



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. Syria covers 71,498 square miles (185,180 square kilometers), an area roughly the size of Florida. The coastal region borders on the Mediterranean Sea but also includes the narrow range of Anti-Lebanon Mountains to the south. This western edge of Syria receives adequate rainfall; it is also home to most of the population. The much larger eastern region is dominated by a rocky desert known as al-Badiyah, which extends from Damascus (Syria's capital, in the southwest) to the Euphrates River in the northeast. Much of it is a plateau that rises to an elevation of about 2,000 feet (610 meters). Northeastern Syria contains fertile agricultural land, especially near the Euphrates.

Summers are hot and dry, with average high temperatures of 100°F (38°C) in the desert and 90°F (32°C) near the coast. Winters on the coast last from December to February. They are mild and rainy and average about 59°F (15°C). The west is colder and receives some snow.

History. Syria is an ancient land with a rich cultural heritage. Aleppo is one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, and Damascus is one of the oldest continuously inhabited capitals. In its early history, the area was controlled by various people, including the Akkadians (2300 BC), Amorites (2000 BC), Hittites (1500 BC), and Assyrians (700 BC). For centuries, the area was a vital part of a wide commercial and political network. It was conquered by Alexander the Great in 333 BC, ruled by his successors (the Seleucids), and then brought into the Roman Empire in 64 BC.

Christianity was strong in Syria until the Muslim conquest in AD 634. The first Muslim empire, the Umayyad, ruled the expanding Islamic lands until 750. Egypt controlled the region at times until the Ottoman Empire conquered it in 1516.

Syrian territory continued to be a vital trade and political center. France governed the area under mandate after World War I. An independence movement emerged in the 1920s, but full sovereignty was not realized until 1945. Elections were held in 1947, but economic and political pressures in the new state led to unrest and a series of military coups. In 1970, Hafez al-Assad took power.

Assad ruled Syria with strict control. His government maintained the martial law declared in 1963 to combat domestic dissent. In 1982, thousands died as the military crushed a fundamentalist rebellion. President Assad attempted to shake the country's image as a terrorist state by expelling terrorists, helping solve the hostage crisis in Lebanon, and cooperating with international forces in the Gulf War (1990–1). Running unopposed in the February 1999 elections, Assad received 99 percent of the vote to gain his fifth seven-year term as president. However, he died on 10 June 2000, and the government quickly facilitated the succession of his son, 34-year-old Bashar al-Assad, by lowering the legal age to rule and making him the sole candidate in a July referendum.

Syria fought wars with Israel in 1948, 1967, and 1973. Antagonism between the two nations remains over Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights (near the Israeli border). Syria insists on the return of the Golan in exchange for peace, and Syrians generally believe the Golan must and will be returned to Syria. Negotiations between Israel and Syria have largely been suspended since 2000.

Syria's military entered Lebanon in 1976 during the Lebanese civil war. For the next 29 years, the presence of Syrian troops there allowed Syria to exert its influence over Lebanese politics. In February 2005, a car bombing killed Rafik Hariri,

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a former Lebanese prime minister and an outspoken critic of Syria. Many Lebanese accused Syria of plotting the assassination. His death sparked massive street protests in Lebanon and intense international pressure on Syria to withdraw its forces. In April 2005, Syria announced that the last of its troops had pulled out of Lebanon. A UN inquiry into the Hariri bombing implicated Syrian officials, but Syria has denied involvement.

THE PEOPLE

Population. Syria's population of 19.7 million is growing by 2.2 percent annually. Most Syrians (90 percent) are Arabs. The largest minorities are Kurds and Armenians. Smaller groups of Turks, Circassians, Assyrians, and some Palestinian refugees also inhabit the country. A large number of Iraqi refugees have arrived in Syria since the onset of the Iraq war in 2003. Roughly half of all Syrians live in urban areas. Damascus is the largest city, with at least four million residents.

Language. Arabic is Syria's official language and the native tongue of Syrian Arabs. Minorities speak Arabic as a second language. At home, they speak their native tongues of Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic (by Assyrians), and Circassian. French and English are taught in school.

Religion. While Syria is officially a secular state, the nation's political leaders try to keep policies in line with Islamic principles. About 74 percent of Syrians are Sunni Muslims. Other Islamic groups (16 percent) include the Alawites, the Druze, and the Shi'i. The Alawites are a branch of Shi'i Islam to which President Assad belongs.

Sunni and Shi'i Muslims differ on the question of Islam's leadership after the prophet Muhammad died, but central to all Muslims is a belief in the *Qur'an* (Koran) as the word of *Allah* (God) revealed to the prophet Muhammad. Muslims show devotion through the Five Pillars of Islam: professing that there is no God but *Allah* and Muhammad is his prophet; praying five times each day while facing Makkah, Saudi Arabia; giving money to the poor; fasting during the holy month of *Ramadan*; and making a pilgrimage to Makkah once in a lifetime. Friday is the Muslim day of worship.

Christians account for 10 percent of the population; they enjoy equal political rights in Syria. Christian denominations include Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic, Maronites, and other smaller groups.

General Attitudes. Syrians are dignified and proud of their heritage. Urban residents tend to be better educated, more cosmopolitan, and more liberal in their thinking. Conservative values are more prevalent in rural areas but are also preserved by many urban families. Syrians admire people with higher education, fame, power, and/or wealth acquired through hard work. They appreciate someone who is nice but assertive and who has good moral values. Hypocrisy is widely disliked. Most Syrians wish to attain a good education, buy a car and home (there is no financing; purchases are in cash), and have an adequate income to provide for a family. The younger generation is more influenced by Western attitudes and the desire to obtain money and luxury as quickly as possible.

Syrians are somewhat divided in their political opinions. Some want the country to become an Islamic republic; others favor more political freedom and some form of democracy. They have strong feelings regarding the prospects for Middle East peace and generally favor a settlement over more conflict. Syrians often disagree with policies of the U.S. government but admire the people of the United States for their lifestyle and educational opportunities.

Personal Appearance. Syrians traditionally dress very conservatively, avoiding revealing attire of any kind. For women, clothing such as tight pants, blouses that expose the upper arm, and short skirts are considered too revealing by most people. Most Syrian women wear a *hijab* (a scarf that covers the hair). A minority wear a *niqab* (a veil that covers the face). Women who wear the *hijab* often wear Western dresses or jeans, but a woman who wears the *niqab* dresses more conservatively, in traditional black clothes that completely cover the body. One can often tell a woman's home region by her clothing and hair covering. Bedouin women wear long dresses and the men wear *jalabas* (long robes) and a *keffiyah* (head covering). Urban men favor Western clothing, such as suits and ties, or shirts and slacks. Rural men wear Western or traditional Arabic clothing.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings. Syrians shake hands when they greet each other, although very religious individuals will not shake hands with members of the opposite sex. Men may embrace, depending on the closeness of their relationship. They might also kiss on each cheek, as do women. Men kiss women on the cheek only if they are close relatives. Children may kiss the back of their parents' or grandparents' hands as a greeting to show respect.

Greetings are warm. Common phrases include the traditional Islamic wish *Asalaam alaykum* (Peace be upon you) and the reply *Wa alaykum Asalaam* (And peace upon you), as well as the less formal *Marhaba* (Hi). Hosts might welcome arriving guests with *Ahlan wa sahan*. One might inquire *Keef haalak?* (How are you?) to begin a conversation.

Adults are addressed by a title and last name. If a person does not have a professional title, his or her last name is preceded by *Sayyed* (Mr.), *Sayyida* (Mrs.), or *Anisa* (Miss). Using a person's first name is very impolite, unless he or she is a close friend or an acquaintance around the same age. One might appropriately refer to a parent as the mother or father of the oldest son. Some educated families use the oldest daughter's name if the parents have no sons. It is also acceptable to call an older man *Aam* (uncle) or an older woman *Khaleh* (aunt), even if the speaker is not related.

Gestures. Syrians pass items with the right hand or both hands, but not the left alone. They avoid pointing at other people or using fingers to indicate direction; the entire hand is preferred. It is inappropriate to do anything with the feet that would cause them to point at another person. Hence, Syrian men cross their legs at the knee but would not rest the ankle of one leg on the knee of the other. Women do not usually cross legs in public; they sit with knees close together and covered. It is unacceptable for women to sit with knees apart unless they are wearing very loose, long skirts. Syrians often rely on the eyes to get a person's attention or convey information.

Visiting. Visiting family and friends is an essential aspect of Syrian society. If adult children live near their parents, they usually visit them at least weekly. Other close relatives receive a visit at least biweekly. If one lives far away or has business or professional obligations that prevent frequent visits, telephone calls are acceptable.

Visitors are welcomed warmly; even unexpected visitors are never turned away. If a phone is available to both parties, however, it is polite to call ahead. Syrians enjoy having guests and try hard to make them comfortable. They offer refreshments (usually juice, lemonade, coffee, or tea) and sit down to conversation. If a visit is especially pleasant, it may extend into mealtime, and the guest is invited to join the family for a meal.

Business usually is not discussed in the home; it is also inappropriate to take bad news to a family at their home. Business associates are more often entertained at restaurants. Some urban families may also receive friends at a restaurant or private club if they feel their apartments or schedules cannot accommodate entertaining at home. The host pays the entire bill at a restaurant.

Eating. The family meal is important to Syrians. Children wait for their father to come home before they all sit down to eat. Lunch (2–3 p.m.) is the main meal of the day for most families. If an unrelated male is eating with a rural or very conservative urban family, the children and mother will eat separately from the men. Some foods are eaten with the hands and others with utensils. A spoon is the most frequently used utensil. In rural areas, dishes are placed on a canvas or plastic material spread on the ground. When guests are present, hosts urge them to eat more than one helping. Guests usually decline the offer twice out of politeness before accepting the third offer. Hosts typically accept a polite decline on the third offer. Finishing one's food shows gratitude for the hosts.

LIFESTYLE

Family. The family is the center of an individual's life. Any individual achievements advance the entire family's reputation. Many social events are organized by and for the family. Children look to their parents as role models. They give special respect to their father, who maintains discipline and is the primary provider. The mother devotes herself to the children and helps them in all aspects of life. Syrians stay close to their parents throughout their lives. Most Syrians will not show respect to someone who treats his or her parents poorly. Because of the care they receive from their parents, children expect to provide care for them when they are elderly.

The extended family is very close, and although nuclear family households are most common in cities, some homes still hold more than one generation. According to Islam, a man may have as many as four wives, but he must have permission from any wives he already has and must provide for each equally. However, only a small minority of men, most of them in rural areas, choose to have more than one wife.

Housing. Traditional houses were usually built around a central courtyard, an arrangement that helped keep the house cooler in summer. Such houses still exist, but today most city dwellers live in small apartments in buildings with up to 15 storeys. A family of five or more may share an apartment of 645 square feet (60 square meters). Most villagers live in small brick houses. Every home has a living room reserved for hosting guests. Male and female guests often socialize together in the living room, where chairs and couches line the walls. However, in more conservative families, women socialize separately in another part of the house and do not enter the living room when male guests are present.

Dating and Marriage. While dating is becoming common in more Westernized circles, it still occurs mostly among young adults of college age and is restricted to cousins and close friends of the family. Even Westernized adults who can pick their own mates are careful to choose someone the family approves of. Among more traditional people, dating is not common and families play a dominant role in selecting marital partners for their children. Marriage between people of different religions (and even different branches of Islam) is rare. A Muslim written engagement permits a couple to be in public together and to go on dates before getting married. It is later

formalized by a ceremony that indicates the couple has made the final decision to marry.

Wedding customs depend on the family. Westernized families have a traditional ceremony followed by a reception in mixed company. Conservative families hold separate parties for men and women. The men have a religious ceremony, while the women enjoy music and dancing. The bride receives presents at this party, where she also changes into several party dresses before donning the white wedding dress.

Life Cycle. When a child is born to a Muslim family, a *sheikh* (priest) is asked to visit the home to whisper the phrase *Allah o 'Akbar* (God is great) into the newborn's ear. To celebrate the baby's arrival, the relatives and friends in attendance are then served a pudding of rice flour and cinnamon. Among Christian families, a new baby is baptized in a church. Traditionally, Arab males were circumcised as a rite of passage at age 13, but today the procedure is performed in a hospital after the birth.

The dead are normally ritually washed by a close relative or a *sheikh*. The body is then dressed in a white cotton cloth and buried as soon as possible, with the head turned towards Mak-kah. Women and men are kept separate at funeral services, and women are normally not allowed at the cemetery for the burial.

Diet. Wheat is Syria's staple grain; lamb is the most popular meat. Traditional dishes include *foul* (fava beans with tomatoes, garlic, lemon juice, and olive oil), *hummus* (a dip made of chickpeas), and *mutabal* (mashed eggplant). Pieces of bread are used to scoop up and eat these dishes. Many families serve them on Fridays, though they may be eaten any day of the week. *Tabouleh* is a popular parsley salad with cracked wheat, green onions, and tomatoes. *Kebbeh* is spiced meatballs. A *Mezza* is a table full of appetizers often served at restaurants and clubs. It includes pickles, olives, breads, *hummus*, *mutabal*, and meat (raw or grilled) dishes mixed with spices and wheat. Breakfast often consists of Turkish coffee, cheese, yogurt, olives, eggs, bread, and tea. Cheese is made from lamb or goat milk. Favorite fruits include oranges, apples, grapes, figs, peaches, apricots, cherries, and plums. Devout Muslims do not eat pork or drink alcohol.

Recreation. Soccer is the most important sport in Syria and has an avid following. Basketball has gained popularity, especially among schoolboys. Water sports are popular in coastal cities. Women play sports (basketball, volleyball) but not competitively. Young women like to dance; older women enjoy exchanging recipes and doing crafts together. Visiting friends and relatives or socializing with them in a coffee shop or restaurant is a common leisure activity. Young Westernized people may go to a movie, but the older generation prefers to watch television or a video. Families enjoy outdoor activities.

The Arts. The Ministry of Culture and National Guidance promotes and controls cultural life. National folk traditions have been encouraged by the state. The National Museum in Damascus contains collections of Asian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic art. Until World War I, much art was restricted to calligraphy and arabesque (organic geometric designs). Painting has subsequently become more common.

Syria's traditional handicrafts include metalwork, elaborate filigree jewelry (made of gold, silver, or copper wire), and marquetry (the art of affixing wood patterns on boxes, trays, and furniture). Artisans create brocade by embroidering silks with arabesques (intricate patterns of interlaced lines) in gold and silver thread. Since the Middle Ages, Damascus has been famous for its woven textiles, known as *damask*. The capital is also known for beautiful blown glass.

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Syria has a rich literary tradition, although many Syrian writers have moved to Lebanon. Poetry is highly regarded and may be performed with a musical accompaniment. Music styles range from traditional Arabic music to European-style orchestras and vocalists. A traditional instrument is the *oud* (a stringed ancestor to the European lute) and the *nay* (an instrument similar to the clarinet).

Holidays. Secular holidays include New Year's Day, Revolution Day (8 Mar.), Labor Day (1 May), Martyr's Day (6 May), and War of Liberation Day (6 Oct.).

Islamic holidays, determined by the lunar calendar, include *Ramadan*, when Muslims do not eat or drink from sunrise to sundown each day. In the evening, meals are served and friends visit one another. People also pay special attention to the needs of the poor during this time. *Eid al-Fitr* is a three-day celebration at the end of *Ramadan*. Early-morning prayers are followed by visits to all family members, beginning with the grandparents. Children receive money and gifts, everyone gets new clothing, and people give to the poor. The four days of *Eid al-Adha* also include prayers and visiting, and Syrians slaughter a sheep to commemorate Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son. The meat is divided three ways: for the poor, the extended family, and the nuclear family. At the end, people congratulate those who have made a pilgrimage to Makkah. The birth of the prophet Muhammad and *Ashura* (the Shi'i Day of Atonement) are two other important holidays.

Christians celebrate Easter, although observances are distinctly separate between Eastern Orthodox and Western-rite faiths. Armenian Orthodox Christians celebrate Christmas on 6 January, while other Christians celebrate it on 25 December.

SOCIETY

Government. Syria is a republic comprised of 14 provinces. The president (currently Bashar al-Assad) is chief of state and has strong executive powers. A prime minister (currently Muhammad Naji al-Utri) is head of government; he heads an executive cabinet known as the Council of Ministers. The popularly elected 250-seat legislature is called the People's Council (*Majlis al-Chaab*). Laws generally are based on Islamic law (*shari'a*). The ruling Ba'ath Party (Arab Socialist Resurrectionist Party) controls the political landscape, and few other political elements have been able to gain much influence. The voting age is 18.

Economy. Syria traditionally has been an agricultural nation. Industrial output now accounts for most of the country's export income, but agriculture still employs more than one-third of the labor force. In addition to petroleum and textiles, Syria exports cotton, fruits, vegetables, wheat, and chickens. Except for small businesses, most industries are controlled and owned by the state. These include oil refineries, utilities, railways, and various manufacturing plants. The government is gradually increasing the degree of private sector ownership.

Skilled labor is in short supply, which hampers industrial growth. Many skilled and educated Syrians seek jobs abroad, primarily in Persian Gulf nations, the United States, and Europe. Inadequate infrastructure (including water distribution) and outdated technology challenge the economy. Poverty continues to afflict the population, especially in rural areas. Many families require two or three jobs to meet basic expenses. The currency is the Syrian pound (SYP).

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POPULATION & AREA

Population	19,747,586 (rank=57)
Area, sq. mi.	71,498 (rank=86)
Area, sq. km.	185,180

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	108 of 177 countries
Adjusted for women	95 of 156 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$3,808
Adult literacy rate	88% (male); 74% (female)
Infant mortality rate	14 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	72 (male); 76 (female)

Transportation and Communications. Syria's location has long made it a crossroads for the region. It has two major ports (Tartus and Latakia) and two international airports (at Damascus and Aleppo). An adequate system of roads and railways serves the country, but public transportation in cities (mainly buses) is inefficient. Urban families often have cars. Taxis and minibuses are available in larger cities; they run along set routes and pick up passengers until full. Large buses travel between cities and are generally efficient and inexpensive. In rural areas, agricultural products are transported by donkey or truck, depending on the quantity.

The government tightly controls all media to ensure no threatening or defamatory information is published. The government runs three television stations and one radio station, but people have access to international broadcasts through satellite dishes, especially in Damascus and Aleppo. Most urban homes have telephones and televisions. Cellular phone use is widespread. Internet cafés operate in large cities, and a growing number of people have internet access at home.

Education. The bulk of Syria's students are enrolled in public schools, but private religious and private secular schools also operate. Children attend six years of primary school, three years of middle school, and three years of high school. Until recently, as much as one-fourth of all students dropped out after only a few years. Dropping out is now illegal and most children complete at least the required nine years prior to high school. The literacy rate is lower among women, reflecting a traditional bias against sending girls to school. The literacy rate is higher among the current generation of pupils. Parents who can afford it often pay for private tutors to supplement their children's public education. Many students enroll in vocational training or work in a family business after their formal schooling. Others prepare for higher education at one of Syria's several universities.

Health. Syria's government provides free health care to its citizens, but private care is of higher quality and is preferred by those who can afford it. Government facilities often lack modern equipment and adequate supplies, especially in rural areas. Sanitation is often poor. Poverty, malnutrition, and unawareness of free immunizations provided by the government all contribute to the country's high infant mortality rate.

AT A GLANCE

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