



CULTURAL ORIENTATION

ARABIC-LEVANTINE



*Tetrapylon, Palmyra
Flickr / Dan*

Ti
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*Roman ruins, Busra ash Sham, Daraa
Flickr / Jose Javier Martin Espartosa*

Chapter 1 | Arabic-Levantine Cultural Orientation

Profile

Introduction

The Syrian Arab Republic (Syria) is located in the Middle East, at the juncture of Africa, Asia, and Europe on the Mediterranean Coast, an area known as the Levant.^{1, 2} The word Levant is derived from a Latin word meaning, “to rise.” It came into use because, from the Western European perspective, this was the direction of sunrise. Thus, the dialect of Arabic spoken in this area is known as Levantine.³

Syrian history dates back many centuries. Both the ancient Silk Road connecting the Mediterranean Sea with India and China and the Pilgrim’s Road to Mecca pass through Syria. The old Roman Road, the ruins of the Roman Temple of Jupiter, and the

Umayyad Mosque, which dates back to ninth century, are located in Damascus, the capital and one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities. Saladin, the great medieval military leader who led the Muslim armies against the Crusaders, is buried in Damascus. In 1945, Syria became officially independent from France when it signed the United Nations Charter. In 1946, the last French troops left the country.^{4, 5}

Syria covers an area of 185,180 sq km (71,504 sq mi) and shares borders with five countries: Turkey to the north, Jordan to the south, Lebanon and Israel (including the disputed Golan Heights) to the southwest, and Iraq to the east and southeast.⁶



Map of Syria and its border countries
DLIFLC

The majority of Syrians are Arabs, comprising 90% of the population. Sunni Muslim Arabs are the country's largest religious ethnic group, comprising nearly 75% of the population. The Alawites, who adhere to some aspects of Shia Islam, are a minority group that controls the government and the military. Bashar al-Assad, the president, is an Alawite. Other minority groups include Palestinians, Bedouins, Kurds, Druze, Turkmens, Armenians, and Circassians. Before 2011, 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.⁷



Syrian refugee camp, Bekaa Valley, Lebanon
Flickr / Stephan Rebernik

The current civil war, which began in 2011, has caused demographic shifts and changes in settlement patterns all over Syria. Over 5.6 million Syrians fled to neighboring Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and beyond, and 6.5 million have been internally displaced by the continuous violence.⁸ An estimated 440,000 people have been killed in Syria since the beginning of the conflict.^{9, 10, 11}

Geography

Geographic Features

Syria's geography features a rich coastal region, fertile plains, deserts, and mountains. The northwestern coastline stretches along the Mediterranean Sea for about 180 km (100 mi). Two-thirds of the country's population live within 121 km (75 mi) of the Mediterranean Sea in the intensely cultivated coastal plain region.¹²



*Mediterranean coast of Syria
Flickr / Badreddin Alsabbagh*

Separating the coastal plain from the interior is the Al-Ansariyyah (Jabal al-Nusiriyya) Mountain Range, running north to south parallel to the coast. Fingers of the Al-Ansariyyah Mountains cut into the narrow coastline strip in several places. East of the mountains is the Ghab Depression, a part of the Great Rift Valley that encompasses the Orontes River.^{13, 14}



*Snowy Mount Hermon
Wikimedia / Almogtions*

Farther south and inland, marking the Syria-Lebanon border is the Anti-Lebanon Range and Jabal Libnan al-Sharqiyya. Farther south rises the highest mountain in the range, Jabal al-Sheikh (known as Mount Hermon), which peaks at 2,814 m (9,232 ft). Smaller mountains rise in several locations around the country. One is Jabal al-Druze (Druze Mountain) in the extreme south, with more than a hundred Druze villages on or near the mountain.^{15, 16}

In the extreme northeast, along the Euphrates River, which originates in the mountains of Turkey and flows across Syria into Iraq, lies the fertile Al-Jazirah region, an irregular plateau that reaches 460 m (1,500 ft) above sea level. Between 2006 and 2008, one of the worst droughts in 40 years hit the area, forcing thousands to flee to the coast.^{17, 18}

Most of southeastern Syria is rocky desert, and the few people who live there are predominantly Bedouin. The boundaries of the Syrian Desert are the Euphrates River

to the east, the Orontes Valley to the west, and the desert of the Arabian Peninsula to the south.^{19, 20}

Climate

Syria's climate is dry, and temperatures range from extremely hot to freezing cold. During the summer (June to August or mid-September), the interior is hot and dry and coastal areas may be humid, with moderately warm temperatures. In the desert, summer temperatures rise to 43°C (110°F). Visitors to this area should take precautions. In the mountains, summer temperatures are usually mild. Spring and autumn are considered the most comfortable seasons, when temperatures are mild. Occasional rain in the coastal areas and in the mountains during the spring keeps the air clear.^{21, 22}



Springtime in Syria
Flickr / Charles Roffey



Snow at Jabal al-Druze
Wikimedia / KFZI310

In winter (November through February), temperatures are cold; rain is frequent on the coast and in the mountains, less so in the interior. Annual rainfall on the coast and the mountains facing the coast varies from 51 cm to 127 cm (20 to 50 in). Winter temperatures along the coast range from 9°C (48°F) to 20°C (68°F). The mountains are often covered in snow. Because the mountains block the rainfall from entering the interior, the rest of the country remains relatively dry in winter.

The high plains just east of the mountains receive about 25 cm (10 in) of rain annually, and the desert receives minimal rainfall, from 0 to 7.6 cm (3 in) annually. Temperatures in the plains and the desert can reach freezing levels in the winter.²³

Rivers and Bodies of Water

The Euphrates River

The Euphrates River rises in Turkey and flows southeast through Syria and into Iraq. It crosses the Turkey-Syria border in northwest Syria (north Kurdistan), flows for 710 km (440 mi) inside Syria, and enters Iraq, where it unites with the Tigris and empties into the Persian Gulf. Since ancient times, the Euphrates (2,800 km, or 1,740 miles in length) has supported several civilizations. The river meets 80% of Syria's water needs.^{24, 25}



*Floating bridge over the Euphrates, northeastern Syria
Flickr / Egisto Sani*

Lake al-Assad and the Euphrates Dam



*Lake al-Assad and the Euphrates Dam
Flickr / Paul Engler*

The huge Euphrates Dam, also called Tabqa Dam after the city of Tabqa, is located on the Euphrates River. The 4 km (2.5 mi) long and 60 m (197 ft) high dam was completed in 1973 with aid from the Soviet Union. A power plant on the dam supplies electricity and irrigation for Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, rural Aleppo, and villages in the Al-Jazīrah region. The dam feeds a reservoir known as Lake al-Assad, named after President Hafez al-Assad. The 80 km (50 mi) long and 8 km (5 mi) wide lake is the largest water reservoir in Syria.²⁶

In 2013, the dam fell into the hands of opposition groups and the Islamic State (IS), and the control room was damaged. During the intense fighting to recapture Raqqa and Tabqa in March 2017, the dam was in danger after air strikes and shelling hit the area. In May 2017, Syrian government forces took back control of the dam and engineers began repair work. A collapse in the dam could have caused catastrophic flooding in the Euphrates valley.^{27, 28, 29}

The Orontes River



The Roman bridge on the Orontes River
Flickr / Egisto Sani

The Asi-Orontes River rises in the hills of north Lebanon and runs northward to Turkey parallel to the coast.³⁰ Most of the river flows through northwestern Syria; it then enters the disputed Hatay Province in Turkey and empties into the Mediterranean Sea. The river is non-navigable, and its tributaries have been dammed in 41 places and rechanneled for irrigation. Syria uses about 70% of the total flow before it reaches the border with Turkey. The Orontes is also a source of water for the

cities of Hama and Homs, where it expands into Lake Homs. In 2009, Syria and Turkey agreed to build a friendship dam on their shared border for the purpose of flood prevention, irrigation, and energy production. The project stopped when the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011.^{31, 32, 33}

The Barada River and Al-Ghuta Oasis

The Barada River rises in the Anti-Lebanon Mountains, flows through the center of Damascus, and disappears into the desert. This small river created the Al-Ghuta Oasis, the fertile beltway of Damascus. The oasis has provided water to the area for thousands of years. An ancient Roman aqueduct still runs along the river. The Barada River supplies 70% of the water for Damascus and its surroundings.^{34, 35, 36}

Since the 1980s, the oasis has shrunk due to suburban encroachment, and the river has been diminished by years of drought and pollution.³⁷ During the civil war, rebel forces gained control of Wadi Barada through which the river flows into the capital. In 2017, officials in Damascus claimed that opposition forces contaminated the river by pouring gasoline into the water. Local residents claimed that aerial bombing of the water processing facility by government and Russian aircraft contaminated the river.³⁸



Barada River, Damascus
Flickr / Shadi HIJAZI

Major Cities

Damascus



View of Damascus
Wikimedia / Aziz1005

Damascus, the capital of Syria, was founded in the third millennium B.C.E. and is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world. Located east of the Anti-Lebanon Mountains on the edge of the Syrian Desert, Damascus was an important cultural and commercial center throughout history. The city is abundant with cultural treasures. One of its most spectacular historical monuments is the eighth-century Great Mosque of the Umayyads. The city is also home to the University of Damascus, the oldest and largest university in the country. The ancient city of Damascus is a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site.^{39, 40}

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Yarmouk camp is the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Syria, located 8 km (5 mi) from the center of Damascus. It was established by the government as an unofficial camp in 1957 and hosted more than 148,000 refugees before 2011.⁴¹ After the breakout of the civil war, the camp became the scene of heavy fighting. Air strikes killed hundreds of civilians and destroyed about 60% of the camp, which was a stronghold of IS jihadists.⁴²

Aleppo

Aleppo (Haleb) is the capital city of Aleppo Governorate in northwestern Syria. Before the civil war, it used to be Syria's most populous city, with more than 2 million residents. Aleppo, like Damascus, is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, with archaeological discoveries pointing to settlements as early as 8000 B.C.E. Hittites, Assyrians, Akkadians, Greeks, Romans, Umayyads, Ayyubids, Mameluks, and Ottomans ruled the city and left their mark on its architecture.



Aleppo Old City
Flickr / Craig Jenkins

The city features a variety of buildings, among them a medieval citadel, the Great Mosque, bazaars, palaces and bathhouses, mosques, cathedrals, and madrassas. Aleppo is famous for its cuisine, handicrafts, poetry, and music and is one of Syria's most industrialized cities. It is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site.^{43, 44, 45}

Aleppo has a mixed population of Sunni Muslims, Alwaites, Armenians, Arabs, Turkmen, and Kurds. From antiquity until the 20th century, the city was an important center of Jewish culture. Beyond the old city, there are many high-rise, modern apartment buildings and wide avenues built to accommodate the city's growing population.⁴⁶

In 2012, Aleppo became one of the main battlegrounds of the civil war. For four years, control of the city was divided between rebel groups and government forces. In December 2016, the government launched a large military campaign to take control of the entire city. The fighting devastated Aleppo. In 2013, the 1,000-year-old minaret of the Umayyad Mosque collapsed after it was struck by shelling. Some neighborhoods were completely destroyed and thousands became refugees.^{47, 48, 49} In 2018, Aleppo began a reconstruction effort.⁵⁰

Homs

Homs is Syria's third largest city and the capital of Homs Governorate. It is located in the fertile agricultural region in central Syria, near the Orontes River, about halfway between Damascus and Aleppo. The history of Homs goes back to the first millennium B.C.E., during Roman rule. For centuries, it served as a trading post on the route linking the Mediterranean with India and China. The city had a thriving agricultural market and was known for its local handicrafts. It declined during Ottoman rule but regained its importance with the revival of the cotton industry, eventually becoming an industrial center boasting the country's largest oil refinery, fertilizer and vegetable oil plants, and a sugar refinery.^{51, 52}



City center and the Old Clock Tower, Homs
Wikimedia / Zozo2kx

The Homs Gap, also known as the “gateway to Syria” is a flat corridor in the Orontes River Valley. It separates the Al-Ansariyyah Mountains from the Anti-Lebanon Mountains. For centuries, the Homs Gap was used as a route from the coast to the interior. Today,

the city of Homs links Syria’s interior with the Mediterranean coast through a network of roads and railways. An oil pipeline also runs through the gap.^{53, 54}

After the onset of the civil war, Homs was a stronghold of the opposition, and gained the name “Capital of the Revolution.” Major offensives by government forces resulted in some of the worst bloodshed of the war and left much of the city in ruin.⁵⁵

Homs, the Palestinian refugee camp, is located within the city. The camp was established in 1949 adjacent to the al-Baath University. More than 22,000 Palestinian refugees, mostly from villages in northern Israel, were registered in the camp before the civil war.⁵⁶

Latakia

Latakia is located about 40 km (25 mi) south of the Turkish border on the Mediterranean Coast. It was founded in 1000 B.C.E. by Phoenician fishermen. The city lies in the midst of an important agricultural region and is linked by road to Aleppo, Tripoli, and Beirut. Most of the city’s historical buildings have been destroyed by earthquakes; the few remaining buildings include a Roman triumphal arch and Corinthian columns known as the Colonnade of Bacchus. The Port of Latakia is Syria’s principal seaport.^{57, 58}



A modern neighborhood in Latakia
Wikimedia / Zozo2kx

There is an unofficial camp for Palestinian refugees in Latakia. The camp was established in 1955 by the Syrian government to accommodate Palestinian refugees from northern Israel. About 10,000 refugees were registered in the camp before the civil war.⁵⁹

An Alawite stronghold, Latakia Province escaped much of the violence that engulfed Syria, but the tourism industry was seriously affected by the ongoing fighting.⁶⁰ The city’s bars, restaurants, cafes, hotels, and beach resorts still attract tourists from Lebanon, off-duty Syrian soldiers, and Russian military personnel, but many hotels were forced to close, and poverty is visible on the streets as more refugees arrived in the city.^{61, 62}

Hama

Hama is located 80 km (50 mi) east of the Mediterranean Sea and is surrounded by rich agricultural land. Located on the banks of the Orontes River, south of Aleppo, the city traces its roots to prehistoric settlements. Over the centuries, it was ruled by Aramaeans, Assyrians, Persians, Macedonians, Seleucids, and Byzantines. The Arabs conquered the city in the 7th century C.E.; the Crusaders captured it in 1108, only to lose it to the Muslims again. Hama serves as a market center for local produce grown in the surrounding countryside. Wool and textile weaving, tanning, flour mills, and cement contribute to the city's economy. The city is famous for its many gardens, watered by large wooden waterwheels constructed in the 14th century.⁶³



View of Hama
Wikimedia Commons

In 1982, members of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood rebelled against the Assad regime. The Hama uprising was brutally suppressed by government forces. During the bloody crackdown, every neighborhood was destroyed or subdued, including a quarter of the Old City, and an estimated 20,000 people were killed.^{64, 65, 66}

During the recent civil war, Hama and its surrounding villages saw intense fighting between government forces and anti-government groups, including the al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front.^{67, 68, 69}

History

Early History

Many empires ruled Syria over the centuries, including the Egyptians, Hittites, Sumerians, Mitanni, Assyrians, Babylonians, Canaanites, Phoenicians, Arameans, Amorites, Persians, Greeks, and Romans. In 637 C.E., Muslim armies entered Damascus, and the city became the capital of the Muslim world until Baghdad took over. The 12th century



The Roman theatre at Bosra, dating from the 2nd c. AD
Flickr / (Ergo)

brought the Christian Crusaders to Greater Syria. The Kurdish warrior Salah al-Din al-Ayubi (Saladin) defeated the Crusaders and took Syria back. Then, in 1260, Mongols invaded Syria. From 1516 until the breakup of the Ottoman Empire in World War I (1914-1918), Syria flourished under the rule of the Ottoman Empire.⁷⁰

The French Mandate

In October 1918, British forces, accompanied by Arab troops led by Emir Feisal, entered Damascus and ended 400 years of Ottoman rule. In 1920, Syria became a French mandate as was agreed between France and Britain in the secret Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, which divided the Arab territories of the Middle East. For the next 20 years, Syrians clamored for independence through protests, uprisings, and elections. Shukri al-Kuwatli was elected the first president of Syria in 1943, but the French continued to maintain military and economic dominance.^{71, 72,73}



*General Gouraud marching in Aleppo, 1920
Wikimedia / Longbow4u*

Independence

In March 1945, Syria became a charter member of the United Nations and a month later joined the Arab League, but France refused to leave before ensuring its interests were protected. Fighting between French troops and Syrian nationalists broke out in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama, and the British threatened to intervene. A UN resolution in early 1946 called on France to leave Syria. On 15 April 1946, the last French troops left the country, and two days later, on 17 April, Syria officially became an independent state. Following independence, Syria experienced years of instability and a series of military coups.⁷⁴



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

al-Din al-Bitar, a Sunni Muslim. The party, whose name means “renaissance,” developed a pan-Arab secular nationalist ideology. A merger with the Arab Socialist Party in 1953 resulted in the creation of the Arab Socialist Baath Party.^{75, 76, 77}

The United Arab Republic

In 1958, Syria joined with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic (UAR); Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt’s president, dissolved all political parties. The union ended three years later in 1961, when Syrian army officers, discontent with Egypt’s domination of the UAR, seized power in Damascus in a military coup and re-established the Syrian Arab Republic.⁷⁸



Quwatli and Nasser at final meeting of Syrian-Egyptian unity talks in Cairo, 1958
Wikimedia Commons

The Baath Revolution

In 1963, the Arab Socialist Baath Party seized power in Syria through a military coup. In 1966, President Amin Hafiz and other civilian leaders of the Baath Party were removed from power and jailed in a coup led by Salah Jadid. Shortly afterward, Major General Hafez al-Assad, a former commander of the air force and long-time Baathist, became the minister of defense.^{79, 80}

In 1967, during the Six Day War, while al-Assad was the minister of defense, Israel seized the Golan Heights from Syria and destroyed most of Syria’s air force. A conflict between Jadid’s civilian wing and al-Assad’s military wing was brewing.⁸¹

The Presidency of Hafez al-Assad (1971-2000)

Hafez al-Assad’s rise to power began to take shape after Syria’s defeat in 1967. As an Alawite, he gained power through his military service. In 1970, he overthrew President Nur al-Din al-Atasi, imprisoned Salah Jadid, and became prime minister. In the 1971 national election, he ran as the only candidate and became president of Syria and the head of the Baath Party.^{82, 83}

Al-Assad strengthened the Syrian military with the help of the Soviet Union. In 1973, Syria and Egypt went to war with Israel, and a year later, as part of the disengagement agreement with Israel, Syria regained some territory in the Golan Heights, which it had lost to Israel in 1967.⁸⁴

In 1975, after civil war erupted in Lebanon between Palestinians and the Lebanese army, al-Assad sent approximately 20,000 troops to intervene on the side of the Lebanese Christians. In 1978, Syria switched its support to the Muslim and Palestinian factions. In February 1982, members of the Muslim Brotherhood revolted against the regime in the city of Hama. Government forces led by Assad's brother, Rifaat, laid siege to the city. For three weeks Hama was bombed, and most of the Old City was destroyed. Thousands of civilians were killed, tortured and executed and the opposition was crushed.^{85, 86}



*Assad and Mustafa Tlass on the Golan front
Wikimedia Commons*

After Israel invaded Lebanon in June 1982, Syrian forces withdrew from some areas but remained in Lebanon. For the next twenty years, Syria exerted control over Lebanese politics. President al-Assad threw his support behind militant Islamist groups, and his government provided funding and training for the Shia militia Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. After al-Assad died of a heart attack in 2000, his son, Bashar al-Assad, ran for the presidency unopposed and won 99.7% of the vote.^{87, 88}

Bashar al-Assad Presidency

When Hafez al-Assad died, the parliament amended the constitution and lowered the minimum age for a president from 40 to 34 so Bashar could take office.

In 2001, Syria redeployed most of its 25,000 troops from Beirut to rural areas. After former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated on 14 February 2004, the United Nations ordered all foreign troops to withdraw from Lebanon, and the United States imposed new sanctions and restrictions on the Syrian regime. By the end of April 2005, Syria's 29-year occupation of Lebanon had ended.^{89, 90}

During the first decade of the 21st century, Syria restored diplomatic relations with Iraq after nearly



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



President Bashar al-Assad meets with U.S. Senator Ted Kaufman in 2009
Wikimedia / Office of Senator Ted Kaufman

25 years, entered in a new dialogue with the European Union, and established diplomatic relations with Lebanon for the first time. President Bashar al-Assad met with high-level U.S. politicians and the French president, attempting to end the diplomatic isolation imposed on Syria by the West.^{91, 92}

In November 2011, Bashar al-Assad appointed a committee to draft a new constitution to replace the constitution from 1973. The new charter allowed

al-Assad to remain in power until 2028, and let his family maintain control of the country's politics indefinitely.⁹³ In 2014, al-Assad won re-election for a third term with 88.7% of the vote. Elections took place in government-controlled areas in the midst of civil war. Many democratic states considered the election illegitimate.^{94, 95,}
⁹⁶ Syria rejected an attempt by Russia to draft a new constitution which would limit presidential terms in office to two consecutive seven-year terms.⁹⁷

Civil War

Waves of unrest and government turmoil, known as the Arab Spring, cascaded across the Middle East in 2011. Syria appeared to be immune to the unrest under the autocratic rule of Bashar al-Assad. However, after the fall of Egyptian president 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 2018.^{98, 99, 100}



Syrian uprising against al-Assad regime, Damascus
Flickr / shamsnn

The main participants in the civil war are the Syrian government, Syrian Kurds, Islamist rebels, the Islamic State, and rebel groups backed by the West. The conflict has also drawn in international players such as Iraq, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia,

Turkey, and the United States.^{101, 102, 103} A particularly grim aspect of the conflict has been the repeated use of chemical weapons, primarily by the al-Assad regime. In August 2013, a sarin gas attack in Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus, killed over 1,400 civilians.¹⁰⁴



Wounded civilians arrive at a hospital in Aleppo, 2012
Wikimedia / AndrewDressel

State Terrorism



ISIL fighters parade through Raqqa in 2014
Wikimedia / Denarivs

Syria has been designated a State Sponsor of Terrorism since December 1979. Syria is a supporter of Hezbollah, and Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad have their headquarters in Damascus. Syria claims that Hamas and Hezbollah are legitimate resistance movements.¹⁰⁵ Since the beginning of the civil war in 2011, the U.S. government has imposed more restrictions on Syria, including a prohibition on investments in the country, exportation or sales of services to Syria, and importation of petroleum from Syria by any U.S. person.¹⁰⁶

Government

Syria is a centralized republic. One of the most repressive regimes in the world, it has been run by the al-Assad family since 1970. The secular Baath Party has governed Syria without interruption since the 1960s. In 2018, Freedom House gave Syria a score of “Not Free” in the categories of freedom, political rights, and civil liberties.¹⁰⁷

According to the constitution, presidential candidates must be Muslim and nominated by the Baath Party. The president is the head of state, elected for a seven-year term. The president is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and secretary general of the Baath Party. The president appoints the vice president, the prime minister, and the Council of Ministers. The president has the power to declare war, amend the constitution, issue laws, and appoint supreme court judges. The next presidential election is due in 2021.¹⁰⁸



*Bashar al-Assad, the Regional Secretary of the Syrian Regional Branch of Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party and State President
Wikimedia / Fabio Rodrigues Pozzebom / Abr*

The executive branch consists of the prime minister and the Council of Ministers. The prime minister is the head of the government. The council ratifies laws but has no power to oppose the president.¹⁰⁹

The legislative branch is represented by the Majlis al-Shaab (People's Assembly), which consists of 250 representatives elected to four-year terms.¹¹⁰
¹¹¹ In 2016, elections were held for the council in government-controlled areas. The Baath party took 200 of the 250 seats.¹¹²

The judicial branch consists of civil, criminal, military, security, and religious courts. The legal code is based on French law and the constitution of 1973. Religious courts cover family law. Matters pertaining to Muslims are judged according to Muslim legal code. Religious tolerance can be traced back to the Ottoman Empire when non-Muslims were exempted from following Muslim law. The High Judicial Court consists of the president and senior civil judges who oversee the legislative branch.¹¹³

Voters must be 18 years old or older. The law prohibits absentee voting and voting by proxy; therefore, refugees and others who live outside Syria cannot vote.¹¹⁴

Media

The constitution provides for freedom of speech, including for the press, but these rights are severely restricted in government-controlled areas, as the government often detains, arrests, and harasses journalists and other writers for material deemed critical of the state. The government and Islamists routinely target and kill local and foreign journalists, mostly those who cover politics and human rights abuses.^{115, 116}



*A newspaper stand
Flickr / Alper Çuğun*

Media outlets are forbidden to operate without permission from the interior ministry. The government exercises control over local print and broadcast media, and reporters must reveal their sources in response to government requests or be punished. Some semi-independent periodicals owned and produced by individuals affiliated with the government can be published. The government owns some radio and most local television stations, and the information ministry monitors radio and television news and entertainment programs and jams some Arab networks. Domestic and foreign publications are heavily censored. Publication or distribution of any material deemed threatening or embarrassing to the government is prohibited. Censorship is usually greater for materials in Arabic.^{117, 118}

According to the International Telecommunications Union, in 2018, 45% of households in Syria had internet access at home. Many Syrians also use satellite dishes.^{119, 120} The government controls and restricts the internet and monitors email and social media accounts. It censors opposition websites and cuts internet connections, sometimes shutting down the internet and mobile phone networks. It employs sophisticated technologies and computer specialists to filter and surveil email and social media accounts of detainees and activists.^{121, 122}



*Satellite dishes on the roof, Aleppo
Flickr / Hugo van Tilborg*

Economy



*Syria's Rumeilan Oil Fields
Wikimedia / Aram33*

Prior to the civil war, the Syrian economy was based on oil and natural gas, mining (limestone, basalt, phosphate ore, asphalt, gypsum, and salt), textile manufacturing (wool, cotton, nylon and silk), and agriculture. The majority of Syrian farms (about 95%) were privately owned, but marketing and transportation were and still are state-operated. Syria's main agricultural products included cotton, grain, lentils, olives, sugar beets,

chickpeas, milk, eggs, beef, mutton, and poultry. Industrial products included pharmaceuticals, plywood, batteries, bottles, glass, and cement.^{123, 124}



*Livestock farming
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

The civil war has brought Syria's economy to a near collapse. Between 2010 and 2016 the economy declined by 70%. The finance and insurance sectors declined; activity in mining, manufacturing, and utilities decreased, and wholesale and retail trade contracted. The conflict devastated livestock farming and the production of olive oil and cereals.¹²⁵ At the same time, agriculture assumed a bigger role in the economy. International sanctions, the escalating cost of war, a drop in global oil prices, disrupted oil production, damaged infrastructure, reduced fuel subsidies, dwindling foreign exchange reserves, trade deficits, high inflation, a decrease in the value of the Syrian pound, and a decrease in household purchasing power all contributed to the destruction of the economy. In order to survive, the Assad regime relies on Iran for oil and credit to import commodities and equipment and on loans from Russia.^{126, 127, 128}

In 2016, the inflation rate reached 52%. In May 2017, the inflation rate was 27.1% as government forces began to take control of larger areas. The official unemployment rate was 15%.¹²⁹

In 2017, the World Bank published a report on the impact of the conflict on the Syrian economy. One of the key findings showed that about 60% of the Syrian population lives in extreme poverty. Furthermore, since the beginning of the war, the cumulative losses in gross domestic product amount to USD 226 billion, about four times the 2010 GDP.¹³⁰ A new war economy emerged in rebel-controlled and Kurdish areas where international aid is critical.¹³¹

Ethnic Groups

Arabs

Arabs are the largest ethnic group in Syria, consisting of 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 Syria's civil war.¹³²

According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), there are about 440,000 Palestinian Arabs in Syria in 12 refugee camps, down from 560,000 in 2011.^{133, 134}

The Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp, located in southern Damascus, is the largest. The camp has seen heavy fighting during the Syrian civil war. In 2018, during one week of violence,^{3, 500} Palestinians fled the camp.^{135, 136, 137} The Syrian Arab population also consists of Bedouins, who are tribal, nomadic herders.^{138, 139, 140}



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

After World War II, Arab nationalism and the Baath Party in Syria cultivated a national identity that was secular and synonymous with Arab identity. The defeat of Syria in several Arab-Israeli wars left Syrians disillusioned with the secular government, and many embraced the Muslim Brotherhood, a religious Sunni political organization. Hafez al-Assad tried to counter this sentiment by adopting policies that appealed to both parties, using religious language, framing his policies in a religious context, and visiting 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 relies on international Shia militias, many of which aren't Arab, to defeat the largely Arab-Sunni rebels.^{141, 142, 143}

Kurds

Most of the Kurds speak a Kurdish language (Kurmanji), and they are primarily Sunni Muslims but not Arabs. 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 considered foreign by the Syrian government. These foreign Kurds became ineligible for government services, including education. The Syrian government

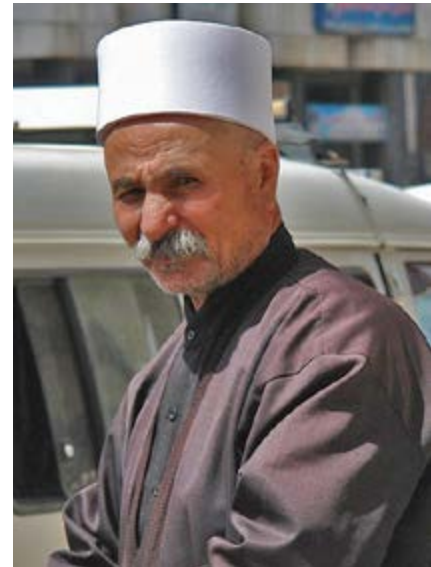


*Kurdish YPG Fighter
Flickr / Kurdishstruggle*

restricted the use of the Kurdish language and Kurdish media. One of the prominent Kurdish militias is the People's Protection Units (YPG), which is under the control of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). During the Syrian 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 as allies of NATO, apart from Turkey.^{144, 145} The Kurds recognize women's rights and do not discriminate against other religious or ethnic groups.¹⁴⁶

Druze

The term Druze refers to an ethnicity and a religion. Druze communities lie throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Druze religious beliefs include 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. Most of the Druze live in the south of the country. The government allows the Druze population to operate public schools.^{147, 148, 149} Although there were Druze uprisings in 1860 and rebellions against the French Mandate government on two occasions, the Druze adopted a policy of neutrality and self-defense in the Syrian civil war. As a result of these policies, the Druze communities of southern Syria have suffered minimally from the conflict.^{150, 151}



*Druze man of Suweida
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

Turkmen

The Syrian Turkmen (also called Turkoman) population is concentrated in northern Syria and is estimated to be between 500,000 and 3.5 million. The Turkmen community came to Syria from central Asia in the 11th century C.E. The Turkmen community

adheres to Sunni Islam. The Syrian government adopted policies that discriminate against the Turkmen population, 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.^{152, 153, 154}

Other Ethnic Groups



*The memorial to the Armenian Genocide at the Martyrs' Memorial Church of Deir ez-Zor
Flickr / Israel Defense Forces*

The Armenian Christian minority is descended from Armenian refugees, who escaped 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. There were about 100,000 Armenians in Syria before the start of the Syrian civil war, but only about 30,000 remain. The Armenian community consists of mainly upper-class professionals. Many Armenians have sought refuge in their historic homeland of Armenia.^{155, 156, 157}

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 Syrian civil war. Assyrians speak Syriac, a language is related to Aramaic, and are predominately Christian.

They have been targets of the Islamic State. Assyrian militias fight alongside the Syrian Democratic Forces.^{158, 159, 160}

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 czarist government. The Circassian community is primarily Sunni Muslim.^{161, 162}

The Syrian Dom population ranges between 35,000 and 70,000, but many of the Dom claim to be of other ethnicities in order to avoid discrimination. The Dom, like the Roma, are thought to have originated in India. 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 they have traditionally been nomadic. The Dom population has lived on the fringe of society throughout the region, often in poverty, because they lack education or employment opportunities due to discrimination.¹⁶³

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Arabic-Levantine Cultural Orientation

Chapter 1 | Profile

Assessment

1. The Barada River, which flows through the center of Damascus, is the longest river in Syria.
2. Latakia is an important coastal city in northwest Syria.
3. Syria gained independence after the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of WWII.
4. The city of Hama was partially destroyed during an uprising of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982.
5. Syria is a host country for thousands of Palestinian refugees.

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



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

Chapter 2 | Arabic-Levantine Cultural Orientation

Religion

Introduction

Syria has no official state religion, although the constitution states that the president must be Muslim and that sharia (Islamic Law) is a principal source of legislation. Syrians are predominantly Muslim (90%). The Muslims of Syria are divided into several sects with the majority being Sunnis (74%). Muslim religious minorities include Alawites, Ismaili, Shiites, and Druze. Syria's Christian community is one of the oldest in the world, going back to the birth of Christianity. The majority of Christians belong to Eastern denominations such as the Greek and the Syrian Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Armenian Apostolic Church. Catholics affiliated

with Rome include the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, the Syrian Maronite Church of Antioch, and the Armenian, Syrian, and Chaldean Catholic Churches.^{1, 2}

Syria had a large, thriving Jewish community going back more than 2,000 years. After the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, persecution drove thousands of Jews to Israel and other countries. By 2015, only 50 Jews were living in Damascus and eight elderly women in Aleppo. Jews were the only minority whose religion was added to passports and identification cards.^{3, 4, 5}

Although the constitution promises to ensure freedom to perform religious rituals and respect all religions, the government limits religious activities, closes mosques between prayers and monitors sermons. Since the insurgency began in 2011, some minority groups have attacked Alawites. The motive for these attacks was the belief that the Alawite-controlled government favored the Alawite minority. The government and its Shia Muslim militia responded by targeting the Sunni population. Many towns and villages that were ethnically and religiously diverse became more homogenous as people from minority groups fled their homes. Some minorities consider the government as their protectors.⁶

According to the CIA World Factbook, of the majority of Muslims who practice Islam in Syria, 74% were Sunni. The remaining Muslim sects—the Alawites, Ismaili, and Shia—accounted for 13%. The Druze represented about 3%. The remaining 10% were Christian.⁷

Major Religions

Islam

Islam reached Syria in 636 CE when Islamic forces conquered Damascus. At the time, followers of different sects of Christianity, Judaism, and paganism inhabited the region. By the time the Ottomans conquered Syria in 1516, most of Syria was populated by Sunnis, Druze, Ismaili, Twelver Shiites, and Alawai (*Nusayris*) with a small population of Christians and Jews.⁸

Islam was founded by the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century CE. Muslims



*The Al-Otrush Mosque, a Sunni mosque
Wikimedia / Bernard Gagnon*

believe that the Prophet Muhammad, who died in 632 CE, received revelations from Allah while meditating in the desert. Soon after Muhammad died, Muslims split into two sects over the question of succession. The Shia named religious leaders from the descendants of Muhammad's family beginning with Ali, the prophet's cousin and son-in-law, who was considered the rightful leader. The Sunnis elected their religious leaders. Another disagreement between the Shiites and the Sunnis involved the Shia attribution of divine qualities to their imams. The Sunnis viewed this practice as a violation of the Islamic belief in one god. There are various Shia sects, with the largest, known as "Twelvers," who believe that their 12th imam, known as the *Mahdi* or Messiah, was taken into hiding by Allah and that he will return at the end of the world.^{9, 10, 11}



Muslim praying at a mosque
Flickr / Thomas Stellmach

is *sawm*, which stands for fasting during the month of Ramadan. The fifth pillar is performing the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, once in a lifetime for those who are physically and financially capable.¹²

Muslims adhere to the five pillars of faith, which are the core beliefs and practices of Islam. The first is the *shahada*, the basic declaration of the faith, expressed by repeating the phrase "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet." The second pillar is *salat*, which stands for prayer: Muslims face Mecca and pray five times a day at appointed hours (dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and mid-evening). The third pillar is *zakat*, which stands for charity. The fourth pillar

The Quran is the sacred text of Muslims. If copies become old or damaged, they have to be disposed of with care. It cannot be burned with trash or other items. The Quran can be buried wrapped in cloth and interred where people do not walk.^{13, 14}

Alawites/Alawi Muslims

The Alawites, a secretive and esoteric offshoot of Shia Islam, revere Ali, the cousin, and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammed. Alwaites have their own trinity, which includes the Prophet Mohammed, his successor Ali, and Salman al-Farsi, an early Persian convert to Islam. Alwaites celebrate Muslim, Persian and Christian holidays, such as Christmas and Easter. They believe in reincarnation and celebrate their

mass with wine and bread. Alawites can drink alcohol and women do not cover their hair. They have their own religious texts and do not adhere to the five pillars of Islam.¹⁵

The majority of Alawites live in Syria, comprising about 10% of the population. There are some Alawites communities in Lebanon and Turkey. In Syria, most Alawites live in the mountain region of the northwest, near Latakia, and the cities of Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs.¹⁶



An Alawit Priest
Flickr / Charles Roffey

For centuries, the Alawites, who used to be called *Nusayris*, were Syria's poorest and most marginalized people. Until the 20th century, several Sunni clerics denounced them as heretics and issued *fatwas* against them, which made many Alawites fearful of Sunni domination. The 1970 military coup, in which Hafez al-Assad, an Alawite, seized power and became president of Syria, had made this small Muslim sect disproportionately powerful in Syria. After the fall of Saddam Hussain, Assad's Alawite regime became the only ruling minority government in the Middle East.^{17, 18}

Druze

In Syria, members of the Druze ethnoreligious group are concentrated in the southern region of Jabal al-Druze (The Druze Mountain) and its regional capital of Sweida, and in some villages in the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights. In Lebanon, Druze live in the mountains. The religion of the Druze is an offshoot of Ismaili Shiism. The Druze do not follow the five pillars of Islam or fast during Ramadan. They believe in reincarnation and that the sixth caliph of Egypt's Ismaili Fatimid Dynasty was a reincarnation of God. Druze reject other religions, maintain the secrecy of their faith, and are closed to outsiders, including people who want to convert. Druze call themselves *muwahhidūn* (Unitarians).^{19, 20, 21}



Druze woman of Suweida
Flickr / Charles Roffey

During the civil war in Syria, most of the Druze community maintained neutrality. In the southeastern region, the majority Druze population was able to escape the violence until mid-2018, when Islamic State militants carried out several suicide attacks on Druze villages, killing more than two hundred people.²² Fear of Sunni radicals who view the Druze as heretical discouraged participation in the anti-government struggle. Lebanese Druze ally themselves with Sunni rebels because Sunnis are the majority group in the region.^{23, 24}

Yazidism

Yazidis are a Kurdish ethnoreligious minority. Yazidis concentrate in Kurdish areas in northern Syria around Aleppo and near the Turkish border. Yazidism combines a mix of beliefs from Islam, pre-Islamic traditions, Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity into a distinct religion. Yazidis have a rich oral tradition by which they pass on their beliefs and their scriptures, which include the Yazidi Book of Revelation and the Black Book. Yazidism is an insular religion: Adherents are born into the faith and converts are not accepted. Yazidis face the sun when they pray at noon, sunset and sunrise; their holy day is Wednesday and Saturday is the day of rest.^{25, 26, 27}



Yazidi cemetery
Wikimedia / RAFFI YOUREDJIAN

Yazidism teaches that the Yazidi are decedents of Adam only, whereas the rest of the population is descended from Adam and Eve. Yazidis worship Yasdan or Yezdan, the Supreme Being and creator of the Earth. Yasdan is so exalted that he is worshiped through seven intermediary spirits; the peacock angel named Melek Taus who is the most powerful of the seven spirits is a force of good. Rules governing purity are an essential aspect of Yazidi life.^{28, 29}

Because of their beliefs, some Muslims characterize Yazidis as heretics and devil worshipers. In 2014, Yazidis of Sinjar in Iraq were massacred, their women and girls raped and sold into sex slavery by ISIS fighters. Hundreds of Yazidi women and girls were captured and taken to Syria, where they were held captive in the city of Raqqa. In 2018, ISIS fighters attacked Yazidis in northern Syria, changed the names of their villages and forced them to convert to Islam.³⁰

Christians



*A Maronite Christian Church in Aleppo
Flickr / Jillian C. York*

Christians arrived in Syria during the early years of the first century CE. Today, Christians make up about 10% of the population, with thousands displaced by the civil war. The main differences between the various Christian denominations revolve around the question of the divine nature of Christ.^{31, 32}

The largest Christian denomination in Syria is the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch with its Patriarchal See in Damascus going back to 1342. The Greek Catholic Church (Melkites) separated from the Greek Orthodox Church in 1724. The Ottomans persecuted and massacred Melkites in Aleppo in the early 1800s. The Armenian Church is divided into Orthodox (Gregorian) and Catholic. Most Armenians live in Aleppo, Jazira, and Latakia. The Armenian Catholic Patriarch lives in Lebanon.³³ There are 25,000 Maronite Catholics in Syria, mainly in Aleppo, Latakia, and Damascus. Maronites celebrate mass in Syriac-Aramaic and Arabic. The majority of Maronites live in Lebanon.^{34, 35}

Religion and Government

Syria has no official state religion, but the constitution requires that the president be Muslim. Moreover, it stipulates that Islamic law is a principal source of legislation. The law also restricts proselytizing and conversion of Muslims to other religions but recognizes conversion to Islam. The government enforces protection of religious freedom, but some groups such as Jehovah's Witness and Salafists are outlawed.³⁶



*A Syrian Muslim wearing Niqab
Flickr / Neil Hester*

In 2011, as Syria sank into a sectarian civil war, laws related to religion were enforced only in areas controlled by the government. In the regions that fell into the hands of Islamic State forces and other extremist groups, the new rulers imposed religious laws that did not always agree with the government's interpretation of religious law

or with the constitution.^{37, 38} For example, in areas controlled by Islamic State in northern Syria, men were forced to grow a beard and women were forced to cover their faces with the niqab.³⁹

In areas controlled by the government, Christian and Druze minorities are allowed to follow their own laws in issues relates to marriage and divorce. Muslims must follow sharia law as implemented by government-appointed religious judges on matters pertaining to personal status.⁴⁰ Muslim women cannot marry Christian men, but Muslim men can marry Christian women. In interreligious affairs, sharia takes precedence. The government’s interpretation of sharia determines inheritance issues for everyone except for Christians. Christian women who marry Muslims may have inheritance rights if they convert to Islam. Birth certificates include religious affiliation, but passports and identity cards do not.⁴¹



*St George Syriac Orthodox Church, Damascus
Flickr / Jan Smith*



*Inside the mosque in the Souk al Sheik
Flickr / Noor Nahas*

The government monitors religious groups and closes mosques between prayers. Preaching is not allowed, and proselytizing is discouraged. Religious groups have to register with the government, and all their meetings require permits. Recognized religious groups, such as Jewish, Christian, and Muslim are exempt from real estate taxes on religious buildings and personal property taxes on official vehicles. Christian and Muslim religious leaders are exempt from military service.⁴²

Government-run public schools are nonsectarian. Religious instruction is mandatory and covers Islam and Christianity only. Teachers and curricula have to be approved by the government. Some Christian and Druze communities can operate public schools.⁴³ Kurds can send their children to schools and universities but are ineligible to receive a degree that documents their academic achievements.⁴⁴

Islamist “Salafist” groups are banned in Syria. The Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed

by Hafez al-Assad. Membership in the Muslim Brotherhood is punishable by death or imprisonment.^{45, 46}

Members from the Alawite minority, to which Assad belongs, hold a higher status in all leadership positions including the military and other security services.⁴⁷

Influence of Religion on Daily Life



*Muslims reading Koran in front of the mosque, H'alab
Flick / Damian Bere*

Religion is prominent in the daily lives of Syrians. In areas that are not affected by the civil war, on Friday, shops are usually closed, and people attend mosques. The Muslim call to prayer can be heard five times a day from the minarets (towers) of mosques. Churches are also well attended.⁴⁸

Besides following organized religion, many Syrians follow other spiritual practices. Many villages have a shrine for a saint, who may have been a local person who led a moral life. Members of different faiths worship at the same shrine sometimes, praying for cures or fulfillment of wishes.⁴⁹

Islamic traditions have many rules about food and drinks and Muslims in Syria live by these rules. For example, Muslims can eat shrimp if they were caught alive, but cannot eat lobsters, turtles, amphibians, snails, or crayfish. Muslims are forbidden to drink alcoholic drinks such as wine, beer, and everything that causes intoxication; they are allowed to eat halal meat (permissible meat) which comes from an animal that is permitted to eat such as cow, sheep or chicken, and slaughtered in accordance with Islamic laws.⁵⁰ Syrian refugees who find themselves living in non-Muslim majority countries find it hard to buy halal meat.⁵¹

Religion and Gender

The Syrian constitution guarantees gender equality. However, personal status laws that govern marriage, divorce, and inheritance are discriminatory to women as well as laws concerning retirement, citizenship, and social security. Some personal status laws follow Islamic law regardless of the religion practiced by the people involved in the case. For example, if a man and a woman commit adultery, the woman's punishment would be more severe than that of the man's.⁵²



Syrian women
Flickr / Charles Roffey

Before the war, women and girls were able to participate in public life, work outside the home, go to school, and exercise freedom of movement all over the country. Since 2012, militants from the extremist groups ISIS and Jabat al-Nusra and other opposition groups took control of areas in north and northeastern Syria and imposed discriminatory restrictions on females based on their own interpretation of sharia. Women and girls were forced to wear the hijab (headscarves) and *abaya*

(full-length robe) and were not allowed to wear makeup, move in public without a male relative, attend school, teach, and work. In some areas, hair salons were closed, and women were removed from local councils.⁵³

In areas that are not controlled by extremist groups, women wear varying styles of clothing in public. Some may choose to wear the hijab, but such decisions are a matter of personal choice, although social pressure may play some role in these decisions.⁵⁴ In 2010, Assad's government imposed a ban on wearing the niqab, the black veil that exposes only the eyes, in schools. A year later the ban was lifted in an attempt to appease religious conservatives.^{55, 56, 57}



Muslim women with abaya in Damascus
Flickr / Michal Huniewicz

Since Muslim men are allowed to marry four women on the condition that they can provide for them, polygamy is legal in Syria; however, it is not commonly practiced. As the civil war continues to rage in some regions and men die in battle or go missing, the rates of polygamy are climbing. Women who lose their husbands or face economic hardship enter a polygamous marriage as a way to protect themselves and religious tribunals bypass restrictions on polygamy to help these women.⁵⁸

Women can own and manage land and other property; however, religious and cultural norms impede these rights, especially in rural areas.⁵⁹

Religious Holidays

Ramadan

One of the most important religious holidays is the month of Ramadan, which commemorates Muhammad receiving God’s revelation, the Quran, while meditating in the desert. The actual date of the holiday changes each year because Muslims observe their holidays according to the lunar calendar, which is shorter than the solar calendar. Under the solar calendar, Ramadan begins 11 days earlier each year. Ramadan is held on the ninth month of the Muslim lunar calendar. In 2018, Ramadan began at sunset on 15 May.^{60, 61}

During Ramadan, Muslims fast every day from dawn to dusk and abstain from other pleasures such as smoking during daylight. Fasting is seen as a physical and spiritual cleansing process that strengthens self-discipline and improves the self. Only the elderly, the sick, pregnant and nursing women, and young children are exempt from the fast. Muslims break the fast with a sip of water and a few dates. Non-Muslims should not eat, drink, or smoke in public during this time. Such behavior would be construed as rude and inconsiderate.⁶²

Muslims celebrate Ramadan with great joy and anticipation. Each evening after the first stars are visible in the night sky; the fast is broken with a lavish meal called iftar. The extended family gathers to pray, read the Quran, socialize, and eat late into the night. This is also the time to give charity to the poor (zakat), exchange visits with friends and neighbors, and reconcile differences. Because of these late-night social events, shops stay open late during Ramadan and markets are packed with shoppers. In the cities, people decorate the façades of their homes and mosques serve large iftar meals. Non-Muslims in Damascus and other cities interact with Muslims and come to listen to Muslim chants.^{63, 64}



*Iftar table in Ramadan
Flickr /Omar.Hafez*

As the civil war continues to rage in Syria, the holy month of Ramadan is no longer celebrated with the same joy and excitement in many areas. Violence and poverty are rampant, essential goods are too expensive because of food shortages, many families are displaced, broken apart, or in mourning of lost relatives, and communities are shattered.^{65, 66}

Eid al-Fitr

Muslims celebrate the end of Ramadan with a great feast, *Eid al-Fitr* (festival of breaking the fast) which lasts three days. People decorate their houses with ribbons, wear new clothing, exchange gifts such as sweets and toys, and visit friends. Local fairs are also held during this feast, replete with carnival rides and fireworks. Music can be heard late into the night as Syrian Muslims take this opportunity to celebrate the good things in life.^{67, 68}



Eid celebration in Syria
Flickr / Michal Huniewicz

In May 2018, Turkey opened a border crossing with Syria to allow thousands of Syrian refugees to return to their homes for the holiday. Those who wished to go back to Turkey had to return before July 26 when Turkey closed the border crossing. Turkey hosts 3 million refugees from Syria.⁶⁹

Eid al-Adha

Eid al-Adha, the Feast of the Sacrifice, is Islam's second major festival. It follows *Eid al-Fitr* and is the holier of the two holidays. This holiday falls on the 10th day of the 12th month, the most sacred month of the Islamic lunar year and takes place during the height of the hajj, which is the pilgrimage to Mecca. This celebration commemorates the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son Ishmael to God. The sighting of the crescent moon determines the timing of the holiday.^{70, 71}

During this celebration, Muslims dress in their best clothing and perform the obligatory Eid prayers. To commemorate God's test of Ibrahim, Muslims who can afford to do so sacrifice a sheep, a goat or a cow. One-third of the meat is given to the poor, and the rest is shared with family and friends. People also exchange gifts, donate to charities, and give money to children. The common greeting during the holiday is "Eid mubarak," which means "blessed Eid."^{72, 73}

▶ Happy Eid!

Visitor: kul seneh wo inte saalem!

Happy Eid!

Local: wo inte saalem

Happy Eid to you too.

Exchange 1

Christmas and Easter

Syrian Christians celebrate Christmas and Easter with church services, family get-togethers, and special dinners. In some cities, Christians erect a Christmas tree in Christian majority neighborhoods and decorate it with ornaments and Christmas lights. On Christmas Eve, children leave their shoes outside to be filled with gifts and sweets by a camel.^{74, 75}



Christmas celebrations
Flickr / Moud Barthez

In Damascus, worshippers parade the street with an icon of Jesus on Easter and children wear their best clothes. However, Easter week, which was usually a public celebration in Syria, is becoming a subdued event as the coexistence of Christians and Muslims is threatened by the long civil war.⁷⁶

In Aleppo, after government forces took back the city in 2016, Christians celebrated Christmas by lighting a large Christmas tree for the first time in five years, and dozens of worshippers attended Christmas Eve Mass at the local cathedral.⁷⁷



Christmas decorations, Al Qanawat, Damascus
Flickr / Charles Roffey

In Homs, before the civil war, Orthodox, Armenian, Maronite, Catholic, and Anglican Christians lived peacefully with their Muslim neighbors. During Christmas, Muslims greeted Christians with “Eid Milad Saeed” or “Milad Majid” (Arabic for “Merry Christmas”), visited churches during the holiday, and had Christmas trees in their homes. Santa Claus, called Noel Baba in Arabic, brought small presents to children. During the shelling of the city, most of the city’s Christians were forced to flee. At the end of the siege, Christian families were allowed to return, but many Muslims were barred from the old city.⁷⁸

In Homs, residents celebrate a unique Muslim-Christian holiday called Sweet Thursday or Thursday of the Saints and prepare special Homs sweets.⁷⁹

Buildings of Worship



*Umayyad Mosque in Damascus
Flickr / Игорь М*

There are several famous mosques and shrines in Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, and Homs. One of the most notable mosques in Syria is the Great Mosque of Damascus also called Umayyad Mosque. This mosque was built by the Umayyad Caliph on the site of a first-century Hellenic temple dedicated to Jupiter. The Umayyad Mosque still contains a shrine dedicated to John the Baptist.^{80, 81, 82}

Churches in the Christian quarter of Damascus represent the various Christian denominations of Syria. The Chapel of St. Paul is dedicated to the saint (formerly Saul of Tarsus) who preached in Damascus in the first century.⁸³

During the seven years of the civil war, more than a thousand mosques and over 30 churches were destroyed by airstrikes, artillery or deliberate attacks.⁸⁴ During the battle for eastern Aleppo, the 12th century Great Umayyad Mosque was partially destroyed. In 2014, a government offensive destroyed most of the mosques and churches in Homs including the Umm al Zinar Church, which dates back to the first century CE. ISIS militants destroyed the Uwais al-Qarni Mosque in Raqqa and other sites they deemed offensive to their interpretation of Islam. In March 2017, a U.S. warplane accidentally hit a mosque in a village near Aleppo killing dozens of worshippers.^{85, 86, 87}



*Old church in Damascus
Flickr / Dwinton*

In 2014, Syrian Arab Army forces destroyed 400-year-old Eliyahu Hanabi (Elijah the Prophet) Synagogue, also called the Jobar Synagogue, in the Jobar suburb of Damascus. The synagogue was a repository of hundreds of irreplaceable texts and cultural treasures, including hundreds-years-old Torah scrolls.⁸⁸

Behavior in Places of Worship

A visitor who wished to enter a mosque should ask for permission. Some mosques are out of bounds to tourists and non-Muslims. Conservative clothing should always be worn in a mosque.

When in a mosque, the face, hands, and feet are washed according to preordained rituals. Shoes and hats should be removed before entering a mosque or even a shrine. Do not point the feet in the direction of Mecca.



*Shoes and hats should be removed before entering a mosque
Flickr / lokha*

One should not touch any books or banners while in a mosque. It is also not acceptable to talk to those who are praying or ask them questions while they are praying. Similarly, do not walk in front of someone praying; this is thought to invalidate their prayers.^{89, 90}

▶ May I enter the mosque?

Visitor:	mumken foot 'al jaame'?	May I enter the mosque?
Local:	eh	Yes.

Exchange 2

▶ Do I need to cover my head?

Visitor:	beHtaaj ghaTee raasee?	Do I need to cover my head?
Local:	eh	Yes.

Exchange 3

▶ Must I take off my shoes inside the mosque?

Visitor:	laazem ishlaH SubaaTee jowaat il jaame'?	Must I take off my shoes inside the mosque?
Local:	eh	Yes.

Exchange 4

▶ **When do you pray?**

Visitor:	imtaa betSaloo?	When do you pray?
Local:	menSalee wa-t iDh Dhuhur	We pray at noon.

Exchange 5



*St George Syriac Orthodox Church in Damascus
Wikimedia / krebsmaus07*

When visiting an Eastern Orthodox Church, it is also appropriate to dress conservatively, with arms and legs covered, and to speak softly. In these churches, it is forbidden to go behind the decorated screen that separates the sanctuary and the nave. While in a church, men may have to remove any head coverings; women should cover their heads with a scarf while in a church. Crossing the leg while sitting in a church is considered impolite, and punctuality is essential. Visitors should not enter the church when the priest leaves the altar and faces the congregation or the altar or during the reading of the Epistle or the Gospel.^{91, 92}

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Chapter 2 | Religion

Assessment

1. The Druze are an oppressed religious minority in Syria.
2. Mixed marriages are illegal in Syria.
3. Polygamy is legal in Syria.
4. Muslim women are not allowed to wear the *niqab* in government-run schools.
5. Since the beginning of the civil war, Islamist militants and government forces destroyed hundreds of mosques.

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



*Syrians marching during the funeral of Mohamed Ammar
Flickr / Freedom House*

Chapter 3 | Arabic-Levantine Cultural Orientation

Traditions

Introduction

Syria has a long tradition of tolerance and pluralism. For centuries, the majority of Muslim Arabs lived in peace next to their non-Arab and Christian neighbors. While the civil war rages, escalating sectarian tensions, most Syrians remain respectful of the different ethnoreligious groups.¹

As in other Arab countries, Syrians place a high value on religion, tradition, family, education, and honor. Although a majority of Syrians are Sunni Arabs, ethnic and religious minorities such as Kurds, Armenians, Circassians, Assyrians, and Christians can maintain their traditions and languages.^{2, 3}

Syrians have a reputation for being friendly and hospitable people. They are very sociable and often go out together in groups. They live in decorated houses, and their homes are lively with music and conversation. Food is a central part of social interactions.^{4, 5}

Religion plays an essential role in the lives of Syrians, whose fundamental values and customs follow Islam. Men are the authority figures in a family setting, particularly in rural areas. Women are more likely to be responsible for taking care of the family. Elderly people are highly valued and respected in Syrian households.⁶

Formulaic Codes of Politeness

Interactions between people begin with extended greetings and inquiries into each other’s health and that of their family. Men should avoid asking specifically about the women in the family, but it is appropriate to ask about the family in general. When meeting someone for the first time, use formal language and address people by their professional titles. Being less formal with young people than with elders is appropriate.^{7, 8}



*Friends greeting
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

▶ Good morning.		
Visitor:	SabaaH il Khayr	Good morning.
Local:	SabaaH il Kheyraat	Good morning.

Exchange 6

A handshake often accompanies a greeting between men, sometimes a hug or a kiss on both cheeks. Bowing with the right hand placed over the heart conveys respect and affection. Foreigners should limit their physical contact to a handshake. Shaking a woman’s hand is not appropriate unless she initiates it. Men usually greet women by placing their hand on their heart and saying “hello” or “good morning.”^{9, 10}

► **Good afternoon.**

Visitor:	masaa il Khayr	Good afternoon.
Local:	masaa il Khayraat	Good afternoon.

Exchange 7

When entering a shop, greet the shopkeepers and say a few words, in Arabic or in English. Although many shopkeepers know some English, they appreciate the courtesy and goodwill.¹¹

Syrian men and women enjoy animated conversation in groups. Speaking in a loud voice does not signify anger. Women gather in parks or other common areas to chat while children are playing. Groups of friends walking or sitting together will be mostly of the same sex.¹²



*Men chatting at the store
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

► **Good evening.**

Visitor:	masaa il Khayr	Good evening.
Local:	masaa il Khayraat	Good evening.

Exchange 8

► **Good night.**

Visitor:	tuSbaH 'ala Khayr	Good night.
Local:	wo inte min ahluh	Good night.

Exchange 9

► **How are you?**

Visitor:	shlonak?	How are you?
Local:	'aal ikteer	Fine, very well.

Exchange 10

Kissing or holding hands in public is only acceptable between members of the same sex.¹³

▶ Are you doing well? (informal)		
Visitor:	marHabaa sayed shaamee	Hi, Mr. Shaamee.
Local:	ahlayn	Hello!
Visitor:	shlon aHwaalak, imneeH?	Are you doing well?
Local:	eh	Yes.

Exchange 11

▶ How is your family?		
Visitor:	shlon ahlak?	How is your family?
Local:	imnaaH, shukran	They are doing fine, thank you.

Exchange 12

Visitors should avoid talking about sensitive and controversial conversation topics, such as religion or politics, Israel, the situation in Syria or the president. It is not appropriate to joke about death, illness, or poverty.^{14, 15}

Hospitality and Gift Giving

A Syrian family may invite a guest to dinner or to spend a day or two in the family's home. Certain obligations are imposed on the guest if he or she accepts. Besides respecting the traditions in the home, the guest should not refuse any visits that the family arranges. The family, for instance, may wish to introduce the guest to the neighbors. Such visits should be seen as an honor and not rejected.¹⁶



*Dinner invitation, Halab
Flickr / Thomas Stellmach*

▶ **I appreciate your hospitality.**

Visitor:	mamnoonak ikteer la karamak	I really appreciate your hospitality.
Local:	maa fee shee min waajbak	It is nothing.

Exchange 13

In most homes, Muslim or Christian, it is a common social practice that men and women sit separately. They will then meet at the table, and the host will welcome guests with a toast, typically accompanied by a nonalcoholic drink. The guest should reciprocate with a toast, wishing good health to the host and his family. Another courtesy is to acknowledge the food offered by the host.¹⁷

▶ **What is the name of this dish?**

Visitor:	sho isim hal akleh?	What is the name of this dish?
Local:	shaawormaa	Shawarma.

Exchange 14

▶ **The food is very good.**

Visitor:	il akel Tayeb ikteer	The food is very good.
Local:	hay tas-eyeh	It's Taseeyeh.

Exchange 15



*Dinner invitation, Mezze, Rif Dimashq
Flickr / delayed gratification*

When invited to dinner or into a family's home, it is appropriate to bring a gift. Gifts should not be cheap. Gifts of food should not contain pork, pork by-products, or alcohol. Guests should not bring anything made of silk or gold because Muslim men are forbidden to wear them. Giving dates, pastries, chocolate, and sweets are appropriate. Giving gifts to children shows consideration but giving a gift to a woman is inappropriate unless the gift giver is a woman as well. Arts and crafts from other cultures are appreciated. Do not expect profuse thanks for gifts you bring. Gifts should be wrapped, but the host may not open it in front of the guest, because doing so might be construed as a sign of impatience or greed.^{18, 19}

Eating Habits and Types of Foods



A Syrian typical meal: makdous, tabbouleh, hummus, haloumi and baba ghanoush, with pita bread
Flickr / Paul Joseph

Syria's multicultural past is evident in its cuisine. Syria's cuisine is influenced by the culinary trends of the Middle East, Greece, Turkey, and the southern Mediterranean, and its position on the Silk Road opened it to influences from Iran to Far East Asia.²⁰

Breakfast is served as early as six o'clock. The main meal of the day is served in the afternoon at around two or three o'clock. A light dinner is served late in the evening and concludes with strong sweet Turkish coffee. A typical Syrian meal begins with appetizers and proceeds to other courses.²¹

Muslims eat with the right hand, never with the left, which is considered unclean. People may eat while seated on the ground or the floor and use flatbread to scoop the food and wipe the plates. It is unacceptable to throw away bread. It is customary to wash hands before and after a meal. Men usually pay the bill for the women's share of a meal and fight over paying it. It is advisable to offer a contribution.^{22, 23, 24}

A *mezze* (meze), which means "taste" or "snack" is a spread of salads, vegetables, and nuts offered at the beginning of the main meal of the day. The *mezze* includes appetizers such as hummus, *baba ghanoush* (a smoky eggplant dip,) tahini, stuffed grape leaves, stuffed zucchini, tabbouleh (a salad made with bulgur wheat, tomato, parsley, lemon, and onion), falafel, *fattoush* (a salad made with vegetables, toasted pita bread, lemon juice and olive oil), and pita bread.^{25, 26}



Fattoush
Wikimedia / Aziz1005

► The food tastes so good.

Visitor: il akel Ta'moh Tayeb ikteer

The food tastes so good.

Local: shukran

Thank you.

Exchange 16



*Halawat al-Jibna: A doughy pastry, topped with syrup and filled with cream cheese and pistachios
Flickr / Mahmood Alsalama*

Appetizers are followed by lamb, grilled chicken, or fish cooked in different ways and served with rice, chickpeas, yogurt, and vegetables. Baked trout with almonds is served in regions where there are trout farms; other fish, such as sea bass, are eaten on the coast and come from the Mediterranean. A dish called *farooj mishwee* consists of barbecued chicken served with a garlic sauce that has been whipped to a mayonnaise-like consistency. *Kibbeh* is a popular dish made of bulgur and minced lamb. A popular Bedouin specialty

is a whole-cooked lamb served over pine nuts and rice. This dish is reserved for special occasions such as the birth of a son or the arrival of an honored guest.^{27, 28, 29}

Desserts may consist of fresh fruit, pastries soaked in honey and baked with nuts or other creations. *Halawat al-Jibna* is a doughy pastry, topped with syrup and filled with cream cheese and pistachios. A traditional pastry called *batlawa*, similar to the Greek *baklava* has a French influence. Dates are often used to sweeten other desserts or eaten alone. Puddings made with farina or rice and flavored with rose water, orange flower water, cinnamon, and aniseed are often enjoyed as a snack between meals.^{30, 31}

Turkish coffee is enjoyed after every meal. Tea is consumed at social gatherings any time of the day or evening. Alcohol is not widely consumed because Islam forbids it, but beer, wine, and arak, which is an aniseed-tasting alcoholic beverage are consumed



*Kibbeh
Flickr / Noema Pérez*

in Syria. In Lebanon, this drink, which has up to 60% alcohol volume, is called “lions’ milk.”^{32, 33, 34}

Dress Codes

Clothing styles vary according to the region or ethnic background, but modesty is the rule. In the cities, clothing styles are more modern. Women wear modest dresses in a variety of colors. Young and upper-class urban women may wear makeup and jewelry and dress in jeans or pants. However, they do not expose the upper arms or legs. Fabrics may be brightly colored, with elaborate embroidery. Men in urban areas may dress in robes, or they may wear Western-style clothing, including jackets, sweaters, or pants.^{35, 36}

▶ How should I dress?		
Visitor:	shlon laazem ilbes?	How should I dress?
Local:	ilbays aawaa’ee ’areeDha itghaTee jesmak	Wear loose-fitting clothes that cover your body.

Exchange 17

The traditional garment of women in Syria is the *thob* or abaya, a single-color cotton robe or dress that covers the body from shoulder to the feet 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, which is a floor-length coat, over the dress that may be a traditional dress or the latest European fashion. The dress is accessorized 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, fringe, and silk tassels. Each village and region feature different motifs, types of stitches, and colors to show the identity of the woman wearing the garment.^{37, 38}



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

Traditional menswear includes a white cotton shirt, sometimes decorated with embroidery, and cotton pants (*shirwal*). The most important garment is the abaya,



A shepherd in didasha and hatta
Flickr / Charles Roffey

a wide cloak worn over the clothes, or the one-piece robe, the *didasha*. Men’s headwear (*hatta*) can be made of cotton or silk; in the summer the fabric is white, and in the winter it has a red and white checkered pattern. The *agal* (or *ogal*) is a black band that holds the headdress in place on the head. Men also wear a hat (*taqiyye*) under the headdress to hold it in place.³⁹

When entering a mosque, both men and women have to be dressed modestly, with arms and shoulders covered. Women should cover their hair with a headscarf.⁴⁰

▶ Is this acceptable to wear?		
Visitor:	hadaa imnaaseb la ilebsoh?	Is this acceptable to wear?
Local:	eh	Yes.

Exchange 18

Until the mid-20th century, Bedouins wore traditional clothing. Men wore a cape (abaya) over a long robe (jellaba) with a tight collar. Now they are more likely to wear a European-style jacket over the jellaba.

Nonreligious Ceremonies, Holidays, and Festivals

Syrians observe several national holidays, some of which have a historical significance. New Year’s Day (1 January) is celebrated by Muslims and Christians and is an official holiday. Revolution Day marks the Baath Party’s ascension to power in 1963 and is celebrated on 8 March. Independence Day, celebrated on 17 April, marks the end of French rule in Syria in 1946. Labor Day is celebrated on 1 May. Martyrs’ Day honors Syrians who fought the Ottomans in World War I and is celebrated on 6 May. Armed



Syrians at the Hama Flower Festival
Flickr / Charles Roffey

Forces Day and October Liberation Day, which commemorates Syria's and Egypt's war against Israel, are celebrated on 6 October.⁴¹

Several festivals used to take place in Syria before the war, among them was the three-day Desert Folk Festival in the ancient Roman ruins of Palmyra, which featured horse and camel races, and dance and music performances.⁴² A flower festival was held in Hama near the Orontes River annually; a two-week al-Mahabba Festival in Latakia featured famous singers, arts and crafts exhibits and dancing, and a cotton festival was held in Aleppo every year. A music, film, and theater festival was held in October in the ancient ruins of Bosra every other year.⁴³ The International Flower Festival in Damascus attracted thousands of flower growers from Arab and Western countries until the war broke out in 2011. In July 2018, the festival returned to Damascus, with Iraq and Bulgaria as the only two foreign countries represented.^{44, 45, 46}

Other Cultural Traditions

Honor Killings

In 2009, Bashar al-Assad abolished Article 548 of the Syrian constitution, which waived punishment for men who kill a female family member suspected of committing an illegal sex act, and husbands who kill their wives because of an extramarital affair. The new article eased punishment for honor killings, requiring a minimum sentence of two years. Extramarital affairs are illegal.⁴⁷



*Syrian women at the mosque, Aleppo
Flickr / Michal Unolt*

Women do not speak out about rape because when a woman is raped, she brings shame to her entire family. According to some NGOs, since the beginning of the war, the crime of honor killing is on the rise in certain areas where women were raped by government forces or forced into sexual slavery by the Islamic State.^{48, 49, 50}

Taboos

Homosexuality is against the law and carries severe penalties with a minimum of three year's imprisonment. The government arrests LGBT individuals and charges them with drug possession, obscene parties, and violation of social values.⁵¹

Gestures

Certain gestures carry much meaning.^{52, 53}

- An outstretched hand and click of the wrist mean “What do you want?”
- Raised eyebrows and a slight sudden tilt back of the head means “no.” Making the same gesture with a click of the tongue means “no” as well.
- A circular motion to the right with an open right hand may indicate a question.
- When a shopkeeper sketches a comma in the air with his right hand, he is indicating “half.”
- All five fingers pointing upward means you should wait.
- If an official motions as if to draw a line on his left palm, he wants to examine your documents.
- Placing the right palm on the chest with a slight bow of the head and closing the eyes means “Thank you, in the name of Allah.”
- During a conversation with someone of the same sex, it is common to touch the other's arm or shoulder.



*Syrian men holding arms, Hims, Homs
Flickr / Charles Roffey*



*A Syrian hand gesture
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

Dos and Don'ts

Dos

- **Do** use your entire right hand to summon a person. Keep your palm down and wave downward.
- **Do** keep your feet down and your soles on the ground.
- **Do**, if you are a man, stand when a woman enters the room.
- **Do** stand when new guests arrive at a social gathering or when an elderly or high-ranking official enters the room.
- **Do** give compliments and praise when appropriate.
- **Do** eat only with your right hand.
- **Do** expect people to ask personal questions as a way to acquaint themselves with you.
- **Do** express sympathy about the current situation in Syria.

Don'ts

- **Don't** summon women if you are a male soldier! Let a female soldier do that.
- **Don't** use the Western way of beckoning with one finger. It is very offensive.
- **Don't** point to anybody with a finger; use the entire *right* hand instead.
- **Don't** make the "A-OK" signal (circle with index finger and thumb of one hand); this gesture may be misinterpreted as obscene.
- **Don't** point upward with the middle finger. It is obscene in the U.S. and equally so in Syria.
- **Don't** use obscene or indecent language within earshot of Syrian citizens. Many are familiar with American slang.

- **Don't** cross your legs when sitting in a chair or show the bottom of your feet to someone.
- **Don't** lean against a wall when speaking with another person.⁵⁴
- **Don't** talk down to people who have poor English skills.
- **Don't** talk about the political situation in Syria or ask a Syrian to explain the situation in Syria.
- **Don't** ask Syrian men about female family members.⁵⁵

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Assessment

1. Honor killing, which is the murder of a woman by a male relative, is not considered a crime in Syria.
2. Muslims do not participate in New Year's Day celebrations in Syria.
3. A *mezze* is the traditional Syrian wooden coffee table inlaid with mother of pearl and ivory.
4. Wine, beer, and arak, an alcoholic drink made of aniseed are available and consumed in Syria.
5. Both men and women wear the traditional *abaya* in Syria.

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



*The souk in Aleppo
Flickr / Paul Engler*

Chapter 4 | Arabic-Levantine Cultural Orientation

Urban Life

Urbanization Issues

Most Syrian cities have an old part of town that includes businesses and residences. *Souks* (markets) offer food and goods as they have had throughout the centuries. Artisans sell traditional handicrafts in the *souks* such as engraved wood, brocade, gold and silver ornaments, blown glass, carpets, and leather products.¹

Over 54% of Syria's total population lives in cities. Between 2007 and 2010, prolonged drought and poor management of the water supply system led to the migration of about 1.5 million people from rural areas to already overpopulated cities that were unprepared to absorb them. Then, on 15 March 2011, pro-democracy protestors



Syrian Civil War
Flickr / William Proby

took to the streets, the government responded with violence, and the country slid into a civil war that displaced half of the population and left entire city neighborhoods in ruin.^{2, 3}

According to the World Bank and the UN children’s agency (UNICEF), about one-third of housing and one-half of medical and education facilities in Syria have been damaged or destroyed since 2011. Communicable diseases such as

polio began to appear due to a lack of access to healthcare, and more people now die of treatable illnesses and chronic conditions than in fighting. Furthermore, the massive death toll - 460,000 estimated deaths - and the displacement of over half of the population have devastated the country’s social fabric.⁴

The current economy is in crisis. Before the civil war, the government had begun liberalizing economic policies; however, the economy remained centralized, heavily regulated and sluggish, owing to a variety of factors, including the ongoing civil war.⁵ In 2015, the World Bank estimated that young Syrians faced an unemployment rate of 78%, and the total unemployment rate was 50%.^{6, 7} According to UNICEF, about 70% of the population is now living in extreme poverty (less than USD 1.90 a day) as a result of the long civil war, and 6.5 million people face acute food insecurity.⁸

Housing

Cities are often divided into distinct sections, displaying different styles of architectures. Neighborhoods have traditionally been segregated according to the religion, ethnicity, nationality, and economic status of the inhabitants. As newer sections were added, families from the older parts of the cities moved out, changing the traditional divisions.⁹ Urban residences include apartment buildings, one-story houses with a spacious backyard



Urban housing in Homs
Flickr / sabamonin



*Daraya is one of the most bombed city
Flickr / William Proby*

(*sha'bi*), villas, traditional Arab homes, and country homes.^{10, 11}

The long war has reduced some historical and traditional urban centers into rubble. Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, Douma, and Daraya have been repeatedly bombed, and some of their neighborhoods have been destroyed beyond recognition.^{12, 13} Around 760,000 housing units in the cities were damaged. A damage assessment of three cities conducted by the World Bank

found that in Aleppo and Idlib nearly 30% of the housing units - mostly apartments - have been damaged (7% entirely destroyed and 21% partially damaged). Hama was the least damaged city among the three examined cities, with 6% of the housing units destroyed or damaged by the war.¹⁴

With 5.7 million internally displaced people (IDPs) - 40% of IDPs are hosted in cities - the urbanization rate has increased, and rents have skyrocketed. Many displaced people rent apartment units, live with friends or relatives, or settle in formal and informal camps (sports complexes, schools, and mosques). Some cities experience both population growth and outward migration depending on the dynamics of the conflict. For example, aerial bombardments force residents out of their homes in search of safety while quieter neighborhoods with access to water and food attract IDPs.^{15, 16}

Healthcare

Before the war, Syria had an extensive network of healthcare facilities. Healthcare was free for all citizens, provided they used government health centers, clinics, and hospitals. Public health centers offered limited services at no cost and were staffed with at least one doctor and a nurse. Some medical facilities included pediatricians, obstetricians, and dentists and provided maternal and child care, immunization, family planning, control and prevention



*Field hospital in Syria
Flickr / Freedom House*

of communicable and non-communicable diseases, and health education. Private healthcare was also available and was considered better than public healthcare.^{17, 18}

Seven years of war have devastated the healthcare system. Hundreds of healthcare workers were killed, and many were arrested. Medical vehicles and convoys carrying medical equipment were bombed, and hospitals and other medical centers were deliberately targeted, mostly by pro-government forces.^{19, 20} For example, a hospital in Hama was bombed 33 times, and another hospital in eastern Aleppo was targeted 19 times until it was destroyed in 2016. Between 2011 and 2015, about 15,000 medical doctors left Syria. In 2013, only 250 physicians were left in Aleppo. Among the people who fled the city were nurses, medical technicians, ambulance drivers, and hospital administrators. Because of the massive migration and targeted killings of physicians, only 45% of Syria’s medical personnel remain active in the country. Also, the lack of midwives had left thousands of pregnant women without pre-natal care. About 55% of public hospitals and 50% of health community centers are now closed or only partially operational.^{21, 22, 23}



*A wounded boy arrives at the hospital
Flickr / Freedom House*

▶ Is there a hospital nearby?		
Visitor:	fee mustashfaa aareeb?	Is there a hospital nearby?
Local:	eh, bewasaT il madeeneh	Yes, in the center of town.

Exchange 19

According to the World Health Organization, government forces routinely stop international convoys, remove critical medical supplies (equipment and drugs), and send them back to the storage centers. In 2017, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated that 1.5 million people in Damascus and 2.2 million people in Aleppo did not have access to hospitals. Two private, nonprofit hospitals operate in Damascus, and one nonprofit hospital in Aleppo is operated by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), however, only at partial capacity. These hospitals and some mobile clinics run by NGOs and UNICEF provide healthcare to the poor, children, single mothers, and the wounded. As of 2018, more than 11 million people needed health assistance, with 3 million who live with disabilities and injuries.^{24, 25}

► Is Dr. Said in, sir?

Visitor:	id duktoor sa'eed hon yaa sayed?	Is Dr. Said in, sir?
Local:	eh, howey hon	Yes, he is.

Exchange 20

Education and Schools



*School children
Flickr / Patrick Savalle*

Primary education is compulsory and lasts six years. Three years of noncompulsory lower-secondary education follow primary education. After completing the Al Kafa'a examination, students can attend three years of upper-secondary schools that focus on literature and sciences or choose three years of technical or vocational education. Pre-primary education is available for children between three and five-years of age in mostly privately owned schools. All primary and secondary

education is free and funded by the government. 97% of primary education schools and 94% of secondary education schools are public. Higher education is mostly free in the seven public universities. Private schools and universities do not receive funding from the government. The Ministry of Higher Education mandates the curriculum, and only government-approved higher education institutions are allowed to operate. In the Kurdish-held regions, educational institutions operate without government supervision.^{26, 27}

Before the onset of the civil war, more than 90% of Syrian children attended primary education, and more than two-thirds of children attended secondary schools.²⁸ Since 2011, one-third of Syria's schools have been destroyed or damaged, and many schools have turned into shelters for IDPs or into military bases. A severe shortage of teachers and teaching materials such as textbooks and stationary further exacerbates the situation. According to the UNICEF, the education sector has lost 150,000 teachers. In Aleppo, 49 educational facilities were destroyed and the number of schoolteachers had dropped by nearly 70% compared to prewar numbers. Schools were destroyed or partially damaged also in Daraya, Raqqa, Tadmur, Homs, Hama, Deir ez-Zor, and Douma. In areas where fighting is still taking place, such as Idlib, some teachers work a double shift to accommodate children who live in areas where schools cannot



*A Lebanese teacher lends a hand to Syrian children
Flickr / DFID - UK Department for International Development*

operate due to shelling and violence. Schools that still function experience limited access to electricity, water, and sanitation facilities.^{29, 30}

Syria's ministry of education, UN agencies, and NGOs partner to provide prefabricated classrooms and rehabilitate damaged school buildings. In Aleppo and Homs, where the needs are high, these partners offer special learning programs for children, some of which have missed seven years of schooling.³¹

In spite of the ongoing conflict, nearly 5 million children in Syria have access to education, with a substantial majority attending public schools.³² However, only a minimal number of university-age Syrians have been able to continue their higher education, which created a “lost generation” of university students.³³

Restaurants and Cafés

Lebanese, Turkish, French, Mediterranean and Greek cuisine, influence Syrian food. Establishments that serve food include high-end restaurants, cafés, roadside eateries, fast food joints, and street stalls.^{34, 35} Before the war, eating out was a fun-filled family occasion. Many restaurants featured either traditional or loud pop music. During the violent conflict, many restaurants had to close, and those that stayed open had to survive amid shortages of fresh food supplies, security threats and limited access to electricity. However, for many restaurants that managed to remain open in Damascus, business is booming.³⁶



*A traditional restaurant in Syria
Flickr / DFID - UK Department for International Development*

► Are you still serving breakfast?

Visitor:	lesaatkum 'am it-admoo ifToor?	Are you still serving breakfast?
Local:	eh	Yes.

Exchange 21

Syrians are proud of their cuisine, known for elaborate dishes that can be created from a few ingredients. Syrian cuisine employs many styles of preparations and spices such as olive oil, garlic, lemon, sumac, and *bokharat* (seven spice). Vegetarians can enjoy a variety of *mezze* (appetizers) which include pita bread (*khubz*) served with hummus sprinkled with olive oil, olives and pickles, *baba ghanoush* (smoked eggplant dip), falafel, *tabbouleh* (cracked wheat mixed with chopped tomatoes, cucumber and parsley) and *fattoush* (a tomato and cucumber salad served with pita croutons and grated cheese). *Foul* (pronounced “fool”) is made of fava bean paste, flavored with cumin, olive oil, and mint leaves and served with pita bread. Two types of local cheeses are *jibbneh*, *mashallale* (string cheese) and *shanklish* (goat cheese flavored with thyme and pepper). *Labneh* (strained yogurt) with *za'atar* and olive oil is also popular. Rice is used as a side dish or to stuff zucchini, cabbage, eggplants, and grape leaves, usually mixed with minced meat. Baklava (a flaky pastry filled with nuts and covered in honey), *knafeh*, and *ka'ak*, a cookie traditionally served with cheese, are favorite desserts.^{37, 38} It is common for families to go out for dessert after a large meal. Sweets shops stay open late for the after-dinner crowd.³⁹



Syrian cuisine, Mezze with baba ghanoush, pita bread
Flickr / Charles Roffey

► I'd like some hot soup.

Visitor:	bedee shoorabaa	I'd like some hot soup.
Local:	Tayeb	Sure.

Exchange 22

Safiha, a mini meat pie and *borak zaitoon*, olive mini pies, are favorite snacks.⁴⁰ Main dishes feature spicy fish with caramelized onions (*sayadieh*), meatballs (*dawood basha*), grilled lamb mixed with garlic and parsley (*kufta kebab*), oven roasted chicken, stuffed artichoke hearts (*ardi shoki blahmi*), and a large variety of *kibbeh*.^{41, 42}

► **What type of meat is this?**

Visitor:	sho no' hal laHam?	What type of meat is this?
Local:	laHam ghanam	Lamb.

Exchange 23

In Aleppo, *safarjaliyeh*, a tomato-based lamb stew, and *kibbeh labaniyah*, a mix of bulgur and minced lamb dipped in garlic-infused yogurt, are iconic dishes.⁴³

► **Put this all in one bill?**

Visitor:	HuT hadaa kuluh be faatora waHdeh?	Put this all in one bill?
Local:	Tayeb	Okay.

Exchange 24

► **May I have a glass of water?**

Visitor:	mumken ta'Teenee kaaset maay?	May I have a glass of water?
Local:	eh, hala 'ala Tool	Yes, right away.

Exchange 25

Mulberry juice and other fruit juices are sold by street vendors and in restaurants. Beer is available and inexpensive; the local brands are *Al-Sharq* and *Barada*. There are specialty wine stores where Syrian, Lebanese, and French wines are sold. Many hotels, bars, and restaurants serve alcohol. Drinking alcohol in public during the month of Ramadan is illegal, and punishments for violators can be severe.⁴⁴



Juice stand
Flickr / Melissa Wall

► **Do you have a dessert?**

Visitor:	'andkum Halweyaat?	Do you have a dessert?
Local:	eh, 'anaa ba-laawa	Yes, we have baklava.

Exchange 26

Tipping 10% is appropriate and expected in restaurants. In high-end restaurants, the service charge may be automatically added to the bill.⁴⁵

▶ Can I have my total bill, please?		
Visitor:	mumken itjblee kul faatortee min faDhlak?	Can I have my total bill, please?
Local:	eh, Tab'an	Yes, of course.

Exchange 27

Every meal includes flat bread. The bread is used as a utensil to scoop up the food. Although Western-style cutlery is available, Arabs eat only with the right hand.⁴⁶

▶ I would like coffee/tea.		
Visitor:	bedee ahweh / shaay	I would like coffee/tea.
Local:	Tayeb	Sure.

Exchange 28



Serving Arabic coffee, Damascus
Flickr / Daniel coy

At coffeehouses, men play card games or a variation of backgammon. Many men smoke a *narghile* (water pipe) also during meals in restaurants.⁴⁷

In spite of the long war, many restaurants still operate in Damascus. According to the website TripAdvisor, out of 147 restaurants reviewed by visitors, 9 of the best restaurants in Syria are located in Damascus.⁴⁸ Since 1979, the Durra brand, which was established by the Al Durra family in Syria, has become synonymous with Syria's best produce and goods.⁴⁹

▶ Where is your restroom?		
Visitor:	wayn il itwaaleyt?	Where is your restroom?
Local:	il gherfeh illi 'al ishmaal ihneek	That room to your left, over there.

Exchange 29

Marketplaces and Street Vendors



Spices in the Aleppo Souk
Flickr / Paul Engler

Most Syrian cities have modern shopping centers and traditional *souks*. *Souks* are covered markets that have been in operation for centuries. Maze-like streets are abuzz with merchants and buyers mingling until late in the evening.⁵⁰ Many small businesses that were forced to close during the war are starting to open. People turn their gardens and homes into small shops, some set up tents and others sell goods from their cars. In areas close to the Turkish border, Turkish products dominate the markets since the Syrian industry has been decimated.⁵¹

▶ Is the souk nearby?

Visitor:	is soo aareeb min hon?	Is the souk nearby?
Local:	eh, ihneek 'al yameen	Yes, over there on the right.

Exchange 30

Prices in the souks are not set since it is expected that the buyer and the seller haggle over the price. Most Syrians never agree to the first price set forth by the seller, since prices are grossly inflated.⁵²

▶ Do you have any more of these?

Visitor:	'andak kamaan min hadaa?	Do you have any more of these?
Local:	laa	No.

Exchange 31

Do not be surprised if a vendor insists that you enter his shop, only to seat you and serve tea. This is just the prelude to an intense effort to sell you something, anything, within the store. It is considered rude to refuse an offer of tea, so it is best not to enter a store if you don't intend to buy something. Also, you should not start bargaining about the price of an item you are not willing to buy. Doing so is considered impolite and inconsiderate.⁵³

▶ **May I examine this close up?**

Visitor:	be-der afHaS hal Soora?	May I examine this close-up?
Local:	eh	Sure.

Exchange 32

Street Vendors

In the cities, food is commonly sold at street stalls. The food vary with the season. In springtime, vendors sell whole green almonds, and in summer, fresh pistachios and fruits. *Shawarma*, *foul*, and falafel are common street foods sold from colorful carts. Vendors of *shawarma* are dressed in white. Unlike merchants in the souks, street vendors change their location from time to time.⁵⁴



Shawarma on the street
Flickr / Rain Rannu

▶ **How much longer will you be here?**

Visitor:	aadeysh Hateb-aa hon?	How much longer will you be here?
Local:	itlat saa'aat	Three more hours.

Exchange 33

▶ **Please, buy something from me.**

Visitor:	alah yeKhaleek ishtaree minee shee	Please, buy something from me.
Local:	aasef, maa ba-aa ma'ee maSaaree	Sorry, I have no money left.

Exchange 34

Money, Credit Cards, ATMs

Syria's currency is the Syrian pound or lira, abbreviated as SP (Syrian pound), or LS (Livre Syrien). Banks' business hours and holidays are usually set by the government. Business hours are from 8:00 until 15:30 from Sunday to Thursday; banks are closed on Friday and Saturday. Dates of Islamic holidays are announced shortly before each holiday, since they are subject to the visibility of the moon.⁵⁵



Syria's currency: Syrian pound or lira
Flickr / Ronald Chan

No U.S. banks operate in Syria. Only the Commercial Bank of Syria (CBS), the Real Estate Bank, and private banks, some of which maintain offices inside four- and five-star hotels, can exchange foreign currency into Syrian pounds. Four- and five-star hotels and high-end stores accept major credit cards, but most restaurants and shops accept only cash. Traveler's checks are not accepted and banks do not cash them unless the customer has an account at that bank.⁵⁶

▶ Do you accept U.S. currency?

Visitor:	bete-bal doolaaraat amarkeeyeh?	Do you accept U.S. currency?
Local:	laa, be-bal layraat soreeyeh bas	No, we only accept Syrian pounds.

Exchange 35

There are 14 private banks in Syria with branches in major cities. Branches with ATMs honor major credit and debit cards. Since U.S. banks cannot conduct business with CBS, they do not process ATM transactions from CBS branches. Funds can be sent to Syria via Western Union.⁵⁷

▶ Can you give me change for this?

Visitor:	bete-der teSruflee hay?	Can you give me change for this?
Local:	laa	No.

Exchange 36

Urban Traffic and Transportation



Traffic in Aleppo
Flickr / Xiaojun Deng

Because of the ongoing conflict, traveling in Syria is hazardous. Road conditions are poor, and traffic laws are not obeyed since law enforcement is absent in many areas. Drivers do not give right of way to pedestrians or cars in many cases, ignore lane markings, one-way streets and maneuver aggressively around moving vehicles. Drivers also regularly run red lights and enter intersections before the light turns to green. By law, vehicles entering traffic circles have the

right of way. Drivers and passengers should exercise caution since they are at risk of abduction and harassment. Drivers should be prepared to stop at official and unofficial checkpoints.⁵⁸

► Where can I rent a car?

Visitor:	wayn be-der asta-jer sayaara?	Where can I rent a car?
Local:	be markaz il madeeneh	Downtown.

Exchange 37

Traffic accidents that cause injuries to passengers are relatively uncommon in Damascus, mainly because heavy traffic prevents drivers from achieving high speeds. Accidents involving pedestrians are more frequent and result in severe injuries and occasional fatalities.⁵⁹

► Is there a gas station nearby?

Visitor:	fee kaazeyt banzeen aareebah?	Is there a gas station nearby?
Local:	eh	Yes.

Exchange 38

To get around in cities, locals use buses, yellow taxis, and minibuses called *servees* or *meeero*. These minibuses carry between 10 and 12 passengers and use predetermined routes. Destinations are written in Arabic.⁶⁰

▶ **Will the bus be here soon?**

Visitor:	Hayeejee il baaS lahon ba'd ishway?	Will the bus be here soon?
Local:	eh	Yes.

Exchange 39



A bus stop in Hama
Flickr / Hugo van Tilborg

Despite the ongoing conflict, regular bus service continued to run in towns and between towns and cities throughout Syria, even in areas held by IS. However, as the fighting intensified, the army closed some roads and bus drivers had become less willing to risk their lives to make the dangerous journey. Dozens of checkpoints manned by the various factions, bombing, sniper fire, and road closures have turned some trips that lasted a few hours before the war into a dangerous journey that lasted

several days. When the Islamic State had banned smoking, bus passengers heading into IS-controlled areas had to hide their cigarettes or discard them all together, change their clothing, and grow their beards. Women could not travel unaccompanied by a male relative.^{61, 62}

▶ **Is there a good auto mechanic nearby?**

Visitor:	fee meekaaneekee sayaraat aareeb?	Is there a good auto mechanic nearby?
Local:	eh	Yes.

Exchange 40

When traveling by taxi, passengers have to negotiate the fare before entering the vehicle because some taxis do not have meters. Before getting into a taxi, make sure the meter is reset. Taxis are a safer way to navigate the city, especially for women.⁶³

▶ **Where can I get a cab?**

Visitor:	wayn be-der laa-ee taaksee?	Where can I get a cab?
Local:	ihneek	Over there.

Exchange 41

▶ Which road leads to the airport?

Visitor:	ay Taree beewadee lil maTaar?	Which road leads to the airport?
Local:	iT Taree illi beyetejeh lil shar	The road heading east.

Exchange 42

▶ Can you take me there?

Visitor:	bete-der taaKhednee lahneek?	Can you take me there?
Local:	eh, be-der	Yes, I can.

Exchange 43

Before the war, passenger and cargo trains crossed Syria for over a century linking Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Latakia, Deir ez-Zor and more. The trains stopped running in 2012. More than half of Syria's railways were damaged during the war, some train tracks were stolen. In June 2018, the Syrian government reported that some train service is going to be reestablished. The railway is going to be used first to transport cargo between Tartus and Homs to help revive the economy. Another line will be opened between Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor.⁶⁴ Other train routes that will be reopened stretch between Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo, as well as between the coast and the border with Iraq. The authorities aim to have most lines back up and running by the end of 2018. Syria has 2,450 km (1,522 mi) of train tracks.⁶⁵



Aleppo Train Station
Flickr / Karen Melchior

▶ Is there a train station nearby?

Visitor:	fee maHaTet itreynaat aareebah?	Is there a train station nearby?
Local:	laa	No.

Exchange 44

Crime



Syrian Police, Al Qanawat, Damascus
Flickr / mocassino

The crime rate in major cities is unknown due to the ongoing war. However, due to the continuing conflict, criminal activity appears to be on the rise. According to the U.S. Department of State, no part of Syria is safe. The kidnapping of Westerners, aerial bombardment, shelling, and chemical warfare pose a high risk of death or injury.^{66, 67} A report by the U.N. Commission of Inquiry on Syria condemned the government's methods of warfare and concluded that pro-government forces perpetrated crimes against humanity in Eastern Ghouta.^{68, 69}

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Chapter 4 | Urban Life

Assessment

1. Hospitals and clinics in Syria's largest cities escaped most of the violence that engulfed the country during the civil war.
2. Restaurant servers, taxi drivers, and hotel employees are usually tipped in Syria.
3. For security reasons, traveler's checks are the best alternative to cash in the *souks* of Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs.
4. Fatal traffic accidents are common in Damascus because drivers do not obey the speed limit.
5. Syria has a large railway network.

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



*Riding the range, Hama
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

Chapter 5 | Arabic-Levantine Cultural Orientation

Rural Life

Introduction

Agriculture is the main occupation and source of income for millions of Syrians who live in rural areas. Until 2008, Syria was the only country in the region that was self-sufficient in food production, especially wheat and barley. A well-developed farming infrastructure helped Syria avert severe food shortages for many years, even during wartime.¹

Between 2006 and 2010, as Syria coped with a wave of refugees from the Iraq war; a severe drought forced 1.5 million Syrians to abandon their farms and move to the cities, an event that helped trigger the civil war in 2011.^{2, 3, 4} Since then, the ongoing

fighting, as well as damaged irrigation systems and shortages in cheap fuel, seeds, and fertilizers, have forced millions to abandon rural areas. By 2016, only half of the 2011 rural population still lived in rural areas. According to a UN report, the first six years of the Syrian civil war have cost Syria more than USD 16 billion in lost crop and livestock production and damaged farming properties and infrastructure. Furthermore, although 75% of rural households still grow food for their own consumption, due to the global rise in food prices and the ongoing conflict, 90% of rural households spend more than half of their income on food.^{5, 6, 7}

Rural Economy

Before the civil war, Syria’s main agricultural products were wheat, barley, cotton, lentils, sugar beets, tomatoes, potatoes, oranges, apples, olive oil, sheep, cattle, milk, poultry, and eggs. About 40% of the population’s livelihoods were connected to agriculture, and the majority of farms were family owned.⁸ The government maintained grain depots, storage facilities, and collection centers for agricultural products, and farmers sold their crops to the state-run collection centers and kept a small portion for their families’ consumption. However, most of the facilities were destroyed during the war. The government also controlled the transportation system for shipping produce to market, as well as the markets themselves.⁹



Sheep
Flickr / Joel Bombardier

▶ Do you own this land?		
Visitor:	hay il aareDh milkak?	Do you own this land?
Local:	eh	Yes.

Exchange 45

In 2016, heavy fighting in the Northeast Province, where almost half of Syria’s wheat is grown, caused shortages of this crucial food staple even in government-held areas. Government-backed sieges caused extreme hardship and starvation in some rebel-controlled areas such as Daraa.^{10, 11}

► **Where do you work, sir?**

Visitor:	wayn ibteshtughul, yaa sayed?	Where do you work, sir?
Local:	anaa falaah, yaa sayed	I am a farmer, sir.

Exchange 46



Damaged irrigation canal, Ghab Valley
Flickr / Water Alternatives

Currently, farmers depend on rainfall to irrigate their crops, since the irrigation infrastructure was damaged.¹² **Fighting in the heart of the crop cultivation area along the Mediterranean coast and the northern border with Turkey** disrupted much of the fresh fruit and vegetable production. The scorched earth strategy used by the Islamic State (IS) has left thousands of acres of crops and fruit trees burned to the ground around Kobani. Water scarcity and damaged irrigation systems

worsened food insecurity in the east. Misuse and exploitation of underground water aquifers increased in rebel-held areas, where farmers could drill new wells to irrigate their plots without government oversight.^{13, 14}

► **Are you the only person in your family who has a job?**

Visitor:	inte bas yaalee be'eltak 'ndoh shughul?	Are you the only person in your family who has a job?
Local:	laa	No.

Exchange 47

In areas that saw little fighting, such as those around the coastal city of Latakia and the southern city of Sweida, farmlands and orchards were not damaged, and food production continued. **In northwestern Syria, many displaced families who live in rebel-held areas and in temporary shelters depend on handouts and donations of basic foodstuffs.**¹⁵



Farmland
Flickr / Charles Roffey

Gender Issues

While the constitution stipulates that women should have equality with men, due to cultural norms and social stigma, women are routinely barred from some sectors of employment - particularly in leadership roles - and their roles and responsibilities are confined to the home. Additionally, the penal code allows husbands to forbid their wives from working outside the home. In 2010, about 20% of women participated in Syria's workforce, mostly in female-oriented positions such as nursing and teaching, and their wages were 20% that of men's.^{16, 17}



Syrian woman with her children
Flickr / PistoCasero

▶ Do your children go to school?

Visitor:	berooHoo awlaadak 'al madraseh?	Do your children go to school?
Local:	eh	Yes.

Exchange 48



Female street vendors
Flickr / Charles Roffey

Since the beginning of the fighting, the number of working-age men has decreased, many have died, were injured or detained, or have gone missing. Others joined militant groups or fled the country. The result of this is that many women are now most areas, men still dominate household decision-making, especially in education, work, and relations with other members of the community. In areas where women became the heads of household, it was because of the crisis rather than a sign of change in social norms.^{18, 19, 20}

According to the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, after seven years of war, women head a little over 22% of Syrian households, although it is difficult to determine the exact dynamics in every family (many women are displaced and unaccompanied by men). In some areas, women make up about 90% of the agricultural work force,

sometimes because men cannot go out to the fields for fear of being detained or killed. As the conflict rages on, more women are taking on employment and building their vocational skills. However, women generate less income than men.^{21, 22}



*A wounded woman in Aleppo
Flickr / William Proby*

The war had a devastating effect on women and girls. Early marriages of girls as young as 13, sexual violence, and other gender-based violence such as harassment and humiliation against women and girls are rampant. Survival sex, which is the consequence of women and girls' need for income, is also identified as sexual violence. In southern Syria and rebel-held areas, women have been increasingly pushed out of public life and leadership roles since the beginning of the war, and their mobility has become even more restricted.^{23, 24}

Rural Transportation



*Boys are transporting heating wood in Idlib
Flickr / Freedom House*

Driving in the rural areas of Syria requires the highest level of caution. Highways are often not well lit at night. Roads are in varying states of disrepair, which makes driving conditions difficult, particularly during bad weather. Vehicles are usually not well maintained; broken-down vehicles are sometimes left on roadsides without emergency lights or other proper warning signs. Truck drivers often start or stop without warning, and frequently change lanes without signaling. Driving is especially dangerous at night, as it is common for people and animals to walk on the roads. Vehicles without lights are also a hazard. The bus system spans most of the country and is used to reach rural destinations.^{25, 26}

Traveling between cities takes much longer than before the war, as some roads are off limits or too dangerous, and checkpoints are common.²⁷

Rural Housing



Houses in Ma'loula
Wikimedia / Raki_Man

Rural Syria displays a variety of architectural styles because of the different materials used in building traditional homes. In the southern parts of the central region, homes are built of basalt; in the center and eastern regions, stones composed of calcium carbonate and sandstones are used as building material; and in the river basins, the common building material is clay.²⁸

Villages have three different forms. Some have no regular pattern or plan. The homes are scattered in a specific area. In other villages, homes are clustered along a network of rural roads and separated by agricultural land. In the third kind of villages, houses are built along main transportation routes such as roads or rivers.²⁹

▶ Did you grow up here?		
Visitor:	'shet hon min wa-t maa kent iSgheer?	Did you grow up here?
Local:	eh	Yes.

Exchange 49

A rural home has three main spaces: a human space, an animal space, and food storage. Rural homes also have courtyards bordered by walls and surrounded by rooms on one or more sides.³⁰

▶ Do you know this area very well?		
Visitor:	bte'ref hal manTeqa mneeH kteer?	Do you know this area very well?
Local:	eh	Yes.

Exchange 50

There are five types of homes in Syria. The most common type consists of three spaces: bedrooms, living rooms, and food storage areas that are elevated with stairs. Walls are typically made of stone and have no exterior finish. In the summer, people cook and sleep in a designated area outside. An outhouse is attached to this outdoor area.³¹



*Houses in Bara
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

Houses with courtyards are most common in Horan, Swieda, and north and central Syria. The house outline is not planned; it expands and takes shape as the family grows. The courtyard sometimes has an external wall on one side, forming what is called a hosh. The courtyards provide space for activities of family members who live in the dwellings that surround the courtyard.³²

In central Syria, in the countryside around Homs as well as in some areas along the coast and the southern region, the arcade home is common. This type of home features a long arcade either on the ground floor or on the first floor. Animals are kept on the ground floor when the house has two floors or in a separate structure outside the house, along with an outhouse.³³

The least common home is the iwan. This house gets its name from a space with an arched ceiling that is open to the courtyard on one side. The iwan is located at the center of the house, surrounded by living spaces, and is the main reception area where social activities take place. Sometimes it is used to store food or provide shelter to animals.³⁴

The central-hall house became a status symbol in rural Syria during the Ottoman rule when wealthy rural families imitated the architectural style that appeared in coastal cities in Syria and Lebanon. The symmetry of levels and a sloping triangular roof are the main features of this house. The food storage is built outside the house while the toilet and kitchen are inside, a novelty that improves the quality of life of the residents.³⁵



*Ottoman houses in Halab
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

Rural Healthcare



A wounded boy arrives at the Dar al Shifa Hospital
Flickr / Freedom House

Almost half of Syria’s medical facilities are either partially functioning or closed. A study conducted in 2016 found that during that year, there were about 200 attacks, mostly aerial bombings, on medical facilities and workers in rebel-held provinces, in which more than 100 healthcare providers died, and several hospitals and clinics were completely destroyed. More than 40 healthcare facilities had to close temporarily. Some facilities were attacked more than once.

Because medical facilities are usually the largest buildings in rural areas, they are easy to identify and target from the air. Hospitals and clinics stopped displaying the red cross or another marking that identify them to avoid attacks. Patients are afraid to go to hospitals, and many doctors have left conflict zones.^{36, 37}

▶ Is there a medical clinic nearby?

Visitor:	fee mustawSaf aareeb min hon?	Is there a medical clinic nearby?
Local:	eh	Yes, over there.

Exchange 51

Medical convoys carrying medical supplies are routinely attacked and robbed. In an attempt to prevent medical supplies from falling into the hands of rebel groups, shipments require formal approval from the government, which takes a long time to negotiate and process. As a result, medical supplies, food, and clothing end up sitting in warehouses and in neighboring countries. Many times, the government will remove certain supplies from trucks, making it harder to treat patients, especially in areas under siege.³⁸

▶ My arm is broken, can you help me?

Visitor:	eedee maksora, bete-der it saa’ednee?	My arm is broken, can you help me?
Local:	eh, mumken saa’dak	Yes, I can help you.

Exchange 52

Many rural Syrians still rely on traditional medicine, which uses remedies made from plants and natural ingredients. A bee sting, for instance, may be relieved with garlic. Colds are treated with a drink made of honey, lemon, and cinnamon. A cactus-like plant known as sabbar is used to treat rheumatism.³⁹

▶ Do you know what is wrong?		
Visitor:	bte'ref shoo il mushkleh?	Do you know what is wrong?
Local:	laa	No.

Exchange 53

People in conflict zones have no access to mental healthcare. The few patients who were able to receive treatment before the war find it hard to continue their treatment because medicines are not available on the market and doctors are not reachable. Only one hospital in the rural area outside Damascus operates in a limited capacity. People in the rest of the country, especially in conflict zones, have no access to mental health services.⁴⁰



*A patient in a field hospital
Flickr / William Proby*

Rural Education



*School children
Flickr / Christian Payne*

Primary education is compulsory and lasts six years. Three years of noncompulsory lower-secondary education follow primary education. After completing the national examination, students can attend three years of upper-secondary schools that focus on literature and sciences or choose three years of technical or vocational education that offer curricula in agriculture, commerce, and industry. Pre-primary education is available for children between three and five years of age, in mostly privately owned schools.

All primary and secondary education is free and funded by the government. Higher education is mostly free. The education ministry regulates the educational system. In the Kurdish-held regions, educational institutions operate without government supervision.^{41, 42}



School children at Freedom Generation School in Aleppo
Flickr / Christian Payne

A typical rural school consists of several rooms. Many primary schools operate in informal spaces, such as houses where students from two or more grades sit together in one classroom. These schools employ fewer teachers than required and sometimes lack qualified teachers who can teach core subjects. Only a few schools operate in formal school buildings. The school week begins on Sunday and ends on Thursday. Some schools operate in two shifts and students alternate between the morning and afternoon shifts on a weekly basis. Students cannot move from one grade to another without completing a minimum number of school days.⁴³

Because rural areas have fewer lower-secondary and upper-secondary schools, children have to cover longer distances to attend these schools, either on foot or by bicycle. Poverty is the main cause for dropping out of school, followed by child labor, and poor conditions in the school - many schools cannot afford to provide meals or educational materials and have no heating system in the winter. Security issues are also a cause of dropping out, as the government slowly retakes control over the country.⁴⁴

▶ Is there a school nearby?		
Visitor:	Is there a school nearby?	Is there a school nearby?
Local:	Yes.	Yes.

Exchange 54

In 2018, over 2.1 million children were out of school, as the regime and rebel groups have targeted schools and hospitals. In areas where a lot of fighting takes place, such as East Ghouta, Afrin, northern rural Homs, and Daraa, most schools were forced to close. Many children risk their lives when they go to school as they cross active lines of fire. Since schools are targeted, children are sometimes hit by shelling. Schools operate when the educational authorities allow them to open

for instruction, depending on the security situation in the area. UNICEF and other NGOs respond to school closures by providing alternative and non-formal learning opportunities, essential learning materials, temporary classrooms, meals, medical services, and financial incentives and professional development to teachers. Children displaced from the Kurdish-controlled area have to cope with the language barrier as well.^{45, 46, 47}



Because schools are targets of violence, millions of children no longer attend Flickr / Cazz

Village Life



Ma'loula, Rif Dimashq Governorate Flickr / Thomas Stellmach

Villages are organized around extended families. Family loyalty is important, and the norm is that only family members can be trusted. A family lineage has a common ancestor. The leaders of each ancestral lineage are usually middle-aged or older men who make the decisions for the village. The leader of each village is called mukhtar. He is elected from among the men of the tribe and usually possesses special talents or skills.^{48, 49}

▶ Does your leader live here?		
Visitor:	be'eesh qaa-dak hon?	Does your leader live here?
Local:	eh	Yes.

Exchange 55

The mukhtar asserts his influence in the tribal council, the majlis. He serves primarily as a channel from higher administrative officials to the village. The mukhtar also holds meetings where villagers can express their concerns and discuss important matters. The mukhtar and the majlis attempt to reconcile all problems within the tribal unit or village. If they fail, the matter is referred to higher authorities.⁵⁰

▶ **Can you take me to your leader?**

Visitor: bete-der taaKhednee la qaa-dak?

Can you take me to your leader?

Local: eh

Yes.

Exchange 56

Most power and prestige in villages rests with the landowners, who usually live in cities such as Aleppo and Damascus and manage their lands from afar. Such leaders are likely to have substantial land holdings in an area.⁵¹

▶ **Respected leader, we need your help/advice/opinion.**

Visitor: HaDhrat il qaa-ed meHtaajeen li musaa'adtak/wa naSeeHtak/wa ra-yak

Respected leader, we need your help/advice/opinion.

Local: eh

Yes.

Exchange 57

Border Crossings and Checkpoints

Syria's terrain makes much of its borders with Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, and Iraq difficult to control. Since 2012, some of the conflict has spilled over into neighboring countries. Islamic State (IS) militants infiltrated Lebanon, and Syrian shelling of border areas in Lebanon, Israel's Golan Heights, and Turkey has been reported. According to Syria's foreign minister, terrorist groups controlled border crossings and were supported by countries that wanted to keep those border crossings closed.⁵² The U.S. Department of State warns that trying to leave Syria via land borders is dangerous due to frequent shelling and the risk of kidnapping.⁵³



*Syrian Army Post at the entrance to the Golan Heights
Flickr / delayed gratification*

▶ **Did these people threaten you?**

Visitor: hadadokum hadool il zelem?

Did these people threaten you?

Local: laa

No.

Exchange 58

Syria-Jordan Border

The Syrian border with Jordan is 379 km (235 mi) long.⁵⁴ Syria has two border crossings with Jordan. In October 2018, the Naseeb border crossing on Syria's southern border with Jordan reopened. The crossing was closed in 2015 after rebels seized it and disrupted trade between Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and the Gulf countries. The Daraa customs post was recaptured by Syrian government forces after five years of rebel rule.^{55, 56}

▶ Show us the car registration.		
Visitor:	farjeenaa daftar is sayaara	Show us the car registration.
Local:	eh	OK.

Exchange 59

Syria-Israel Border

The Syria-Israel border is 83 km (51 mi) long.⁵⁷ There are no formal border crossings between the two countries. In October 2018, Israel reopened the Quneitra crossing in the Israeli-controlled portion of the Golan Heights, which is operated by the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF). The crossing was closed in 2014 after UN observers were attacked and captured by Syrian rebels. The Quneitra crossing first opened in 1974 after the Yom Kippur War, allowing members of the Druze population who live on both sides of the border to visit relatives. Only United Nations troops who monitor the cease-fire between Syria and Israel can move freely between the two countries.^{58, 59}



Golan Heights - Syria border
Flickr / Greg Sass

▶ Please get out of the car.		
Visitor:	min faDhlak inzool min is sayaara	Please get out of the car.
Local:	Tayeb	OK.

Exchange 60

Syria-Lebanon Border



Syria-Lebanon Border
Flickr / Giorgio Montersino

The Lebanese-Syrian border is 403 km (250 mi) long.⁶⁰ There are five official border crossings between Lebanon and Syria, all of which are under Syrian government control and lead to Homs and Damascus Provinces. The Dabbusiah (Syria)-Abbudiah (Lebanon) border crossing in the north has never been closed. The Jdeidat Yabus (Syria)-Masnaa (Lebanon), Tartus (Syria)-Arida (Lebanon), and Tal Kalakh (Syria)-Bouqueiya (Lebanon) border crossings are also open. In late 2017, the Jussiyeh (Syria)-al-Qaa (Lebanon) border crossing in the southern Aleppo countryside side, which had been closed since 2012, was reopened after the Syrian military reclaimed most of the territory from rebels.⁶¹ There are still many illegal border-crossing points along the Lebanese-Syrian border, used by smugglers and people who live in border towns.^{62, 63, 64}

▶ Is this all the ID you have?

Visitor:	kel hadool il haweyaata illi ma'akum?	Is this all the ID you have?
Local:	eh	Yes.

Exchange 61

Syria-Iraq Border

Syria has three border crossings with Iraq along the 599 km (372 mi) border. Kurdish fighters control the Yaarubiya crossing. In the eastern province of Deir ez-Zor, the Albu Kamal crossing has been held by Syrian forces since 2017. Syria and Iraq are planning to reopen this crossing. Al-Tanaf, another border crossing in the eastern Deir ez-Zor Province is held by U.S.-led coalition forces.⁶⁵

Syria-Turkey Border

The border between Northern Syria and Turkey measures about 899 km (558 miles).⁶⁶ Syria has 13 border crossings with Turkey, most of which are held by rebels or Kurdish fighters. The Bab al-Hawa border crossing in northwestern Idlib Province is controlled by rebels from the Free Syrian Army. Humanitarian supplies and commercial cargo

cross from the Turkish side into Syria. Bab al-Hawa was a vital border crossing before the civil war, handling billions of dollars of goods passing through Syria en route from Europe to the Gulf countries.^{67, 68}



Syria-Turkey Border
Flickr / William John Gauthier

The Bab al-Salama and Jarabulus crossings in the province of Aleppo are held by Turkish-backed Syrian rebels. Both Kobani in Aleppo Province and Tal Abyad in Raqqa Province are held by U.S.-backed Kurdish fighters. The Ain-Diwar and Ras al-Ain crossings are also controlled by Kurdish fighters. Both Qamishli in the northeastern border and Kassab crossings in the western province of Latakia are controlled by the Syrian regime but closed on the Turkish side.⁶⁹ In 2014, Turkey began building a border wall meant to stop smuggling and illegal crossing from Syria.⁷⁰

Checkpoints



Syrian soldiers at a checkpoint in the Bab Amro neighborhood of Homs on May 2, 2012
Flickr / Freedom House

There are still hundreds of military checkpoints all over Syria. Since the latter half of 2018, almost all the pro-government roadblocks and checkpoints in and around Damascus have been removed.⁷¹ Extremist groups target checkpoints and border crossings and pose a serious threat to civilians. These groups also kidnap U.S. citizens for ransom or political purposes.^{72, 73}

▶ Where is the nearest checkpoint?

Visitor:	wayn a-rab neqTat tafteesh?	Where is the nearest checkpoint?
Local:	itnayn keelometer min hon	It's two kilometers.

Exchange 62



Syrian soldiers at a checkpoint
Flickr / Freedom House

When stopped at a checkpoint, showing identification is compulsory. Guards will ask about previous whereabouts as well as the destination of drivers and passengers. If asked to step out of the vehicle, politely comply. Drivers may have to hand over other documents for examination. A car may be searched and possessions examined, especially if there is suspicion of hidden weapons.

▶ Are you carrying any guns?		
Visitor:	ma'ak ay asleHa?	Are you carrying any guns?
Local:	laa	No.

Exchange 63

Landmines

Syria is not a participant in the Mine Ban Treaty and is not known for producing antipersonnel mines. Although the origin and size of Syria's mine stockpile is not known, mines that were removed from the ground in southern Syria and shown in photographs posted online in 2015 indicate that they were manufactured in Russia.⁷⁴

Until the onset of the civil war, the most mined areas in Syria were the border areas, the southwest, and the Syrian-controlled areas in the Golan Heights. The first reports about the Syrian government's use of antipersonnel mines in border areas began to emerge in late 2011. Reports of civilian casualties from mines planted by the IS and the Syrian government began to appear in 2016 and increased in 2017 and 2018. IS militants planted improvised mines in Aleppo Governorate, Palmyra and Homs Provinces, and Raqqa when they controlled



The borders with Jordan and Syria are covered by Israeli minefields
Flickr / scottgunn

these areas. During the retreat from Raqqa, IS militants left improvised antipersonnel landmines and booby traps in buildings, debris piles and open fields in a final effort to kill civilians and military personnel. The Lebanese armed group Hezbollah, which supports the Syrian government, planted mines near the Lebanese border, killing and injuring civilians trying to flee the area. Mines that were laid in schools, homes, and roads during and after fighting between IS militants and the Syrian Democratic Forces injured and killed civilians in northern Syria.^{75, 76, 77}

According to experts, improvised mines laid in Syria will require different clearing techniques because the charges used in them are much higher than those used in conventional antipersonnel landmines.⁷⁸

▶ Is this area mined?		
Visitor:	hal manTeqa malghomeh?	Is this area mined?
Local:	eh	Yes.

Exchange 64

The United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, and France have promised to support demining efforts. In July 2018, Israel cleared 350 mines in the Golan Heights, most of which were laid by Israel after the 1967 Six-Day War, though some were laid by Syria and Jordan and washed into Israel.⁷⁹ The Turkish military is clearing landmines and improvised explosive devices in the northwestern region of Afrin.⁸⁰

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Chapter 5 | Rural Life

Assessment

1. Although the majority of farms are family owned, the government controls the collection and distribution of agricultural products.
2. One of the factors that contributed to the breakout of the Syrian civil war was a severe drought.
3. A mukhtar is a village leader who acts as a liaison between the village and the authorities.
4. Syria produces antipersonnel mines in a secret location in rural Deir ez-Zor.
5. There are no formal border crossings between Syria and Israel.

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



*Syrian refugees
Flickr / Photo Unit*

Chapter 6 | Arabic-Levantine Cultural Orientation

Family Life

Introduction

Syria's traditional society is focused on honor, education, and above all, the family. Family background is the basis of social status and reputation, and loyalty to the family is considered the highest value. Marriages are usually arranged, and births are a cause for celebration. In this patriarchal society, men hold the power and authority in the family and children are taught discipline, obedience, and respect for the elderly. Women marry young and care for the home and the family.¹

The violent conflict that broke out in Syria in 2011 has torn apart millions of families. More than five million Syrians have become refugees, thousands of children have lost

their homes and parents, and women have lost their male protectors and providers. The rates of divorce, polygamy and child marriages have increased, and social norms have been erased by the struggle to survive.^{2, 3}

The pre-2011 Syrian family has changed as more and more women have lost their husbands and become heads of households. How these changes will affect the country once reconstruction and recovery begin is yet to be seen.⁴

Family Structure

Syrians place a high priority on family, the core unit of society. If you ask Syrians where they are from, often they will respond in terms of family origin rather than geography. The family serves as a support network for its members. The ideal Syrian household traditionally includes two or three generations: grandparents, their children (both married and single), and grandchildren. This extended family may also include uncles, aunts, and cousins. When children marry, they tend to stay close to their parents, and may even remain in the same household. Family members usually maintain extremely close and loyal ties to each other. They support each other in good and bad times. Often they work together in business and provide connections for each other in order to succeed, whether in education, politics, or finance.⁵



*Extended Syrian family in Aleppo
Flickr / Aino*

The family is organized around patrilineal descent, with inheritance and control traced through the paternal line. Men make key decisions in financial and family matters. When a bride leaves home, she joins her husband's family. At the same time, she is still part of her father's lineage and will inherit from him.⁶

Bonding in the family typically takes place along gender lines. Women, having a greater domestic role, spend much time socializing together in the home, and they form strong social networks. Men also have strong bonds of friendship and kinship. Close bonding for both sexes occurs within the extended family.⁷

► Does your family live here?

Visitor:	bet'eesh 'eeltak hon?	Does your family live here?
Local:	eh	Yes.

Exchange 65

The collective and the family are valued over all else. Security is found through attachment to the family. The blending and reshaping of families through divorce and remarriage, common in the West, may be seen in the Muslim world as evidence of social breakdown.⁸

Urban migration, housing shortages, economic pressure, and higher levels of education have reduced the size of the family.^{9, 10, 11} Economic uncertainty is impacting families as well. Young people delay their marriage plans until they are more stable financially and have a greater say about whom to marry. Although parental advice remains important, more and more young people are making their own decisions about marriage. The family unit also is becoming smaller.¹²

Typical Household



Family in Hama
Flickr / Charles Roffey

A typical household may consist of parents, children, grandparents, and other relatives, all living under one roof or in households located nearby. This extended family configuration is more common in rural areas than in urban areas, where families may be smaller but still live close to relatives. After marrying, a couple, particularly in rural areas, lives with the husband's family, rather than set up a separate household.^{13, 14}

► How many people live in this house?

Visitor:	kam waaHed be'esh bahal bayt?	How many people live in this house?
Local:	'ashara	Ten.

Exchange 66

Many families, especially in rural areas, have as many as 10 to 12 children. If there is a great economic need, children work in the fields alongside their parents. Families in urban areas are smaller because of housing shortages and economic uncertainty.^{15, 16}



Family in Salamiye
Flickr / Charles Roffey

In rural households, women work at home and on the farmland. In many cases, because of their dual roles, women work longer hours than men. Men are the wage earners and control distribution of income.^{17, 18}

▶ Are these people part of your family?		
Visitor:	hadool in naas min 'eeltak?	Are these people part of your family?
Local:	eh	Yes.

Exchange 67

Status of Elders, Adolescents, and Children



Old man, Damascus
Flickr / Arian Zwegers

Traditionally, the oldest male has the most authority in the household and is expected to be financially responsible for the family. Throughout old age, grandparents or great-grandparents remain fully integrated members of the family and are consulted for their wisdom and experience. The ideal is for all family members to remain emotionally and physically close throughout their lives.^{19, 20}

Children are raised to obey their parents and their elders. They yield seats to adults, wait for them to begin eating, watch over their siblings, do not interrupt adult conversations, and obey their parents.²¹ They are valued because they increase social standing and help their parents in old age. Before the age of six, not much is expected of children. However, as they grow older, their status in the family often depends

on the family's economic circumstances. In rural areas, older children are often taken out of school to work on the family farm. Children of more stable or middle-class families are encouraged to continue their education. Children live with their parents until marriage.^{22, 23, 24}



Syrian children
Flickr / Charles Roffey

The reality of the long war has forced many children as young as seven-years-old to start working to help their families.²⁵

▶ Is this your entire family?

Visitor:	hay kel 'eeltak?	Is this your entire family?
Local:	eh	Yes.

Exchange 68

▶ Do you have any brothers?

Visitor:	ilak iKhwaat?	Do you have any brothers?
Local:	eh	Yes.

Exchange 69

Married Life, Divorce, and Birth



Hama wedding party
Flickr / upvernoz

The state has the duty of protecting and encouraging the institution of marriage. Most marriages are arranged by families. The parents of the bride expect the groom to be financially stable before they agree to the marriage; traditionally the groom or his family have to pay a bride price (*mahr*) to the bride's family. An engagement period allows the couple to get to know one another. While young people from cities and the upper class

can choose their partners, it is still rare for a couple to marry against their families' wishes. Marriage between first cousins is common among Arabs, Kurds, and Turkomans, in decline among middle class families, and forbidden among Circassians. Men from rural areas and working class families often marry younger women. It is not uncommon for husbands to be 10 or 15 years older than their wives.^{26, 27}

Child Marriages

The legal age of marriage for girls is 17 and for boys 18, but with the consent of a legal guardian such as a father or grandfather, girls who reach puberty at 13 and boys who reach 15 can be legally married and register at a religious court. Until 2011, the rate of child marriage was less than 7%. The onset of war has doubled that figure. The latest government figures show that 14% of girls in Syria are married before the age of 18 and 3% before the age of 15.^{28, 29, 30}



A young bride
Flickr / UN Women Europe and Central Asia

The problem is more serious among refugee girls, as displacement, poverty, and fear that a girl may lose her “honor” drive parents to marry off their daughters. A 2016 study of refugee girls showed that child marriage is higher among refugee girls than in Syria overall. About 24% of refugee girls are married between ages 15 and 17.^{31, 32} In a refugee camp in Jordan, the rates of marriages of Syrian girls between the ages of 15 and 17 climbed to 36% in 2018.³³

▶ Is this your wife?		
Visitor:	heyeh martak?	Is this your wife?
Local:	laa	No.

Exchange 70

Divorce

Marriage, divorce and inheritance laws are based on sharia law. Women are allowed to seek a divorce if the marriage has not been consummated, if the husband is absent for a long time, or if there is extreme discord or abuse. Syrian men can divorce their wives sometimes without the women even attending court.^{34, 35, 36}

▶ Are you married?		
Visitor:	inte metjowez?	Are you married?
Local:	laa	No.

Exchange 71

In general, women are expected to return to their father’s household after divorce, but sometimes the family refuses to let the divorced woman return. The children remain legally in the woman’s custody until they reach a certain age. Boys may remain with their mothers until the age of nine and girls until the age of 11, after which their custody can be transferred to the father. A woman can lose custody of her children earlier if she works outside the home, moves to a different city or country, or remarries. Divorced women are entitled to receive child support and alimony, but courts rarely enforce payments.^{37, 38}



Mother with her baby
Flickr / UNHCR/ACNUR Américas

Although divorce figures are difficult to estimate, divorce rates are rising. However, because of society’s negative view of divorced women, many women face serious obstacles and harassment. Several governmental women’s organizations and NGOs have become more active since the beginning of the civil war, helping divorced and abused women find shelter.^{39, 40, 41} Failure to produce a boy may result in divorce.⁴²

Divorce decrees for Christians are granted by Christian religious authorities. With respect to custody laws, Christians have to follow personal status law based on sharia laws. In Kurdish areas, some laws are different, since Kurds maintain independence from the central government.⁴³

Honor Killings

Honor killing is a cultural practice in which a male relative of a woman who is perceived to have committed a sexual transgression has the right to restore the family’s honor by killing the woman or banishing her from the family. The government does not keep official statistics of honor killings. The war has led to a rise in honor killings because of the pervasive use of rape by government forces and sexual slavery by the Islamic

State (IS). In 2009, Syria limited the punishment for men convicted of honor crimes. The new law introduced a two-year minimum sentence for honor killing.^{44, 45, 46}

Family Events

Marriage and Engagement

Marriage is a bond between families more than between individuals. Parents often choose or approve partners for their children, especially among rural families. Men or women who choose their own partner almost always marry within their social class and religious or ethnic group. The parents of the groom are responsible for the wedding expenses.⁴⁷



Syrian wedding ceremony
Flickr / phoenix_acment

The engagement period begins when the couple agrees to marry. While engaged, the couple may meet with each other’s families. The extended families also meet and exchange gifts and hospitality. Engaged couples often meet under the supervision of a male member of the woman’s family.⁴⁸

▶ Congratulations on your wedding!		
Visitor:	mabrook il 'ers!	Congratulations on your wedding!
Local:	shukran	Thank you.

Exchange 72

Muslim Weddings

Muslims do not marry in a mosque. Instead, an imam meets with all parties to review the marriage contract and sign the documents legalizing the marriage. The meeting usually takes place at the imam’s office or at the home of the groom. Particular chapters and verses from the Quran are recited. The bride and groom return separately to their respective homes. The next day there are separate parties for the men and the women.^{49, 50}

▶ I wish you both happiness.

Visitor: betmanaalkum il sa'aadeh

I wish you both happiness.

Local: ilnaa il sharaf

We are honored.

Exchange 73

A Muslim wedding is a large, elaborate celebration that includes feasting, music, and dancing, and may last up to seven days. Because of the long civil war, wedding celebrations are not as extravagant as they used to be. In some cases, the bride is in Syria, and the groom is living in another country. Marriage via Skype is one of the available options for women who wish to start a family.^{51, 52, 53}

Funerals



Girls are crying at their father's funeral
Flickr / Freedom House

Death is followed by many rituals that express mourning and respect for the dead. These rituals include a vigil, funeral procession and services, burial, condolences, and funeral meal. The funeral banquet is held after burial in Christian communities, and one week after a death in Muslim communities.⁵⁴

For a Muslim who is near death, a mullah is invited to read from the Quran. For a dying member of the Syriac Orthodox Church, the family invites a priest. The sick person's room is cleansed, and two candles are lit. The priest gives Holy Communion to the dying person and washes his fingers in a ritual glass of water. Then he recites certain psalms for the soul of the dead.⁵⁵

Muslims bury their dead before sundown on the same day of death. Before the funeral, the body is washed and wrapped in white linen or satin cloth by members of the family. The person who washes the corpse (*mghassel*) asks the family whether the deceased had any debt and who will pay it. Traditionally, the eldest member of the family takes responsibility for the debt.⁵⁶

During the mourning period, female relatives of the deceased wear black and men grow beards. Men carry the dead to the gravesite and recite prayers after the

grave is covered. The tombstone is placed on the grave after 40 days. Women do not attend the burial. Widows rarely remarry and often wear black for the rest of their lives.^{57, 58}

▶ **Please be strong.**

Visitor:	min faDhlkum konoo aawaayaa	Please be strong.
Local:	HanHaawel	We will try.

Exchange 74



Syrian protesters prayed the funeral prayer for the martyrs of Syria in the street in front of the embassy
Flickr / Zeinab Mohamed

Mourners who come to offer condolences do not speak to the family. They only nod and sit in silence, facing the family. They recite the *fateah* (first verse of the Quran) three times and then leave. Women usually serve visitors coffee. However, men and women attend separate wakes, which last three days, at the home of the deceased. Women mourners cry loudly and hit themselves to show their grief, while men remain quiet. The mourning period ends after 40 days with an elaborate meal. In rural areas, families slaughter an animal and invite the poor to share a meal.^{59, 60}

▶ **I would like to give my condolences.**

Visitor:	il 'umur ilak wo la-hlak	I would like to give my condolences to you and your family.
Local:	shukran	Thank you.

Exchange 75

Some customs have changed. Younger people sometimes wear white shirts, and instead of flowers, they bring money to the funeral to help the family. Furthermore, because death has become so common in the war and people fear for their lives, most people bury the dead and quickly leave the cemetery after reciting the *fatihah*.^{61, 62}

Naming Conventions

Most Syrians use Arabic naming conventions. The naming format includes three names: male or female personal name, the father’s personal name, and the grandfather’s personal name. Sometimes parents use the family name instead of the grandfather’s name. Many Muslims use names of family members of the Prophet Muhammed that are mentioned in the Quran, such as Muhammed, Ahmed, or Ali for boys, and Aisha or Amira for girls. Some personal first names are a compound such, Abd or Abdul (servant of) and Allah, which becomes Abdallah (servant of God) or Abdalkarim (servant of the generous). Abdul is not used as a name on its own. Syrian Christians use biblical names such as Mariam or George or English and French names.^{63, 64, 65}



Syrian children
Flickr / Charles Roffey

Family names reflect a person’s heritage, tribal allegiance, national origins, or ethnicity. Some family names have a specific meaning, such as a personal quality. Some family names begin with Al or El, such as the name of the former president, Hafez al-Assad (the lion). Sometimes, the child’s first name is followed by *bin* or *ibn* (son of) or *bint* (daughter of). The name Jamila bint Muhammad translates into Jamila, daughter of Muhammad.⁶⁶

▶ Are these your children?		
Visitor:	hadool oolaadak?	Are these your children?
Local:	eh	Yes.

Exchange 76

Fathers sometimes add their son’s name to their personal name and become “father of,” as in *Abu Suleiman*, father of Suleiman. In families that have daughters, the mothers add the eldest daughter’s name to their own name (*Umm*).^{67, 68}

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Chapter 6 | Family Life

Assessment

1. Since the beginning of the civil war, child marriage has been on the rise.
2. Syrian Muslims bury their dead on the same day of death.
3. When a woman in Syria gets a divorce, she usually loses custody of her children.
4. Syrian Christians use different names from Muslims.
5. Syrian Muslims marry in a mosque.

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

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Final Assessment

1. Aleppo is the capital of the Kurdish semi-autonomous region.
2. Refugees outside Syria, who could prove their Syrian citizenship, were able to vote in Syria's last parliamentary elections.
3. The Muslim Brotherhood is banned in Syria.
4. Giving a silk scarf or a gold watch to a man in Syria is highly appreciated.
5. October Liberation Day commemorates Syria's independence from France.
6. Many rural homes in Syria include a space for animals.
7. The Homs Gap was a popular trekking route to the source of the Orontes River before the civil war.
8. Sunni Muslims elect their religious leaders.
9. Yazidis are a Kurdish ethno-religious minority.
10. The president of Syria is elected to a four-year term.

11. *Kibbeh* is a traditional dish made of cracked wheat and minced lamb, beef, or goat meat.
12. The Syrian currency is the dinar.
13. Syria's longest border is with Turkey.
14. Prices of handicrafts and other merchandize in the *souks* are not set or displayed.
15. The Alawites, an offshoot of Shia Islam, are the largest religious group in Syria.
16. Male foreigners who want to show respect to a Syrian man should kiss him on each cheek during a greeting.
17. Islam is the official religion of Syria.
18. The Syrian civil war has displaced half of Syria's population.
19. President Hafez al-Assad ruled Syria for nearly 30 years.
20. Convoys carrying medical supplies into Syria require formal approval from the government.
21. Damascus is surrounded by roadblocks and checkpoints operated by pro-government militias.

22. Homosexuality is against the law in Syria.
23. Kurds have to apply for permission to attend public schools.
24. President Assad's Alawite regime is the only ruling minority government in the Middle East.
25. Halal refers to certain animal products that Muslims are NOT allowed to consume.
26. It is illegal to celebrate Christmas in public in Syria.
27. Syria is designated a state sponsor of terrorism.
28. The Baath Party is the ruling party of Syria.
29. Syria's Armenians are a nomadic people who have historically inhabited the Levant.
30. Syria was driven out of Lebanon in 2008 by Israel's Defense Forces during the war between Israel and Hezbollah.

29. False; 30. False

19. True; 20. True; 21. False; 22. True; 23. True; 24. True; 25. False; 26. False; 27. True; 28. True; 9. True; 10. False; 11. True; 12. False; 13. True; 14. True; 15. False; 16. False; 17. False; 18. True; Assessment Answers: 1. False; 2. False; 3. True; 4. False; 5. False; 6. True; 7. False; 8. True;