

The Kurdish warrior Salah al-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyubi, known in the West as Saladin, led the Muslim forces to defeat the Crusaders.<sup>36</sup> Saladin founded the Ayyubid Dynasty, but after he died of malaria in 1192, his empire began to break apart.<sup>37</sup>

The successors to the Ayyubids were the Mamluks, a dynasty founded by Turkish generals of slave armies, who were able to stop the initial invasions of the Mongols in 1260 and extend their dominance through Syria to the Euphrates River in the 1300s. A second Mongol invasion, under the leadership of Tamerlane (also known as Timur), was more successful. Tamerlane invaded Syria in 1401, devastating Aleppo and Damascus. After the Mongols left Syria, the Mamluks reclaimed their lost territories but were left vulnerable when the Ottoman Turks under Sultan Selim I invaded in 1516-17.<sup>38, 39</sup>



*The 1299 Battle of Wadi al-Khazandar: The Mongols under Ghazan defeated the Mamluks*  
Wikimedia Commons

## The Ottoman Era



*Syrian women during Ottoman Syria, 1683*  
Wikimedia / Alain Manesson Mallet

The Ottoman Empire era in Syria lasted almost 400 years. Agriculture improved and Aleppo thrived as a trading center with Europe. Damascus gained a special role in the Ottoman world because of its position as the starting point for Muslims embarking on the annual pilgrimage to Mecca.<sup>40, 41</sup>

By the early 19th century, the Ottoman sultan had lost control of the hinterlands, and Bedouin tribes from the Arabian deserts came to fill the vacuum. While Aleppo and Damascus maintained their security and wealth, the outlying cities and villages fell prey to the Bedouins.<sup>42</sup>

During the 1830s, the Ottomans were chased out of Greater Syria. For nearly 10 years, the Egyptian Ibrahim Pasha ruled Syria, but in 1841, European forces helped the Ottoman armies to reclaim Syria.<sup>43</sup> European influence continued to grow, and the local Catholic and Orthodox populations were placed under the protectorships of France and Russia,

respectively. Resentment toward Christian and Jewish merchants, who had established trade links with Europe, festered among many Muslims.<sup>44</sup>

After the Young Turk revolution in 1908, relations between Turks and Arabs worsened. Arab nationalist political parties began to emerge in Syria and Egypt. The Ottoman Empire's entrance into World War I as allies of Germany, Bulgaria, and Austria-Hungary (collectively known as the Central Powers) gave hope to Syrian Arab nationalists that independence would be obtained after the war.<sup>45</sup>



1851 map of Ottoman Syria, showing the Eyalets of Aleppo, Damascus, Tripoli, and Acre  
Wikimedia / National Museum of Korea

## World War I (1914–1918)



Faisal entered Damascus with his forces, and in 1920 was named King of Syria  
Wikimedia / The Government of the Kingdom of Iraq

In 1916, the British and French had signed the Sykes-Picot agreement, a document that carved out spheres of influence in the Middle East once the war would end and the Ottoman Empire would be dissolved. Under the agreement, Syria and Lebanon would fall within the French mandate.<sup>46</sup>

During the war, Syrian Arab nationalists aligned with Hussein, the Sharif of Hejaz (Red Sea coast of Arabia).<sup>47</sup> In October 1918, Hussein's son Faisal entered Damascus with his forces, and in March 1920 was named King of Syria. Though hoped for, independence remained only a dream.<sup>48</sup>

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.<sup>49</sup>



## The French Mandate and Independence



*The inauguration of President Hashim al-Atassi in 1936*  
Wikimedia Commons

The French mandate over Syria, under the auspices of the League of Nations, asserted that the French government would help Syria prepare for eventual self-governance. However, in the view of most Muslim Syrians, the French continuously failed to expedite this process. In 1925, a Syrian nationalist revolt, initiated by Druze rebels in southern Syria, erupted and continued to simmer for two years.<sup>50</sup>

During the first half of the 1930s, negotiations between the French and Syrian nationalists over a framework for ultimate independence were unsuccessful. In 1936, following a change in the French government, the two sides reached an agreement that outlined the terms of Syrian independence. The Syrian government quickly signed off on the agreement, but the French parliament never ratified it.<sup>51, 52</sup>

As Europe slipped into World War II, Syria became a base of operations under Allied control. After the French government fell to Germany in 1941, the British and the Free French Forces proclaimed Syrian independence upon entering Syria, and Syrians quickly set up a government. In 1945, the French delayed the transfer of control of the armed forces in Syria, bombing Damascus when the Syrians refused to negotiate a treaty and establishing French rights within Syria after independence. Winston Churchill threatened to use British forces to aid the Syrian government if the French attacks did not stop. In 1946, the French finally left Syria, and to this day, Syrians celebrate Evacuation Day every April 17, marking the end of the French occupation.<sup>53, 54</sup>



*Quwatli declaring Syria's independence from France, 17 April 1946*  
Wikimedia / Longbow4u

In 1948, Syria participated in the Arab-Israeli war against the newly-formed state of Israel and was defeated along with its Arab allies. In the aftermath of the defeat, popular discontent grew among Syrians against the democratically elected civilian government, which the army blamed for its defeat.<sup>55</sup>

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.<sup>56</sup> The motivation for these coups emanated from the divisive issue of Syrian political unity with Iraq, a complicated proposal that exposed the geographic, religious, and political divisions among the Syrian population.<sup>57, 58</sup>



*Adib Bin Hassan Al-Shishakli established a military dictatorship in 1951*  
Wikimedia Commons

The leader of the third coup, Colonel Adib al-Shishakli, initially 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 Arab Socialist Party, who unsuccessfully lobbied for issues such as land reform.<sup>59, 60</sup>

In 1951, Al-Shishakli staged a second coup against the political leadership and established a military dictatorship. All political parties were subsequently banned, and political dissent was aggressively squelched.<sup>61</sup> As Syrian political leaders, including Al-Hawrani, fled the country, al-Shishakli's heavy-handed tactics began to backfire. By 1954, Al-Shishakli's support had dwindled, and he faced increasing opposition within the Syrian army. In February 1954, he was overthrown and forced into exile.<sup>62</sup>

## The Ba'ath Party and the United Arab Republic



*Nasser signing unity pact with Syrian President, Shuhri al-Quwatli, forming the United Arab Republic, February 1958*  
Wikimedia Commons

Prior to Syrian independence, the Pan-Arab unity movement had spawned several political groups, one of which was the Ba'ath (Arabic for "renaissance") Party, whose platform promoted political nonalignment, a secular embrace of Islamic values, and anti-imperialism.<sup>63</sup> Economically, the Ba'athists advanced a socialist agenda, a stance that was reinforced in 1953 when the Ba'ath Party merged with Al-Hawrani's Arab Socialist Party (ASP) to form the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party.<sup>64, 65</sup> After the merger, the

party found its strongest support among the disadvantaged groups in Syria: Druze, Alawite, Sunni peasants, and Christians.<sup>66, 67</sup>

By 1957, the Ba'ath Party had obtained a fragile position of political primacy within a left-wing political alliance that controlled the government. In 1958, the Ba'ath Party proposed a political union to Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, a pan-Arabist 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 gravely affected the Syrian political establishment.<sup>68</sup>

Syria became the lesser partner in this burgeoning union. In 1961, as Nasser moved toward the complete political and economic integration of Syria into the Egyptian-dominated UAR, a coup d'état led by Syrian army officers took place in Damascus. Nasser did not resist the Syrian secession from the UAR.<sup>69, 70, 71</sup> The secession from the UAR splintered the vanguard of the old Ba'ath Party, and Al-Hawrani departed with the goal of restarting the Arab Socialist Party. Within the Syrian military, a group of mid-level officers had formed a clandestine Ba'athist cell while serving in Egypt during the UAR era. Among the officers were Salah al-Jadid and Hafez al-Assad. In March 1963, the militant Ba'athists staged a coup, and the reborn Ba'ath Party gained power.<sup>72, 73</sup>

Over the next few years, two factions within the Ba'ath party—one that promoted Arab nationalism and a slow approach to socialism, and another that was more concerned about advancing socialist reforms than re-establishing Arab unity—battled for 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 Ba'athist military leader and the most powerful figure among the Nationalists, was overthrown in a bloody coup. Salah al-Jadid, the military leader of the Regionalists, became the Ba'ath Party leader. Hafez al-Assad, Hafiz's fellow Alawite military colleague, took over as Minister of Defense.<sup>74</sup>



*Amin al-Hafiz, the Ba'athist military leader was overthrown in a coup in 1966*  
Wikimedia Commons

Soon thereafter, the two men began to engage in a power struggle. During the 1967 Six-Day War against Israel, the Syrian Air Force was destroyed in a few hours, and Israel took control of the Golan Heights. Syria's crushing loss contributed to the deterioration of the relationship between



*Israeli tanks advancing at the Golan Heights, Six-Day War  
Wikimedia / Assaf Kutin*

Hafiz and Assad, who found themselves on the defensive. Assad, whose views were closer to the moderate nationalists than the fervently socialist Jadid, focused on placing key supporters in the military leadership. Jadid's support came from the civilian political structure.<sup>75, 76, 77</sup>

In September 1970, Jadid's civilian leaders sent tanks into Jordan to support Palestinian guerillas that were being expelled by King Hussein, in an event

known as Black September. Assad and his associates, who were against this action, refused to lend air support, which led to a forced retreat of the Syrian tanks. Two months later, Jadid and the Ba'ath Party leadership tried to remove Assad but instead were deposed by Assad's military supporters. This became known as the Corrective Movement and ushered in decades of Assad rule in Syria.<sup>78, 79</sup>

## President Hafez al-Assad (1971–2000)

By 1971, Assad had firmly consolidated his control of the Ba'ath Party and the Syrian government. In March, he became president. 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.<sup>80</sup>



*President Hafez al-Assad and Mustafa Tlass on the Golan front  
Wikimedia Commons*

Both Syria and Egypt continued to air their grievances with Israel, particularly over the Golan Heights for Syria and the Sinai Peninsula and Suez Canal for Egypt, which had been under Israeli control since the 1967 war. In October 1973, both countries launched a surprise attack against Israel.<sup>81, 82</sup> In April 1974, a U.S.-brokered disengagement agreement between Syria and Israel, in which Israel returned the demolished Golan Heights city of Quneitra to Syria.<sup>83, 84</sup>

During 1975-76, Syrian military forces became increasingly involved in the civil war between the Lebanese Christian Maronites and Muslim militias.<sup>85</sup> Syria initially took on



*Hafez al-Assad with Sunni members of the political elite  
Flickr / Jeroen Elfferich*

a diplomatic, peacekeeping role, but this soon evolved to active military support for the Christian right against the Palestinian and Muslim left. By 1978, Syria had switched sides and was supporting the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Muslim militias. As the civil war began to subside in the late 1980s, Syria controlled a large part of Lebanon. Syria pledged in the 1989 Ta'if Accord to withdraw its 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.<sup>86, 87, 88</sup>

As Sunni Muslim dissatisfaction with the Assad regime grew, 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 Ba'ath Party targets continued to escalate.<sup>89</sup> Muslim Brotherhood attacks in Aleppo continued into 1980 and eventually spread to other cities, such as Hama, Homs, and the eastern city of Deir ez-Zor. For a time, it appeared that Syria might be on the path to civil war.<sup>90</sup> In 1982, government forces attacked rebels in the city of Hama, leaving much of the old city in ruins. The number of casualties from the Hama offensive was estimated between 10,000 and 25,000 people.<sup>91, 92, 93</sup>

## Bashar al-Assad

Hafez al-Assad died in June 2000 and his 34-year-old son, Bashar, became the new president. Bashar al-Assad pushed for modest reforms, primarily economic. The Ba'ath Party continued to have a monopoly on political power, although some steps were taken to loosen the tight restrictions on political expression.<sup>94</sup>

In 2005, Assad's government came under intense pressure from Western and Arab countries after former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri was assassinated by a car bomb. Syria was widely suspected of having played a role in the assassination.<sup>95</sup> Hariri's



*President Bashar el-Assad  
Wikimedia / kremlin.ru*



President Bashar al-Assad meeting with Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei, 25 February 2019  
Wikimedia / Mbazri

death 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 on Syria to uphold a 2004 United Nations Security Council resolution calling for all foreign nations to pull their forces out of Lebanon.<sup>96, 97, 98</sup>

In April 2005, Syrian troops left Lebanon. Meanwhile, a preliminary report from a UN investigation into Hariri's death implicated

Syria in the bombing.<sup>99, 100, 101</sup> Assad avoided having international economic sanctions placed on Syria, except for the United States, which first imposed sanctions on Syria in 2004.<sup>102, 103</sup>

In the aftermath of the Hariri assassination, Syria strengthened its ties with Iran. Both Syria and Iran support Hamas and Hezbollah, which the United States and several other countries have classified as terrorist organizations.<sup>104, 105, 106</sup>

In 2008, Syria and Israel initiated indirect peace talks. The talks began only months after Israel bombed a suspected nuclear reactor under construction in Syria. The Syrian-Israeli talks were suspended when Israel began a military offensive in Gaza against Hamas.<sup>107, 108, 109</sup>

## Civil War (2011–)

Waves of unrest and government turmoil, known as the Arab Spring, spread across the Middle East in 2011. Syria initially appeared to be immune to the unrest under the autocratic rule of Bashar al-Assad. However, after the fall of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, demonstrations broke out in Syria. Security forces killed protestors in the southern city of Daraa, triggering a violent uprising that steadily spread across the country and continued into 2019.<sup>110, 111, 112</sup>



A demonstration against Bashar Assad regime Idlib in 2012  
Flickr / William Proby

The main participants in the civil war have been the Syrian government, Syrian Kurds, Islamist rebels, the Islamic State terrorist group, and rebel groups backed by Western interests. The conflict has also drawn in international players such as Iraq, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and the United States.<sup>113, 114, 115</sup> After losing territory and momentum at the beginning of the conflict, the government has regained the upper hand with substantial military help from Iran and Russia. As of late 2018, Assad controlled over half the country, including the main population centers, the Mediterranean coast, and key natural gas fields. The international community is increasingly accepting that Syria's future will include Assad's continuing leadership.<sup>116, 117</sup> In December 2018, the United States began planning the withdrawal of its forces from Syria.<sup>118, 119</sup>



*A Syrian family escaping from fierce fighting between Free Syrian Army fighters and government troops in Idlib, 2012  
Flickr / William Proby*

A particularly grim aspect of the conflict has been the repeated use of chemical weapons, primarily by the Assad regime. In August 2013, a sarin gas attack in Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus, killed over 1,400 civilians.<sup>120</sup> Over 5.6 million Syrians have fled to neighboring Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and beyond, and 6.5 million have been internally displaced by the continuous violence.<sup>121</sup> An estimated 440,000 people have been killed in Syria since the beginning of the conflict.<sup>122, 123, 124</sup>

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## Syria in Perspective

# Chapter 2 | History

### Assessment

1. Damascus has been the capital of the region known as Syria for more than two millennia.
2. The Seljuk Turks brought Islam to Syria when they conquered the region in the 11th century.
3. The Sykes-Picot agreement included a plan to give France control over Syria after the conclusion of World War I.
4. The United Arab Republic was the first official name for modern-day Syria.
5. October Liberation Day commemorates Syria's independence.

*Assessment Answers: 1. False; 2. False; 3. True; 4. False; 5. False*



*Crowded market in Damascus  
Flickr / alexander kohhofer*

## Chapter 3 | Syria in Perspective

# Economy

## Introduction

Syria has had a centralized, state-run economy since the Baath Party emerged as a major political force in the 1960s. Thereafter, Syria maintained the Baath socialist agenda for the economy while moving toward industrialization and socialist transformation. The first five-year economic plan, implemented in 1960, had limited results. As centralized planning increased, the government nationalized major industries and foreign investment, causing a loss of capital, skilled workers, and administrators.<sup>1</sup>

Starting in the 1990s, the government loosened some control on the economy in an attempt to move toward a social-market economy based on some capitalist principles.

Among the reforms, it established private banks, cut interest rates, and allowed privatization of some business sectors.<sup>2, 3</sup> Despite government efforts, the economy continued to be characterized by cronyism and corrupt patronage networks tied to the state.<sup>4</sup> These realities are believed to have contributed to the popular unrest and revolt that erupted in 2011.<sup>5, 6</sup>

Since 2011, civil war and strenuous international sanctions have caused Syria's economy to implode. The mining, manufacturing, and retail sectors bore the brunt of the damage. As the government lost control of the country, various rebel groups, Kurds, and Islamic State (IS) terrorists set up independent economic spheres in territories they had captured. The economic collapse created a dire humanitarian crisis and much of the population came to rely on international aid.<sup>7, 8, 9</sup>

## Agriculture



*Farm land in Hama  
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

Before 2011, Syria was considered the breadbasket of the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> The livelihoods of approximately 46% of the population were connected to agriculture. Well-established government subsidies promoted stability by providing seeds and purchasing crops.<sup>11</sup> The main agricultural products included wheat, cotton, barley, tomatoes, sugar, citrus, potatoes, olive oil, apples, cattle, sheep, poultry, and eggs.<sup>12</sup> Despite its productivity, Syria's agriculture sector was also a victim of decades of mismanagement. Monoculture (producing a single crop as opposed to many) and chemical use degraded soil and improper irrigation increased water salinization. Overgrazing has also posed a problem by causing desertification of the steppe.<sup>13</sup>

Syria's civil war has caused USD 16 billion in damage to agricultural production, of which USD 3 billion has been damage to assets such as machinery, veterinary clinics, and greenhouses.<sup>14, 15, 16</sup> Wheat production has decreased by half. The devastating effects of armed conflict have caused limited access to farmland, reduced the size of cultivated land, destroyed infrastructure, and reduced the availability of seeds, fertilizer, and equipment.<sup>17, 18</sup> These factors have in turn led to massive declines in food production and soaring food prices.<sup>19, 20</sup>

Before the onset of the conflict, livestock constituted 40% of agricultural production and was responsible for 20% of employment in rural areas. Since the outbreak of hostilities, ownership of the country's livestock herds has decreased by roughly half. Military maneuvers in rural areas have prohibited shepherds from grazing their flocks and many livestock owners have sold their animals to generate desperately needed income.<sup>21, 22</sup> Herders also lack animal feed and veterinary services such as vaccinations.<sup>23</sup>



*Shepherd grazing his sheep  
Flickr / Joel Bombardier*

Despite the catastrophic damage, the conflict has demonstrated the resilience of rural Syrians in the face of hardship. Since the war, agriculture has become more important as other areas of the economy suffer significant damage.<sup>24</sup> Some 6.7 million rural Syrians, including internally displaced persons, rely on agriculture to survive, mainly through vegetable cultivation and livestock rearing at the household level.<sup>25, 26</sup> Absence of government regulation has led to increased agricultural entrepreneurship and the emergence of localized food markets.<sup>27</sup> United Nations assistance programs are helping agriculturalists improve crop yields and safeguard herds.<sup>28</sup> As of 2017, agriculture constituted 20% of Syria's gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>29</sup>

## Industry



*Zipper shop and factory  
Flickr / Elaina Elaina*

Before the civil war, Syria's primary industries were petroleum, textiles, food processing, beverages, tobacco, phosphate rock mining, cement, oil seeds crushing, and automobile assembly. Much of the pre-conflict industrial production involved mineral and energy resources such as refined oil products, fertilizers, cement, and other industrial materials. The two largest manufacturing segments were textiles and clothing, along with food and beverage processing. Since 2011, the conflict has taken an immense toll on the manufacturing sector, causing it to shrink



by some 77%. Nevertheless, in 2017, industrial production grew by 4.3% and industry constituted 19.5% of GDP.<sup>30, 31, 32</sup>

The northern city of Aleppo was a hub for Syria's industry, but has since become emblematic of the war's destructive power. Before the war, the city had some 65,000 factories and small workshops. By 2017, after government forces retook Aleppo, there were about 6,000 factories. The majority of the factories have been destroyed, badly damaged, or looted. Industrialists and investors are attempting to rebuild but face daunting challenges such as corruption, cronyism, a lack of skilled labor, damaged or destroyed infrastructure, and a lack of services.<sup>33, 34, 35</sup>

## Energy

Petroleum and natural gas are Syria's most important natural resources. In the 1980s, large oil fields were discovered in eastern Syria and oil soon became a significant force in the economy.<sup>36</sup> The Syrian government formed partnerships with international oil companies, including ConocoPhillips and Shell, to assist in the development of its oil industry. Crude oil became the dominant Syrian export, destined mainly for European countries.<sup>37, 38</sup>



*Syria's Rumeilan Oil Fields*  
Wikimedia / Aram33

With the start of the civil war and the resulting economic sanctions, oil production fell sharply and revenues shrank by as much as 97%.<sup>39, 40, 41, 42</sup> Control of oil fields and facilities became a valuable military objective. As the warring factions carved up the country's territory, most oil fields fell under Kurdish control. In 2014, the ascendant IS terrorists seized Syria's largest oil field, al-Omar. Control of oil facilities generated as much as USD 50 million per month in revenue for IS, coming from sales to buyers in Turkey and Iraq and, ironically, to the Syrian government. In 2017, as its fortunes waned, IS lost the al-Omar field to Kurdish and Arab forces supported by the United States.<sup>43, 44, 45, 46</sup>

As the civil war enters what some see as its end phase, the Syrian government is turning its attention toward rebuilding the oil and gas sectors. The price tag for such a project—including the repair and operation of refineries, pipelines, rigs, and pumping stations—is estimated to be as high as USD 40 billion. In 2018, Syria gave

Russia exclusive rights to the production of Syrian oil and natural gas.<sup>47</sup> Iran, another ally, has aided government-run refineries to assist in fuel production.<sup>48, 49, 50</sup>

In 2015, Syria produced an estimated 111,600 barrels of refined petroleum products per day, yet consumed approximately 134,000 barrels per day in 2016. As of 2017, it produced approximately 3.74 billion cubic m (132 billion cubic ft) of natural gas per day and consumed approximately the same amount. As of 2018, Syria's crude oil reserves were numbered at 2.5 billion barrels and its natural gas reserves estimated to be 240.7 billion cubic m (789.7 billion cubic ft). Those amounts are significantly smaller than the reserves of its neighbor Iraq and its ally Iran.<sup>51</sup> Most of the country's power stations use natural gas and most known oil reserves are located in the east, near its border with Iraq.<sup>52, 53, 54</sup>



*Pipe unloading for Arabic Gas Pipeline Project, Tartus  
Wikimedia / Taras Kalapun*

The ravages and deprivations of war have forced many Syrians to turn to alternative sources of energy, including solar, biogas, and pomace (the leftover pulp from pressing fruit). Residents of Damascus and other cities have used roving solar panels to supply local businesses and power water pumps. In 2017, with the help of international aid, a Syrian hospital switched from running on haphazard diesel generators to getting uninterrupted power from solar panels.<sup>55, 56, 57</sup>

## Natural Resources



*Phosphate rock mines near Palmyra  
Flickr / Cristian Iohan Ștefănescu*

Before 2011, Syria was one of the world's leading producers of phosphate rock, used primarily in making fertilizer.<sup>58</sup> Most of Syria's phosphate rock comes from desert mines located southwest of Palmyra. Syrian phosphate is attractive to European importers because it contains very little cadmium, a toxic metal. 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.<sup>59, 60, 61</sup>

In 2015, IS captured the phosphate mines near Palmyra.<sup>62</sup> The Syrian government recaptured the mines in 2017, with Russian and Iranian military assistance. Use of the Palmyra mines was then awarded to Russia and the sites were soon fully operational after an infusion of Russian capital. That same year, Syria awarded Iran long-term rights for phosphate exploration and extraction. The ability to export phosphate allows the Syrian regime to partially compensate for the international sanctions imposed on Syrian oil.<sup>63, 64, 65</sup>

## Trade

In 2017, Syria had a trade deficit of USD 3.3 billion.<sup>66</sup> International sanctions and the war-crippled economy have stifled both exports and imports. Exports have decreased by as much as 90%. The country's major export partners are Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, China, Turkey, and Spain. The main exports are crude oil, minerals, petroleum products, fruits and vegetables, cotton fiber, textiles, clothing, wheat, and meat and live animals. The major import partners are Russia, Turkey, and China. The main imports are machinery, food, livestock, metal products, chemical products, plastics, yarn, and paper.<sup>67, 68, 69</sup>



*Cargo ships at the Port of Latakia*  
Wikimedia / نيهاش يداف

The government's tenuous control over the country creates a lack of regulation and quality control of business, leading even long-time trade partners to balk at importing Syrian commodities. Turkey, for example, has banned the import of Syrian olive oil. Sanctions have led to a booming black market for everyday and luxury goods.<sup>70</sup>

## Tourism

With ancient historical sites, various religious shrines, and a warm Mediterranean coastline, Syria had a burgeoning tourism industry before the civil war. Five Syrian locations are World Heritage Sites, including ancient sections of Damascus and Aleppo, the nation's two largest cities. Most travelers to Syria came from neighboring Middle Eastern countries.<sup>71, 72</sup> In 2010, Syria hosted over 8.5 million tourists.<sup>73</sup>



*Ruins of Palmyra, a World Heritage Site  
Wikimedia / Bernard Gagnon*

The civil war has wreaked havoc on Syria's priceless historical heritage. In 2015 and 2017, IS militants damaged or destroyed significant parts of the ancient Roman ruins of Palmyra.<sup>74</sup> The imposing Krak des Chevaliers crusader castle was heavily damaged by aerial bombardments when the Syrian army retook it from rebels in 2014.<sup>75</sup> Many museums and archeological sites were plundered and looted.<sup>76</sup>



*Le Krak des Chevaliers  
Flickr / (Ergo)*

Most Western governments strongly advise their citizens to stay away from Syria due to dangers of terrorist attacks, kidnapping, and armed conflict.<sup>77, 78</sup> Nevertheless, the ongoing conflict has created a niche market for war tourism, in which foreigners arrange to be taken to conflict zones to be near or participate in the fighting.<sup>79</sup> Most air carriers no longer fly to Syria, forcing adventure seekers fly to Lebanon or Turkey and then hire guides or fixers to escort them into Syria.<sup>80, 81, 82</sup>

As the Syrian government retakes more territory and re-establishes its authority, it is also promoting tourism to improve its image abroad and increase revenue. In 2018, the tourism ministry aired promotional videos that advertised Syria's beautiful Mediterranean resorts and the safety of its big cities. In 2017, 1.3 million foreigners traveled to Syria, including day visitors from Lebanon.<sup>83, 84</sup>

# Banking and Finance

## Banking



1,000 Syrian pound (SYP)  
Wikimedia / Belson 303

Syria’s national currency is the Syrian pound (SYP). As of February 2019, USD 1 was worth SYP 514.9.<sup>85</sup> Since the start of the civil war, the SYP has lost over 90% of its value.<sup>86</sup> In 2017, the inflation rate was 28.1% and the public debt was 94.85% of GDP.<sup>87</sup>

Syria’s central bank controls the country’s banking system and issues the national currency. Other state-owned banks finance trade, foreign exchange, infrastructure, industrial development, and agricultural activities.<sup>88, 89</sup> In recent years, the central bank’s efforts have been focused on stabilizing the SYP-USD exchange rate and shoring up exports, production, and investment to improve economic development.<sup>90</sup>

After he came to power in 2000, President Bashar al-Assad aimed to liberalize Syria’s state-owned financial sector. Reforms were enacted that allowed foreign banks to operate in the country and attracted domestic and international private investment. Fourteen private banks, most of them subsidiaries of regional Arab banks, currently operate in Syria. In 2016, the 14 banks’ total assets were estimated at USD 3.5 billion. Islamic banking is also present, although it accounts for a small part of the financial sector.<sup>91</sup> Despite international sanctions, absence of investments, and even physical destruction, Syria’s banks have been resilient, primarily due to protectionism and strong ties to the Assad regime.<sup>92, 93, 94</sup>



Bank Al-Sharq and the Blue Tower Hotel in Damascus  
Flickr / Monis Bukhari

## Finance

Most foreign investment in Syria focuses on the massive reconstruction efforts as the civil war apparently winds down. The projected costs of reconstruction are far greater than the country's financial resources, making reliance on external financing all but necessary.<sup>95</sup> It will take an estimated USD 200 billion to rebuild Syria's cities.<sup>96, 97, 98</sup>



*Bank of Syria and Overseas  
Flickr / Jillian C. York*

The primary foreign investors are the regime's strongest allies, Russia and Iran, who have become significantly involved in Syria's oil, gas, and phosphate industries. The Syrian government offered Russia priority in rebuilding Syria, and signed a USD 1.01 billion deal with Russian companies in 2015. In 2017, Iran was awarded contracts for energy infrastructure, power plants, and school rehabilitation.<sup>99</sup>

India, Brazil, and China are also trying to position themselves as key players in rebuilding Syria in efforts to gain access to its natural resources and recoup losses incurred from the conflict. India has invested in Syrian healthcare and China in its energy, telecommunications, and infrastructure.<sup>100</sup> For its part, Syria hopes to use foreign investments to balance the influence of Gulf states that have been supporting the anti-Assad rebels.<sup>101, 102, 103</sup>



*Flour provided by the Turkish Red Crescent for Syria  
Flickr / Felton Davis*

Another source of overseas funds has been humanitarian aid. Since the start of the war, the United Nations has awarded about USD 30 billion in aid to Syria, the largest such effort in history. Due to the United Nations' regulations for aid, most of that money fell under the control of the Assad regime. The aid is believed to have offset some of the effects of the harsh economic sanctions imposed on the regime by the international community. Ironically, much of the humanitarian aid originated from the same Western countries that spearheaded the economic sanctions.<sup>104</sup>

## Standard of Living

The civil war in Syria has caused over 400,000 deaths and displaced approximately half of the country's population. Sustained destruction to medical facilities and other infrastructure has caused a drastic deterioration in the health and standard of living for the civilian population. An unintended consequence of Western economic sanctions has been to limit the availability of medication and medical supplies. It is estimated that the breakdown of the health system has caused more deaths than the actual fighting.<sup>105, 106, 107</sup>



*A Syrian woman sitting on the ruins of her house, Aleppo  
Flickr / William Proby*

According to the United Nations, Syria's human development index declined noticeably after the start of the civil war, going from 0.631 in 2013 to 0.572 the following year. In 2017, Syria's score was 0.536, with a ranking of 155 out of 189 countries.<sup>108</sup> Life expectancy at birth is 75.2 years, with 72.8 years for males and 77.2 for females. The infant mortality rate is 14.4 deaths per 1,000 births, with 16.6 deaths for males and 12.2 for females. The maternal mortality rate is 68 deaths per 100,000 births.<sup>109</sup>



*Poverty in Syria  
Flickr / Adel Samara*

In 2017, the primary causes of death in Syria were conflict and terror, heart disease, stroke, Alzheimer's disease, and kidney disease.<sup>110</sup> The primary maladies are digestive, skin, and respiratory diseases and mental disorders related to trauma.<sup>111</sup> It is estimated that 60-80% of Syrians live in poverty.<sup>112, 113</sup> Approximately 90% of Syrian families spend more than half of their monthly income on food, and a third of the population is facing acute hunger.<sup>114, 115,</sup>

<sup>116</sup> The government has drastically reduced food and fuel subsidies, even as prices for necessities have increased. In 2010, a typical resident of Damascus earned approximately USD 220 per month. By 2016, the average wage in the city was approximately USD 53 per month. That same year, the average cost of living for a family of five in Damascus was USD 425 per month.<sup>117, 118</sup>

## Employment

Syria's unemployment rate is approximately 50-55%. By comparison, the 2010 rate was 8.6%.<sup>119, 120, 121</sup> During the first four years of the civil war, approximately 538,000 jobs were lost each year.<sup>122</sup> In addition to high unemployment, Syria is beset by a lack of skilled labor, as many who fled the country after the start of the war were professionals, skilled workers, and intellectuals.<sup>123</sup> In Damascus, the job market is severely affected by corruption and cronyism.<sup>124</sup>



*Unemployed men sitting in Damascus  
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

In 2017, 22.8% of Syria's jobs were in agriculture, 32.7% in industry, and 44.3% in services.<sup>125</sup> Syria has well-established trade unions for industrial workers, artisans, farmers, and professionals. These groups fall under an overarching labor federation controlled by the Baath Party.<sup>126</sup>

## Outlook



*Syrian refugees in the town of Arsal  
Flickr / Photo Unit*

In 2020, Syria's GDP is projected to grow by a rate of 3% and the inflation rate is estimated to be 12%.<sup>127</sup> Economic growth and stability will be challenged by ongoing armed conflict, fragmented governmental authority, compromised or lost infrastructure, massive government debt, and the depletion and displacement of the country's population.<sup>128, 129</sup>

As President Assad's position becomes more secure and attention is turned from fighting to rebuilding the country, Syria appears poised to move from the centralized economy of the past to a more liberalized, market-based model.<sup>130</sup> The overall war damage across the country is estimated to be USD 350 billion. Russia, Iran, and China stand to be the largest contributors to the reconstruction effort, and the largest beneficiaries from it. European and other Western countries that



have imposed sanctions on the Assad regime are likely to be less involved, although Europe may take an interest in an economically strong Syria as a way to prevent more Syrian migrants from heading west. Domestically, the government favors awarding lucrative contracts to well-connected loyalists, primarily from non-Sunni minorities, and to commanders of pro-regime militias. The entrenched cronyism, corruption, and networks of influence that have come to dominate the country's economic affairs will prove difficult to overcome.<sup>131, 132, 133</sup>

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## Syria in Perspective

# Chapter 3 | Economy

### Assessment

1. Foreigners travel to Syria in spite of the dangers posed by war and kidnapping.
2. Humanitarian aid helped the Assad regime mitigate the negative impact of economic sanctions.
3. Life expectancy in Syria fell below 59 years because of the war and the collapse of the healthcare system.
4. The steady production of oil and natural gas has sustained the Syrian regime during the long civil war.
5. In addition to oil and natural gas, phosphate is an important natural resource found in Syria.

*Assessment Answers: 1. True; 2. True; 3. True; 4. False; 5. True*





*Umayyad Mosque in Damascus  
Flickr / Игорь М*

## Chapter 4 | Syria in Perspective

# Society

## Introduction

The majority of Syrians are Arabs. Sunni Muslim Arabs are the largest religious, ethnic group, constituting nearly 75% of the population. The most significant minority group are the Alawites, a minority group and offshoot of Shia Islam, who count President Alawite Bashar al-Assad among their number and exercise control over Syria's government and military. Other minority groups include Palestinians, Bedouins, Kurds, Druze, Turkmens, Armenians, and Circassians. Before the civil war, about 10% of the population was Christian. Arabic is Syria's official language. Other languages spoken in the country are Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic, Circassian, French, and English.<sup>1</sup>

The Syrian Civil War has caused demographic shifts and changes to the country's settlement patterns.<sup>2</sup> In some areas along the Alawite-Sunni lines, local militias engaged in sporadic ethnic cleansing that caused a reduction in the rural population. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, in 2016, less than half of the pre-war rural population was living in rural areas.<sup>3, 4</sup>

Since the civil war began in 2011, over 5.6 million Syrians have fled to neighboring Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and beyond, and 6.5 million have been internally displaced. According to the World Bank, more than 440,000 people have been killed in Syria since the beginning of the civil war.<sup>5, 6</sup>

## Ethnic Groups

### Arabs

The largest ethnic group in Syria are Arabs, comprising about 90% of the population. The majority are Sunni, making up about 70% of the population. Sunni Arabs are also the main supporters of the rebel groups in the civil war.<sup>7</sup> Syria's Arab-speaking includes the Bedouins, a group of tribal, nomadic herders.<sup>8, 9, 10</sup>



*Syrian Arab: A Bedouin man  
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), there are about 440,000 Palestinian Arabs in Syria, down from 560,000 in 2011.<sup>11</sup> The Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp, located in southern Damascus, is the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Syria. In 2018, UNRWA reported that during one week of violence, 3,500 Palestinian fled the camp.<sup>12</sup> The camp has seen heavy fighting during the civil war.<sup>13, 14</sup>

Arab nationalism and the Baathist Party in Syria have cultivated a secular Arab identity in Syria. After repeated defeats in Arab-Israeli wars, Syrians experienced disillusionment with the secular government, leading to many to embrace the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni religious and political organization. Hafez al-Assad has tried to counter this by leveraging religious sentiments in his language and policies and publicizing his trips to Mecca. Yet, at the same time, he destroyed the city of Hama to halt the Muslim Brotherhood uprising when it challenged his authority. Presently, Bashar al-Assad, Hafez's son and successor as president, relies on international Shia

militias, many of whom aren't Arab, to defeat the largely Arab Sunni rebels.<sup>15, 16, 17</sup>

## Kurds



*Kurdish YPG Fighter  
Flickr / Kurdishstruggle*

Most Kurds are Sunni Muslims. They are less conservative than the Shia Arab majority in that they recognize women's rights and do not discriminate against other religious or ethnic groups.<sup>18</sup> In 1962, the Syrian government conducted a census, and anyone who did not register became a non-citizen. The census resulted in about 190,000 Syrian Kurds being formally identified as foreigners by the Syrian government. These foreign Kurds subsequently became ineligible for government services such as education. The Syrian government restricts the use of the Kurdish language and Kurdish media. Kurdish militias have organized within Syria, such as the Peoples Protection Units (YPG), which is under control of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). During the civil war, the PYD gained control of northern Syria and formed a semi-autonomous region called the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, or Rojava. The Kurds are considered allies of NATO.<sup>19, 20</sup>

## Druze

The term "Druze" refers to both an ethnicity and a religion that has communities throughout the Levant. The Druze religion includes the belief in reincarnation and the veneration of a collection of holy messengers. The Druze community keeps to itself and does not accept converts. An estimated 3% of Syria's population is Druze, mostly in southern Syria. The government allows the Druze population to operate public schools.<sup>21, 22, 23</sup> Although there were Druze uprisings in 1860 and rebellions against the French Mandate government, the Druze adopted policies of neutrality and self-defense during the civil war. Because of these stances, the Druze communities of southern Syria have suffered minimal impact from the conflict.<sup>24, 25</sup>



*Druze man in Suweida  
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

## Turkmen



*An ottoman market near by Al Takiya Al Sulaimaniya, Damascus*  
Wikimedia / Freedom's Falcon

The Syrian Turkmen (also called Turkoman) are a Sunni Muslim group concentrated in northern Syria. The Turkmen community came to Syria from central Asia in the 11th century CE. Ethnically and linguistically, they have more in common with their Turkish neighbors than they do with their Arabic rulers in Damascus. With a population estimated at anywhere between 500,000 and 3.5 million, the Syrian government has traditionally viewed them as a threat. Subsequently, the Assad regimes adopted policies that discriminate against the Turkmen with a view to suppressing any possible resistance to their rule. This has exactly the opposite effect, and Syrian Turkmen militias have been fighting against the Syrian government and ISIS in the civil war. The Turkish government has provided training for the Syrian Turkmen militias.<sup>26, 27, 28</sup>

## Other Ethnic Groups

The Armenian Christian minority descended from refugees of the Armenian Genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire in 1915. Other Armenian families have been in Syria for centuries, drawn to Syria's ancient trading centers. The Armenian community consists of mainly upper-class professionals. There were about 100,000 Armenians in Syria before the start of the civil war, but there may be as few as 30,000 remaining. Many Armenians have sought refuge in their historic homeland of Armenia.<sup>29, 30, 31</sup>

The Assyrian community was also persecuted by the Ottoman Empire during World War I, claiming the lives of 15 million Christians.<sup>32</sup> Assyrians are descendants of the ancient Assyrian empire and live throughout the Middle East. About 40,000 Assyrians lived in Syria before the start of the civil war. Assyrians speak Syriac; a language is related to Aramaic. Assyrians



*The memorial to the Armenian Genocide at the Martyrs' Memorial Church, Deir ez-Zor*  
Flickr / Ashnag

are Christian and have been targeted by ISIS. The Assyrian militia fights alongside the Syrian Democratic Forces.<sup>33, 34, 35</sup>

About 80,000 Circassians lived in Syria before the start of the civil war. The Circassians are a Russian minority from the Caucasus Mountains that fled to Syria in the mid-1860s amid hostility from the Russian government. The Circassian community is primarily Sunni Muslim.<sup>36, 37</sup>

The nomadic Dom, like the Roma, are thought to have originated in India. The Syrian Dom population ranges from 35,000 to 70,000, although the exact number is unknown because many Dom claim to be of other ethnicities in order to avoid discrimination. The Dom population speaks Domari. Throughout the Middle East, the Dom are referred to as *Nawar*. The Dom have a long history in the region and have lived on the fringe of society there, often in poverty, because they lack education or employment opportunities due to discrimination.<sup>38</sup>

## Religion



Syrians at the Great Mosque of Aleppo  
Wikimedia / Fede Renghino

Syria has no official religion. The U.S. government estimates that about 74% of Syria's population is Sunni Muslim, consisting of Arabs, Kurds, Circassians, Chechens, and Turkmen. About 13% of the population is Shia, including Alawites and Ismailis. Shia Muslims live in rural areas, mostly in the provinces of Aleppo and Idlib. Druze are estimated to be 3% of the population, and about 10% of the population is Christian. However, because of the civil war, many Christians have fled

the country, so a current estimate is not available. Before the civil war, there were small Jewish communities in Aleppo and Damascus, but current estimates put the number of Jews that remain in the country at 20.<sup>39</sup>

Birth certificates list a person's religious affiliation, but affiliation is not listed on ID cards or passports. Students in Syrian schools must attend religious instruction, but courses are only offered for Islamic or Christian studies. Religious organizations govern the marriage and divorce proceedings of their adherents. Christians are exempt from inheritance laws that are stipulated by Sharia law, but Sharia law is enforced when a Christian marries a Muslim.<sup>40</sup>

## Islam



*Umayyad Mosque in Damascus  
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

Muslims, followers of Islam, believe that Allah (God) revealed his word to a series of prophets, concluding with the Prophet Mohammed and the Quran in the 7th century CE. All Muslims adhere to the five pillars of Islam: a declaration of belief, prayer, charity, fasting, and completing the pilgrimage to Mecca. After Muhammad's death in 632 CE, Islam split into two branches over the question of who would be his successor. Sunnis favored an associate of Muhammad, but Shias wanted a descendant of Muhammad to be named as a successor. Unable to find a resolution to this matter, the two branches of Islam continue to exist separately to this day.<sup>41, 42, 43</sup>

Sunni Muslim militias are the main opposition to the Syrian government in the ongoing civil war. Most of the government's wartime prisoners are Sunnis. The government has attempted to unite religious minorities to counter their opposition by presenting itself as the protector from the Sunni majority. Syrian Shia militias are generally aligned with the government, and the Syrian government has used the assistance of Shias from other countries in the region, such as Iranian forces and Lebanon's Hezbollah.<sup>44, 45, 46</sup>

Sunni terrorist organizations operating in Syria want to replace the Syrian government with a Sunni caliphate, or theocracy. ISIS fighters have attacked and killed people from religious minorities and Sunni Muslims who do not adhere to their extreme interpretation of Sharia law.<sup>47</sup>



*ISIS fighters parade through Raqqa in 2014  
Wikimedia / Denarivs*

## Alawites



An Alawit priest  
Flickr / Charles Roffey

Alawites are Syria's largest religious minority; President Assad comes from an Alawite family. Most of Syria's Alawites live on the coast and in urban centers such as Damascus, Homs, and Latakia. The Alawites follow a variation of Shia Islam and view themselves as a moderate Shia branch. They separated from Shia Islam more than a millennium ago. Their religious practices and beliefs are secretive and closely guarded. They do not practice the five pillars of Islam.<sup>48</sup> The Alawite community

in Syria is often confused with the Alevi (also spelled Alawi) community, which is a religious minority in Turkey. By 1970, the Alawites dominated Syria's political institutions and the military, but Hafez al-Assad's coup that year gave them an elevated status in Syrian society as a whole. In the Syrian Civil War, the Alawite community became the target of sectarian violence because of its support of Bashar al-Assad and the preferential treatment it has received.<sup>49, 50, 51</sup> Western diplomats and local Alawites claim that as of early 2015, about a third of young Alawites men have been killed in the civil war, and many military-aged men have been forcibly conscripted.<sup>52</sup>

## Christianity

The Christian community in Syria dates back to the earliest days of Christianity. About 10% of the Syrian population observes Christianity, most belonging to one of the Eastern branches of the faith, such as the Orthodox Church of Antioch, the Melkite Catholic Church, the Syriac Orthodox Church, or the Armenian Apostolic Church. There is a minority of Roman Catholics and Protestants. Most Christians live in or near Syria's largest cities.<sup>53</sup> Much of the Christian population left the country over the course of the civil war because religious extremists threatened and targeted the Christian population. ISIS subjected Christians to forced conversions, displacement, taxation, assassination, and execution. Dozens of churches have been destroyed by government artillery and air strikes and by ISIS.<sup>54, 55, 56</sup>



Chapel at Mar Sarkis, Maaloula  
Flickr / Dwinton

## Other Religious Minorities



Yazidi cemetery  
Flickr User: RAFFI YOUREDJIAN

Yezidis are a Kurdish ethnic and religious minority spread out throughout the Middle East. Before the civil war, there were 80,000 Yezidis in Syria. Yezidis isolate themselves from other communities and observe strict rules of conduct and a caste system. Yezidism combines doctrine from Christianity, Judaism, and Islam with beliefs that are unique to Yezidis. It is not possible to convert to Yezidism, and converting to another religion results in ostracism from the community. In 2014, ISIS kidnapped Yezidis in Iraq and trafficked them to Syria to sale or enslavement. Thousands of Yezidi women kidnapped by ISIS are missing in Syria.<sup>57, 58, 59</sup>

Although there are virtually no Jews currently living in Syria, the long-standing enmity between it and Israel means that anti-Semitic attitudes remain prevalent. For example, government-run media outlets publish anti-Semitic cartoons and articles, and some blame Jews for the civil war. The Syrian government does not allow Syrian Jews to communicate with Israeli Jews. In 2014, the Syrian government was accused of destroying Syria's oldest synagogue in Damascus.<sup>60, 61</sup>

## Cuisine

Syria's cuisine is influenced by the culinary traditions of the Middle East, Greece, Turkey, and the Mediterranean's southern region. The country's position on the historical Silk Road opened it to influences from East Asia. Meat dishes mostly utilize lamb and chicken, although most people cannot afford to eat meat every day. Islam forbids the consumption of pork. Fresh fish is available along the Mediterranean coast. Shish kebabs, *shawarma*, *kibbeh* (dumpling stuffed with meat and vegetables), rice, salads, stuffed zucchinis, and yogurt are popular dishes. Tomatoes, pomegranates, dates, figs, and potatoes are common.



Syrian typical meal: makkous, tabbouleh, hummus, haloumi and baba ganouj with pita bread  
Flickr / Paul Joseph



Falafel, hummus, *baba ganoush* (roasted pureed eggplant), *tahini* (ground sesame paste), stuffed grape leaves, and *tabbouleh* (cracked wheat and vegetables) are popular side dishes.<sup>62</sup> Garlic, olives, parsley, nuts, onions, and mint garnish and flavor foods. Damascus is known for its baklava and has a few French restaurants, a reminder of colonial rule.<sup>63, 64, 65</sup>

Alcohol is forbidden by Islam, but beer, wine, and arak, an alcoholic drink made of aniseed, are available in many places. Tea is served in social gatherings.<sup>66</sup>

## Traditional Dress

The traditional garment of women in Syria is the *thob*, a single-color cotton robe or dress with triangular sleeves. The robe can be decorated with colorful embroidery around the neckline, the chest and on the sides. Wealthy women wear a silk *kaftan*, a floor-length coat, over their dresses. Women accessorize their dresses with a cotton or wool belt, wound around the waist several times. The *shambar* is a large silk scarf women use to cover their head. The edges of the scarf are decorated with embroidery, glass beads, fringes, and silk tassels. Each village and region features different motifs, types of stitches, and colors to demonstrate visibly the identity of the woman wearing the garments.<sup>67</sup>



A Syrian woman wearing shambar decorated with embroidery, glass beads and fringes  
Flickr / Charles Roffey



Syrian man in abaya and hatta  
Flickr / Charles Roffey

Traditional men's wear includes a white cotton shirt, sometimes decorated with embroidery, and cotton pants (*shirwal*). The most important garment is the *abaye*, a wide cloak worn over the clothes. Men's headdress (*hatta*) can be made of cotton or silk. The *agal* is the rope that holds the headdress in place on the head. Men also wear a hat (*taqiyye*) under the headdress to hold it in place.<sup>68</sup>

## Gender Issues



*Kurdish YPJ fighters  
Flickr / Kurdishstruggle*

Women's rights are a priority in Kurdish-controlled northern Syria. Both men and women participate in their local government entity. The Women's Protection Units (YPJ) is an all-female Kurdish militia. At first, the YPJ was established to defend the Kurdish population, but its role expanded to anti-ISIS operations. Women's rights offices have been established to resolve disputes and enforce women's rights.<sup>69, 70</sup>

Domestic violence is not a crime under Syrian law, but the government operated some domestic violence shelters before the civil war. Only 16% of women participated in the Syrian workforce before the civil war. Women receive a higher penalty for adultery than men do, and a husband can legally prevent his wife from leaving Syria. Perpetrators of violence and murder can receive light sentences if they argue that the crime was committed to defend their honor. There are no formal laws preventing women from participating in politics, but cultural practices hinder them from exercising political power. Women have held high political offices, including the office of vice president. A Syrian human rights group estimates that over 7,000 women are imprisoned by the Syrian government; women in Syrian prisons have reportedly experienced extensive torture.<sup>71, 72</sup>

ISIS perpetrated extensive abuses of women. In ISIS-held territory, women must adhere to a strict set of oppressive rules, and those out of compliance may be severely punished or executed. ISIS created a police force, consisting of women, to enforce strict regulations placed on women.<sup>73</sup>

## Arts

Since the beginning of the civil war, much of Syria's cultural heritage has sustained severe damage. By 2016, all of Syria's UNESCO cultural heritage sites had been damaged by shelling and crossfire, among them the Citadel, Great Mosque, and souk of Aleppo; the ancient Roman cities of Palmyra and Bosra; Ebla and Mari from the Bronze Age; and many ancient shrines. Museums that housed important antiquities have been destroyed and looted.<sup>74, 75, 76</sup>

Many artists have left Syria for Europe. Only a few artists remain in Syria or in other countries in the Middle East, and even fewer remain loyal to President Assad, who is considered a great patron of the arts.<sup>77</sup>

In February 2011, at the beginning of the civil war, graffiti calling for an end to the Assad regime appeared on walls in the town of Daraa. The two 15-year-old boys who painted the graffiti were detained and tortured by the security forces. Since then, visual and digital art has been a popular form of political expression among young artists.<sup>78</sup>



*Heritage site in Bosra damaged by shelling and crossfire  
Flickr / Dan*

Filmmaking is an important way for artists to tell the stories of Syrians affected by the war. In 2017, a film about civilian volunteer first-responders, *The White Helmets*, won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature.<sup>79, 80</sup>

## Sports and Recreation



*Syria National Football Team  
in 2015 AFC Asian Cup qualification  
Wikimedia / Javid Nikpour*

The Institute for Sports Education administers athletic affairs in Syria. Soccer is the country's most popular sport, with karate and weightlifting also popular.<sup>81</sup> The national soccer team, known as the Qasioun (a mountain in Syria) Eagles, came close to qualifying for the 2018 World Cup for the first time but failed to reach the tournament after losing to Australia. The team had to play its home games in Malaysia because of the ongoing civil war. Not all Syrians support the team, because of its links to the government. There are

claims that the Syrian government used soccer stadiums as military bases, killed soccer players, and forced players to march in support of the government.<sup>82, 83, 84</sup> Syria also has a professional basketball league and a men's national team.<sup>85, 86</sup> However, the basketball league was suspended during the war, and several players were forced to flee the country.<sup>87</sup>

Syria received its first Olympic medal in 1984. Seven Syrian athletes represented the country during the 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.<sup>88</sup> The first-ever Olympic team for refugees, which was a new addition to the 2016 Olympics, included two Syrian swimmers.<sup>89</sup>

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## Syria in Perspective

# Chapter 4 | Society

### Assessment

1. The majority of Syrians are Sunni Muslims.
2. Syria's cultural heritage has sustained severe damage during the civil war.
3. Islam is the official religion of Syria.
4. The Kurds support women's rights.
5. Alawites are Syria's largest religious minority.

*Assessment Answers: 1. True; 2. True; 3. True; 4. False; 5. True*



*Free Syrian Army's fighters in front of the damaged buildings, Damascus  
Flickr / William Proby*

## Chapter 5 | Syria in Perspective

# Security

## Introduction

Syria has had complex diplomatic relations with its neighbors. The country has engaged in multiple violent conflicts with Israel, occupied Lebanon for more than two decades, harbored terrorists hostile to Turkey, and for many years was a rival of Iraq.<sup>1, 2</sup> The United States and Syria have strained diplomatic relations because of Syria's support of terrorist organizations.<sup>3</sup>

The Syrian Civil War started in March 2011, involves a variety of state and non-state actors, each with its own objectives. Urban warfare, human rights abuses, sectarian violence, and the use of chemical weapons contributed to the devastation of the conflict.

The Syrian government controls the state security apparatus but has little control of pro-government militias and no control over foreign military forces and militias.<sup>4, 5, 6</sup>

## U.S.-Syria Relations



President Hafez al-Assad greeting U.S. President Nixon in 1974  
Wikimedia / Central Intelligence Agency

The United States recognized Syria and established diplomatic relations with the country in 1944. Diplomatic relations ceased from 1958 to 1961, when Syria was a part of the United Arab Republic (UAR). This was a short-lived union of Syria and Egypt into one country with Cairo as its capital. The U.S. suspended diplomatic relations again from 1967 to 1974 because of the U.S. government's support for Israel during the Israeli-Arab Wars. The first U.S. president to visit Syria was Richard Nixon

in 1974. In 1977, President Carter met President Hafez al-Assad in Switzerland, but Assad grew closer to the Soviet Union after President Carter facilitated the Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt. President George H.W. Bush met Assad in Switzerland after the Gulf War. President Bill Clinton met with Assad in Syria in 1994 and in Switzerland in 2000. The Assads hindered numerous U.S.-sponsored regional peace agreements. The Syrian embassy in Washington DC and consulates in Texas and Michigan were closed by the U.S. Department of State in 2014. The U.S. embassy in Damascus closed in 2012.<sup>7, 8, 9</sup> As of early 2019, the Czech Embassy in Damascus represents U.S. interests with an extremely limited range of consular services.<sup>10</sup>

The United States and Syria collaborated on regional issues in the 1990s, but relations soured in the 2000s due to Syria's support of Iraq and the Palestinian insurgency, as well as Syria's interference in Lebanon's affairs. The Syrian government hosted visits from high-level U.S. officials in 2005, 2007, and 2009. U.S.-Syrian relations improved between 2009 and 2011, but the civil war propelled the United States to call for President Bashar al-Assad to step down.<sup>11, 12</sup> In 2018, the United States



Bashar el-Assad meeting with U.S. Senator Kaufman in 2009  
Wikimedia / Office of Senator Ted Kaufman

launched a strike on Syrian military targets to punish Syria for chemical weapons attacks on civilians.<sup>13</sup>

Since 1979, the United States has designated Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism and subsequently imposed sanctions.<sup>14</sup> The United States also levied sanctions on Syria in 2004 in response to Syria's tacit support of militants crossing into Iraq from Syria, Syria's continuous support of terrorism, and Syria's support of Hezbollah. In 2011, the U.S. placed additional sanctions on the Syrian government due to its violent response to civilian protests.<sup>15, 16, 17</sup>

## Relations with Neighbors

### Turkey



Map of Syria and Turkey  
DLIFLC

Historically, diplomatic relations between Turkey and Syria have been poor. Syrians considered the Turkish-run Ottoman Empire as an adversary and participated in the Arab rebellion during World War I. In 1939 Turkey annexed Hatay Province, located in northwest Syria, which was a part of the French Mandate for Syria. The Syrian government still considers the province Syrian territory, and periodically brings up the unresolved dispute. Turkey has constructed dams upriver from Syria,

which have reduced the flow of water into Syria. Syria has allowed the presence of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) on its territory, hindering relations with Turkey. Since the start of the Syrian Civil War, Turkey has called for President Assad to leave office and supported anti-government forces operating in Syria.<sup>18, 19</sup>

The Turkish government considers the presence of Kurdish militias and Kurdish-controlled territory in northern Syria as a threat to Turkey's national security. In January 2018, Turkey launched an air and ground campaign in northern Syria centered on and around the city of Afrin. At the end of the year, Turkey again sent troops to northern Syria near a town held by Kurdish-led forces backed the United States, despite an announcement that it would delay an offensive until after U.S. troops pulled out of Syria.<sup>20</sup> The Syrian government and allied militias have pledged to halt the Turkish incursion.<sup>21, 22</sup>

## Israel

There are no diplomatic relations between Israel and Syria, as technically, the two countries have been at war since Israel's independence in 1948. The two countries have engaged in armed conflicts in 1948, 1967, 1973, and 1982.<sup>23, 24</sup> The Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights is a contentious, unresolved dispute between the Israeli and Syrian governments. Israel seized the Golan Heights during the 1967 Six-Day War and maintained control of the territory after the Yom Kippur War of 1973.



Map of Syria and Israel  
DLIFLC

Prior to 1967, Syrian artillery used the high ground of the Golan Heights to launch attacks into northern Israel. Syria maintains that Israel has to return the Golan Heights to Syria. Currently, Israel uses the high ground to observe the Syrian military. There have been periodic talks between the two countries, including negotiations facilitated by the United States and Turkey, in which the Israeli government has offered to return the Golan Heights, but neither country could ultimately agree on new border proposals.<sup>25</sup>

Israel considers the presence of Iran and Hezbollah in Syria as a threat to its security, and the Israeli military has carried out several attacks against Hezbollah and Iranian and Syrian targets within Syria. Israel seeks to prevent a permanent Iranian presence in Syria.<sup>26, 27</sup> Throughout the course of the Syrian Civil War, Israel has provided humanitarian assistance to Syrian civilians, including medical treatment, medicine, food, clothing, and fuel.<sup>28</sup>

## Lebanon

Syria and Lebanon did not have official diplomatic relations until 2008. The Syrian military occupied Lebanon from 1976 to 2005. The UN Security Council called for Syria to leave Lebanon in 2004. Syria was blamed for high profile assassinations, including that of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005 and a high-ranking security official in 2012. Although Syria departed from Lebanon in 2005, Syria still retains significant control over Lebanese affairs through Hezbollah. Hezbollah has received significant military, political, and financial support from Syria and has lent its support to the Syrian government in the civil war. In 2013, the Syrian government

conducted airstrikes in northern Lebanon against anti-Syrian government forces. Hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees have fled to Lebanon. Lebanon distanced itself from Syria during the Syrian Civil War, but Hezbollah has lobbied the Lebanese government to strengthen its ties with Syria.<sup>29, 30, 31</sup> In 2017, the Lebanese Army conducted an anti-ISIS operation in Lebanon, near the Lebanon-Syria border, while the Syrian army and Hezbollah conducted a similar operation on Syria's side of the border.<sup>32</sup>



*Map of Syria and Lebanon*  
DLIFLC

## *Jordan*



*Map of Syria and Jordan*  
DLIFLC

Jordan and Syria both participated in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and the 1967 Six-Day War, but Jordan did not participate in the 1973 Yom Kippur War (also called the October War).<sup>33, 34</sup> Jordan cut diplomatic relations with Syria in the 1960s because of Syria's support for the PLO, but relations resumed in 1967.<sup>35</sup> Syria invaded Jordan in 1970 in support of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, which was based in Jordan at the time, but Jordan defeated the Syrian invasion force.<sup>36</sup> Jordan has

maintained a diplomatic relationship with Syria since the start of the Syrian Civil War.<sup>37</sup> The country's priority has been maintaining internal security. President Assad has voiced his displeasure with Jordan for cooperating with the U.S. during the civil war. Jordan conducted air strikes against ISIS, backed the Syrian opposition forces, and hosted U.S.-conducted training of Syrian rebels. Jordan's support for Syrian rebels waned as the conflict persisted.<sup>38, 39, 40</sup> The Jordanian government estimates that it has given refuge to over 1.3 million Syrian refugees, but it struggles to provide sufficient medical care, water, and electricity to the refugee population.<sup>41, 42</sup>

## Iraq

Hafez al-Assad and former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein were enemies. Syria supported Iran during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, and Syria was a member of the coalition forces that removed the Iraqi military from Kuwait. Relations between the two countries improved in 1998 when Syria sought to counter close Israel-Turkey ties. In 2006, Iraq and Syria re-established ties after a two-decades-long absence of diplomatic relations. Iraq is one of Syria's major export partners.<sup>43, 44, 45</sup> In 2011, Iraqi prime minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki called for President Assad to leave office. In 2018, in coordination with the Syrian government, Iraqi warplanes struck ISIS targets within Syria.<sup>46, 47</sup>



Map of Syria and Iraq  
DLIFLC

## Military

### Army



Syrian Army soldiers standing on their military trucks shouting slogans in support of Syrian President Bashar Assad  
Flickr / William Proby

The Syrian Arab Army has its roots in the Mandate Volunteer Force, which was founded in 1920 and run by a French officer corps; the Syrian army, in its current form, was created when Syria became independent from France in 1946. The army is the largest branch of service, and the country's senior national military positions are occupied by army officers. Administration of the army is carried out by seven regional commands. The army started the civil war with about 220,000 soldiers, but its current strength may be as low as 25,000. There were about 300,000 reservists before the start of the civil war. Many soldiers have defected or been killed in the conflict since it began in 2011. Alawites hold many of the army's senior leadership positions.<sup>48, 49</sup>

The army has a substantial armored corps but lacks an effective logistics and support system. The Soviet Union provided arms to Syria until it collapsed in the early

1990s. Today, the Russian government provides the Syrian military with weapons and ammunition, including advanced air-defense systems.<sup>50, 51, 52</sup> Iran has supplied Syria with ammunition for heavy weapon systems and equipment.<sup>53</sup>

### *National Defense Forces*

The National Defense Forces (NDF) is a coalition of militias that support the Syrian government and has been integrated into the Syrian security forces. NDF fighters receive training from Iran, and support and oversight from the Syrian military. Many NDF units are militias that operate locally, and unit capabilities vary; some units have advanced weaponry and operate as a small army, while others operate more like gangs. Many NDF fighters are attracted by opportunities to loot secured neighborhoods, while others join out of fear of the Sunni-dominated Syrian rebels. The NDF has been accused of inflaming sectarian tensions and massacring Sunnis.<sup>54, 55, 56</sup>



*National Defense forces  
Flickr / Zeinab Mohamed*

### *Navy*



*Syrian Osa II (Project 205U) craft  
Wikimedia / U.S. NavyColbert*

Syria's navy is the smallest of the armed forces, consisting of only a few thousand personnel. The primary mission of the navy is coastal/port defense, but submarine warfare is a priority as well. The Naval Infantry consists of about 1,500 personnel and three ships. Coastal defenses include artillery batteries and surface-to-surface missile batteries. Russia established a small naval base in Tartus in the 1970s; in 2017, Russia announced an expansion of the base and an extension of its lease

on the facility. The base expansion will accommodate 11 ships, compared to its current capacity of one ship. The Tartus naval facility is Russia's only naval base in the Mediterranean.<sup>57, 58, 59</sup>



## *Air Force*

The Syrian Arab Air Force has over 260 aircraft.<sup>60, 61</sup> Syria is suspected of using its planes and helicopters to drop chemical weapons on civilian targets in urban areas and of bombing hospitals.<sup>62, 63, 64</sup> The Russian military uses civilian planes to transport civilian contractors, and its civilian planes provide aid to Syria, Hezbollah, and Iran through Russia. Iran has used civilian flights through Iraqi airspace to transport weapons and personnel to Syria.<sup>65, 66</sup>

## **Foreign Military Presence**

### *Iran*

Iran has backed Syria militarily in the civil war because it is in the interest of Shia Iran to prevent a Sunni takeover of Syria. Iran is a patron of Hezbollah and has mobilized the terrorist organization to fight on behalf of the Syrian government. Iran has an estimated presence of around 2,000 soldiers in Syria, including elite forces and advisors.<sup>67</sup> Iran has attacked Israeli troops stationed in the Golan Heights, and Israel has attacked Iranian targets in Syria.<sup>68</sup> A possible long-term goal of Iran is to build regional support for its foreign policy goals, in which Syria would be crucial in confrontations with Israel and demonstrate force in the Sunni-Arab region. President Assad claims that Iran does not have permanent bases in Syria.<sup>69</sup>

### *Russia*

Russia entered the Syrian conflict in 2015 and is allied with the Iranian and Syrian governments. Russia has declared that its objective is to fight ISIS, but most of its air strikes are on anti-government militias and targets, such as the October 2016 Russian airstrike on a Syrian rebel hospital. Russia has provided the Syrian government with political and military assistance.<sup>70, 71, 72</sup> Russian military contractors entered the civil war in 2015, and there may be up to 8,000 Russians, including 4,000 mercenaries, fighting in Syria. In 2017, Russia announced that it reached an agreement to establish a permanent airbase in Syria.<sup>73, 74</sup>



*Russian air group personnel in Syria fitting a KAB-500KR guided bomb on an Su-34 jet based in Khmeimim Air Base  
Wikimedia / Russian Ministry of Defence*

## United States

The United States has about 2,000 military personnel deployed to northeastern Syria in order to fight ISIS but has also occasionally struck pro-government militias.<sup>75</sup> The United States has fought ISIS through airstrikes in support of Kurdish and Arab militias and by embedding troops with allied militias.<sup>76</sup> In 2018, a U.S. outpost was attacked by hundreds of pro-Syrian militants and Russian mercenaries backed by armor and artillery; there were no U.S. casualties, but hundreds of pro-Syrian militants, including Russian citizens, were killed.<sup>77</sup> In December 2018, the U.S. government began planning the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria.<sup>78, 79</sup>



*U.S. Marines in northern Syria, March 2017*  
Wikimedia / Lance Corporal Zachery Laning, U.S. Marine Corps

## Militias

Iran has deployed up to 25,000 Shia militants, who are mostly from Iran's Afghan refugee population as well as Pakistan and Iraq. Afghans have been enticed by offers of citizenship from Iran. The original objective of militants was sectarian; to protect important Shia institutions from the largely Sunni Syrian rebels, but these militias have been used to defend the Syrian government throughout the country.<sup>80</sup>

## Cybersecurity



*Coat of arms of the Syrian Electronic Army*  
Wikimedia / SEA ARMY

The Syrian Electronic Army (SEA) is a group of pro-Syrian computer hackers attempting to spread misinformation and discontent through hacking government, economic, and social media accounts and websites. The group started its cyber attacks in 2011, targeting entities that were against the Syrian government or deemed to be supportive of Syrian rebels. Some of the organizations that were hacked include the U.S. Marine Corps, the Associated Press, NPR, 60 Minutes, FIFA, and the BBC.

The Syrian government hosts the group’s website, but the hackers do not work for the government. The SEA website site is registered with the Syrian Computer Society, which was founded by Bashar al-Assad in the 1990s. The group has used spear phishing to gain access to social media or websites. Once successful, they deface websites and spread misinformation on the target’s social media accounts. The group has also engaged in extortion, wire fraud, and money laundering.<sup>81, 82, 83</sup>

## Issues Affecting Stability

### *Government Human Rights Abuses*

The Syrian government lacks the will and ability to investigate suspected human rights abuses or punish those responsible. The government targets human rights workers and organizations through harassment, arrest, and execution. The government has been accused of killing and torturing thousands of prisoners at its Saydnaya Prison. Mass extrajudicial executions, mass graves, and a possible crematorium conceal the prison’s death toll. The Syrian government has been responsible for administering exceptionally cruel torture to its detainees at facilities across the country.<sup>84, 85, 86</sup>



*An elder man trying to save a child who was hit by an Assad death barrels  
Flickr / Freedom House*

Syrian security forces have attacked hospitals, schools, and refugee camps. Sieges and massacres have also been common practices of government forces. The Syrian Network for Human Rights and Amnesty International estimate that the Syrian government is responsible for tens of thousands of forced disappearances. The government has also engaged in forced conscriptions and recruited minors into its security forces.<sup>87</sup>

### *Internally Displaced Persons*

The UN estimates that 6.3 million Syrians are living as internally displaced persons (IDPs). Syrian security forces have seized property that was left behind by IDPs, arrested aid workers, and prevented humanitarian relief from being delivered to areas controlled by antigovernment forces. Many IDPs have sought refuge and security with members of their own religion, rather than remain in areas where they constitute

a religious minority. Antigovernment factions such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Kurdish militias have been suspected of engaging in population displacement. The Syrian government has displaced Sunni communities in efforts to shift demographics. The Syrian government and other armed factions have also used checkpoints to control the movements of the population. The government has obstructed Syrians from obtaining passports, instituted exit visas, and closed border crossings.<sup>88, 89</sup>



*Displaced Syrians  
Flickr / William Proby*

### *Sectarian and Ethnic Tensions*



*Alawites celebrating at a festival in Baniyas  
Wikimedia / Frank Hurley*

Officially, Syria is a secular nation; the country has no official religion, and the constitution provides a measure of religious freedom. However, since they took over the government in the 1970s, Alawites have been disproportionately appointed to senior-level government and military positions. Alawites have supported the Syrian government, which in turn has made the Alawite community a target of anti-government rebels. Many Alawites support the Syrian government out of self-preservation, fearing a backlash from the Sunni-dominated Syrian rebels.<sup>90, 91, 92</sup>

Government-aligned forces target Sunni Muslim individuals, groups, and neighborhoods that support, or are suspected of supporting Syrian rebels. Shia militias such as Hezbollah have participated in the civil war on behalf of the Syrian government. President Assad used chemical weapons against a militant group in a Damascus suburb in order to secure the release of Alawite prisoners. The Syrian government frames the civil war as a conflict of the state fighting Sunni extremists, enticing religious minorities to support the government. As a result, government forces have disproportionately attacked Sunni neighborhoods.<sup>93, 94, 95</sup>

The effects of sectarianism are widespread in the conflict and are amplified by power struggles among factions. Iran has contributed Shia militants in support of the Syrian government. Iraqi Shia militants, members of the Popular Mobilization Front, have also joined the government's side. ISIS and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (which has links to al-Qaeda) are Sunni terrorist factions operating in Syria. Sunni terrorists target Shia Muslims, Alawites, Christians, Yezidis, Kurdish militias, and uncooperative Sunnis. The Free Syrian Army consists of Sunni personnel who deserted from the Syrian army to oppose the government. Kurdish militias are operating in northern Syria, leading to tensions between Syria's Arab population and the Turkish government; yet Kurdish militias have cooperated with Arab militias as members of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces.<sup>96, 97</sup>



*Syrian rebels making bombs to be used against the government forces, at their post in Maaret Misreen  
Flickr / William Proby*

### *Use of Chemical Weapons*



*Victims of chemical weapon used by the Syrian government  
Flickr / William Proby*

war.<sup>101</sup> As of April 2018, the United Nations has attributed four chemical weapons attacks to the Syrian government and one to ISIS. According to the U.S. government, Syria has used chemical weapons over 50 times. The Syrian government has used Sarin and chlorine gas while ISIS has used mustard gas.<sup>102, 103</sup>

Syria produced chemical weapons in the 1970s with the assistance of Egypt and the Soviet Union, and in 2012, the Syrian government confirmed that it had chemical weapon stockpiles. In 2013, the United States and Russia made a deal to remove and destroy Syria's arsenal of chemical weapons, but the weapons have remained in the Syrian government's possession.<sup>98, 99, 100</sup> North Korea is suspected of having supported Syria's chemical weapons and missile programs since the start of the civil

## Drug Trafficking

The lack of government control over large swaths of land in Syria has been a boon to the international drug trade. Production of captagon, a potent amphetamine known as fenethylline or “the jihadi drug,” has increased and millions of fenethylline tablets of Syrian origin have been seized in Lebanon and Turkey. This drug is popular among fighters in the Middle East since it increases alertness, reduces appetite, and boosts self-confidence. The ease of production and profitability of this drug make it an important source of income for the different fighting groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic State, and the Syrian army. Analysts claim that the use of this drug may explain the cruelty and duration of the civil war.<sup>104, 105, 106</sup>

## Terrorist Organizations

### Hezbollah



Hezbollah fighters  
Flickr / William Proby

Hezbollah has been on the U.S. Department of State’s list of terrorist organizations since the list was created in 1997.<sup>107</sup> Although Hezbollah was officially founded in Lebanon in 1985, its members are suspected of carrying out the attacks on the Marine Corps barracks and the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon in 1983. The Syrian government has been a patron of the group, and the group has sent its fighters to assist the Syrian government during the civil war. Hezbollah is a Shia organization

and an Iranian proxy, while many of the Syrian rebel organizations are Sunni.<sup>108</sup> Hezbollah has sustained around a thousand combat deaths in the conflict. Israel has conducted airstrikes that destroyed Hezbollah weapons convoys and is suspected of having carried out a strike that killed one of Hezbollah’s top commanders.<sup>109, 110, 111</sup>

### Hamas

The Syrian government provided Hamas with support in the form of arms, financial backing, and sanctuary in Damascus. Hamas currently is in control of the Gaza Strip. In 2012, Hamas departed from Syria, condemned Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian government, and declared its support for Syrian anti-government forces. Hamas’s

stance toward Syria caused a rift with another one of its longtime patrons: Iran, which provided Hamas with an estimated USD 50 million a month in 2012. Hamas and Iran resumed normal relations in 2017.<sup>112, 113, 114</sup> The U.S. Department of State has listed Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism since 1984, and the department has listed Hamas as a terrorist organization since 1997.<sup>115, 116</sup> Hamas and Hezbollah are split over competing allegiances in the Syrian Civil War, yet maintain good relations with each other.<sup>117</sup>



*Hamas leader, Khaled Meshaal  
Wikimedia / Trango*

## Food and Water Security



*Displaced Syrian people waiting for food  
Flickr / William Proby*

private vendors were used to provide water to the population, but these sources were unreliable and overpriced.<sup>119, 120, 121</sup>

Syria has experienced a significant decrease in water resources. The regional river basin is losing water at an alarming rate, due to poor management and drought. Dams in Turkey have caused water resources in Syria to decrease by 40% since the 1970s.<sup>118</sup> Since 2012, water management in Syria has been ignored; irrigated fields have been abandoned by fleeing farmers and reservoirs have been neglected. Infrastructure damage has caused water shortages in Damascus. Water trucks and

The Syrian government has a system of subsidizing agricultural production and food prices, but agriculture yields and food distribution networks have been severely affected by the war. A lack of reliable irrigation has hurt grain harvests. Farmers are struggling to obtain fuel, fertilizer, and means of transportation to move their products to the marketplace or to storage facilities. Grain production and livestock numbers have decreased sharply. There are 10.5 million Syrians who are food insecure or at risk of becoming food insecure. Millions of Syrians rely on donated food from international

organizations. Government-controlled regions of Syria have not been as disrupted by food shortages; food from these areas can be resold in the rebel-held territory for a large profit. The Syrian government has cut off food supplies in rebel-held areas in order to pressure rebels to surrender. The disruption of the agricultural sector will likely continue to affect the economy after the conflict ends.<sup>122, 123, 124</sup>

## Outlook

Syrian citizens have no role in choosing their form of government or government officials. The Syrian government is unaccountable for its actions, unable to govern or provide basic services to most of the country, and unable to protect its citizens. The government's attacks on civilian infrastructure show a disregard for the lives of its citizens. Foreign entities have significant influence over the government and population. Government-controlled territory is administered by self-serving local militias under weak supervision. Syria will likely emerge from its civil war with Bashar al-Assad remaining in power. Assad will govern over an economically devastated Syria, and will likely spend years consolidating power through the same oppressive tactics that the Assad family has used to maintain control since the 1970s. In the long term, the Syrian government will be subjected to the will of the actors who kept Assad in power; Russia, Hezbollah, and Iran will demand a return on their financial and military contributions to Assad's government. The international community will have little motivation to help the Syrian government with rebuilding and infrastructure projects as a result of Assad remaining in power.<sup>125, 126, 127</sup>



*A poster of Bashar al-Assad at a checkpoint in Damascus  
Wikimedia / Elizabeth Arrott*



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# Chapter 5 | Security

### Assessment

1. The Syrian Electronic Army (SEA) is a group of pro-Assad computer hackers.
2. Russia has a naval base in Syria.
3. During the Syrian civil war, Hamas declared its allegiance to President Bashar al-Assad and cooperated with Hezbollah in the fight against anti-government forces.
4. Turkey provided air and ground support to Syrian Kurds who fought the Islamic State during the Syrian civil war.
5. Syria has no diplomatic relations with Israel.

*Assessment Answers: 1. True; 2. True; 3. False; 4. False; 5. True*

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# Syria in Perspective

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## Final Assessment

1. Most of Syria is a semiarid desert plateau.
2. Hama is the capital of the Kurdish semiautonomous region.
3. The city of Daraa was the epicenter of anti-government protests that led to Syria's civil war.
4. Syria gained independence after the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I.
5. Syria shares its southern border with Saudi Arabia.
6. Before the civil war, the Homs Gap was a popular trekking route to the source of the Orontes River.
7. President Hafez al-Assad ruled Syria for several decades.
8. Syria's Armenians are a nomadic people who have historically inhabited the Levant.
9. Jabal al-Durūz is the traditional home of one of Syria's religious minorities.
10. The Syrian currency is the dinar.

11. During the civil war, Iran supported antigovernment rebels who fought against the Assad regime.
12. The Baath Party is the ruling party of Syria.
13. Syria withdrew its forces from Lebanon following the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000.
14. Thousands of Syrian Kurds are considered noncitizens.
15. Syria is a designated state sponsor of terrorism.
16. Russia has exclusive rights to produce Syria's oil and natural gas.
17. The United States moved its embassy from Damascus to Latakia after the first chemical weapon attack on a suburb of Damascus.
18. Israel seized the Golan Heights from Syria during the Yom Kippur War of 1973 (also called the October War).
19. Russia has high stakes in the Syrian civil war.
20. Yazidis are a Kurdish ethnoreligious minority.
21. Syria's banks collapsed under the pressure of economic sanctions and corruption.

22. The Muslim Brotherhood-led an uprising in the city of Hama in the early 1980s.

23. *Kibbeh* and *tabbouleh* are names of popular Syrian dishes.

24. The Syrian government does not imprison women because it is forbidden by Islam.

25. Most of Syria's oil fields are located near the Mediterranean coast.

Assessment Answers: 1. True; 2. False; 3. true; 4. False; 5. False; 6. False; 7. True; 8. False; 9. True; 10. False; 11. False; 12. True; 13. False; 14. True; 15. True; 16. True; 17. False; 18. False; 19. True; 20. True; 21. False; 22. true; 23. True; 24. False; 25. False