

# Syria in Perspective

## An Orientation Guide



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# A Brief Profile of Syria

## Introduction

Welcome to Syria, a country with thousands of years of eventful history leading back to the dawn of time. Home to two of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, Damascus and Aleppo, Syria takes pride in its long history and in its role in shaping the



© www.hat.net  
Schoolboys laugh it up in Damascus

destiny of the Middle East and beyond, right up to the present day. Syria and its people have much cause for pride, and not just for things past: Syrian culture and cuisine, language and music have all attained fame and won admiration throughout the Arab world. However, Syria's political behaviors and involvement with terrorist groups represent a cause for concern. In the following pages, these and other facets of Syria—past, present, and future—will be brought into *perspective*.

## Syria in Facts and Figures<sup>1</sup>

**Population:** 17,585,540 (July 2002 est.)

**Note:** in addition, about 40,000 people live in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights - 20,000 Arabs (18,000 Druze and 2,000 Alawites) and about 20,000 Israeli settlers (Feb. 2003 est.)

### Age structure:

*0-14 years:* 38.6% (male 3,494,473; female 3,290,699)

*15-64 years:* 58.2% (male 5,238,026; female 4,991,588)

*65 years and over:* 3.2% (male 274,744; female 296,010)

*Median age:* total: 19.7 years

**Population growth rate:** 2.45%

**Birth rate:** 29.54 births/1,000 population

**Death rate:** 5.04 deaths/1,000 population

**Net migration rate:** 0 migrant(s)/1,000 population

**Sex ratio:** *At birth:* 1.06 male(s)/female under 15 years: 1.06 male(s)/female

*15-64 years:* 1.05 male(s)/female

*65 years and over:* 0.93 male(s)/female

*Total population:* 1.05 male(s)/female



© The Shunya  
Bedouin woman

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<sup>1</sup> Information in the Facts and Figures section is courtesy of the 2003 CIA World Factbook, <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/>. All figures are 2003 estimates unless otherwise noted.



© Aramco Services Company  
Young girl in Syria

**Infant mortality rate:** *Total:* 31.67 deaths/1,000 live births  
*Female:* 31.43 deaths/1,000 live births  
*Male:* 31.89 deaths/1,000 live births

**Life expectancy at birth:**  
*Total population:* 69.39 years  
*Male:* 68.18 years  
*Female:* 70.67 years

**Total fertility rate:** 3.72 children born/woman

**Nationality:** Noun: Syrian(s); Adjective: Syrian

**Ethnic groups:** Arab 90.3%, Kurds, Armenians, and other 9.7%

**Religions:** Sunni Muslim 74%, Alawite (a Shi'ite subset), Druze, and other Muslim sects 16%, Christian (Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic, Armenian (Orthodox) Apostolic, Syrian Catholic, Maronite, Protestant, Nestorian, Latin, Chaldean) 10%

**Languages:** Arabic (official); Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic, Circassian widely understood; French, English somewhat understood

**Literacy:** Definition: age 15 and over can read and write  
*Total population:* 76.9%  
*Male:* 89.7%  
*Female:* 64%

**Country name:**  
*Conventional long form:*  
Syrian Arab Republic  
*Conventional short form:* Syria  
*Local short form:* Suriyah  
*Former:* United Arab Republic  
(with Egypt)  
*Local long form:* Al Jumhuriyah al  
Arabiyah as Suriyah



Syria: Administrative divisions  
Courtesy of the UT Library Map Collection

**Government type:** Republic under military regime since March 1963

**Capital:** Damascus

**Administrative divisions:** 14 provinces (*muhafazat*, singular - *muhafazah*); Al Hasakah, Al Ladhqiyyah, Al Qunaytirah, Ar Raqqa, As Suwayda', Dar'a, Dayr az Zawr, Dimashq, Halab, Hama, Hims, Idlib, Rif Dimashq, Tartus



**Independence:** 17 April 1946 (from League of Nations mandate under French administration)

**National holiday:** Independence Day, 17 April (1946)

**Constitution:** 13 March 1973

**Legal system:** Based on Islamic law and civil law system; special religious courts; has not accepted compulsory ICJ jurisdiction.

**Suffrage:** 18 years of age; universal

**Executive branch:**

*Chief of state:* President Bashar Al-Assad (since 17 July 2000)

*Vice Presidents* Abd al-Halim ibn Said Khaddam and Muhammad Zuhayr Mashariqa (since 11 March 1984)

**Head of government:**

*Prime Minister* Muhammad Mustafa Miru (appointed 13 March 2000)

*Deputy Prime Ministers* Lt. Gen. Mustafa Talas (since 11 March 1984),

Farouk al-Shara (since 13 December 2001),

Dr. Muhammad al-Husayn (since 13 December 2001)

**Cabinet:** Council of Ministers appointed by the president

**Elections:** The Syrian president is elected by popular vote for a seven-year term. A referendum/election was last held on 10 July 2000, after the death of President Hafez Al-Assad, father of current President Bashar Al-Assad, who was nominated by the Ba'th Party. The next election is slated to be held in 2007. The vice president, prime minister, and deputy prime ministers are all directly appointed by the president.



**Legislative branch:** The unicameral People's Council or *Majlis al-Shaab* consists of 250 seats whose members are elected by popular vote to serve four-year terms. The Syrian Constitution guarantees that the Ba'th Party (part of the NPF alliance) receives one-half of the seats.

**Judicial branch:** Supreme Constitutional Court, in which justices are appointed for four-year terms by the president. Additionally there are a High Judicial Council, a Court of Cassation, and State Security Courts.

**Political parties:** National Progressive Front (NPF) (includes Arab Socialist Renaissance (Ba'th) Party (governing party); Socialist Unionist Democratic Party; Syrian Communist Party; Unionist Socialist Party; Arab Socialist Party; Arab Socialist Unionist Movement;

Syrian Arab Socialist Party (ASP); Syrian Communist Party (SCP); Syrian Social National Party.

Political pressure groups include conservative religious leaders and the Muslim Brotherhood, which operates in exile in Jordan and Yemen. In general however, non-Ba'th parties have little effective political influence.

**International organization participation:** AFESD, AL, AMF, CAEU, ESCWA, FAO, G-24, G-77, IAEA, IBRD, ICAO, ICC, ICCt (signatory), ICRM, IDA, IDB, IFAD, IFC, IFRC, IHO, ILO, IMF, IMO, Interpol, IOC, ISO, ITU, NAM, OAPC, OIC, UN, UN Security Council (temporary), UNCTAD, UNESCO, UNIDO, UNRWA, UPU, WCO, WFTU, WHO, WMO, WTO



Courtesy of the CIA World Factbook  
Flag of the Republic of Syria

**Syrian diplomatic representation in the US:**

*Chancery:* 2215 Wyoming Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008.  
*Tel.:* (202) 232-6313

**US diplomatic representation in Syria:**

*Embassy:* Abou Roumaneh, Al-Mansur Street No. 2, Damascus  
*Tel.:* [963] (11) 333-1342

**Communications**

The Syrian telephone system is in fair condition and currently undergoing significant improvement and digital upgrades, including the installation of fiber-optic technology. Syria has only one Internet Service Provider (ISP) and there were an estimated 60,000 Internet users in 2002.

**Military**

*Military branches:* Syrian Arab Army, Syrian Arab Navy, Syrian Arab Air Force (includes Air Defense Forces), Police and Security Force

*Military age:* 19 years

*Military manpower* - availability: males age 15-49: 4,715,386

*Military expenditures* - percent of GDP: 5.9% (FY00)

**Transnational Issues**

*International disputes:* The Golan Heights are Israeli-occupied. Hezbollah claims the Shaba'a farms, which are located in the Golan Heights. Syrian troops have been stationed in Lebanon since October 1976. Additionally, Syria protests Turkish hydrological projects regulating the upper Euphrates river waters. Furthermore, Turkey is quick to consistently rebuff any perceived Syrian claim to the Hatay province.

**Illicit drugs:** According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Syria is considered to be a transit point for opiates and hashish bound for regional and Western markets.

## Geography

### Syria's Neighborhood

Syria is located at the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, though its shoreline extends only about one hundred miles, north-south. To its north is Turkey. To its east and southeast lies Iraq. Jordan is directly south of Syria, while Israel and Lebanon are found at the lower half of Syria's western border.



Courtesy of the UT Library Map Collection  
Physical map of Syria

### Natural Features

Syria has two narrow mountain ranges: one, the “Anti-Lebanon” range, which separates the border with Lebanon, and another facing the Mediterranean coast. Desert covers the greater portion of Syria's land. Irrigated areas include:

- the far northeastern tip, watered by the Tigris River;
- the Euphrates River Valley, which extends from the Turkish border, some 75 miles northeast of Aleppo, meandering first south into Lake Assad, then southeast all the way to the center point of the border with Iraq;
- the Mediterranean coastal area;
- the western region in general;
- Damascus, which is supplied with water from the Barada River. This waterway has its source in the Anti-Lebanon mountains.

*A succession of oases [lie] east of the eastern mountain system on the edge of the steppe, and [are] fed by short local streams. Of these the most important are, from north to south, (a) the Saltpan of Jebeil, fed by the North al-Dahab; (b) the oases of Kinnesrin and Aleppo, fed by the North Kuwaik; and (c) that of Sham or Damascus, fed by streams from Hermon, of which the Barada (Abana) and the Awaj (Pharpar) are the chief tributaries<sup>2</sup>.*



© Bob and Clarice Hoffmann  
The Leja

### Environmental Issues

Syria has to deal with a variety of environmental issues. These include deforestation, overgrazing, soil erosion, and desertification. Water pollution from raw sewage and petroleum refining wastes is a big problem that contributes to an inadequate supply of potable water.

<sup>2</sup> “Syria” 1911 Edition *Encyclopedia*, <http://88.1911encyclopedia.org/S/SY/SYRIA.htm>

## Climate

As an arid / semi-arid region, Syria suffers a chronic shortage of water. In the west, including Damascus, the rain falls (but not plentifully) from December to March. During the winter season, the temperature hovers in the 50s (Fahrenheit), but it can dip down into the 40s (Fahrenheit) and occasionally into the 30s. Snow and sleet, though not a frequent weather phenomenon, are known to fall on the streets of Damascus. Up in the mountains,



© The Shunya  
Snowfall in the desert

the weather is cooler and snow is more likely. The spring and fall seasons in western Syria, including Damascus, feature sunshine and temperatures ranging from 50 to 70°F. Summer, however, is hot, with frequent days of the mercury rising above 100°F. Central and eastern Syria have greater extremes of temperature, as would be expected from a region dominated by desert. On a summer day, the temperatures rise well into the 100s and 110s°F; summer nights are cold and winter nights are frigid.

## Major Cities

### Damascus

Damascus (called *Dimashq* in the Arabic language, and also known as *ash-Shaam* by Syrians and other Arabs), the capital of Syria, is reputed to be the oldest continuously



© The Shunya  
The souq on a Friday

populated city in the world. Located in the southwestern corner of Syria and established in the 3rd millennium B.C.E.<sup>3</sup>, Damascus has hosted a long series of conquering civilizations, including Egyptian, Aramaic, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and Arab. Based on excavations undertaken in the 1950s, archaeologists have determined that a community dwelt southeast of Damascus as long ago as the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium B.C.E. Evidence of early human habitation, in the form of pottery, has been found in Damascus itself and dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C.E. The oldest known document to mention the name of Damascus is an ancient Egyptian record, stating that the Pharaoh Thutmose I conquered this city in the 15<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.<sup>4</sup>

Damascus boasts a number of important historical monuments. In the heart of the old city is the Umayyad Mosque, the construction of which began in 705 C.E.<sup>5</sup> under the rule of the caliph, Al-Walid. The “Street Called Straight” is an old Roman road



© Frank and Ruth Harold  
Great Mosque courtyard, Damascus

<sup>3</sup> B.C.E = Before the Common Era (corresponds to B.C.= before C

<sup>4</sup> “Damascus” *Encyclopedia Britannica* from Encyclopedia Britann

<sup>5</sup> C.E = Common Era (corresponds to A.D.= Anno Domini)

where the Apostle Paul was first converted to the Christian faith. No visit to Damascus is complete without a few trips to *Souk al-Hamidiya*, a huge Oriental marketplace, built adjacent to the ruins of the Roman Temple of Jupiter. The *souk* spans block after city block. The great commander who led the Muslim armies against the Crusaders, Salah ad-Din, is buried in this city at the tomb that bears his name: Saladin's Mausoleum. Modern Damascus bustles with a population of 2.1 million.

## Aleppo

Aleppo rivals Damascus for its antiquity, with a history that goes back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C.E. Already ancient Hittite documents mention Aleppo. Less than 50 miles from the border with Turkey, this city is 220 miles north of Damascus and it has a character all its own. The citadel, a majestic 13<sup>th</sup> century Muslim structure, ranks as the



© www.haf.net  
The Citadel at Aleppo

most famous landmark in Aleppo and draws international tourists and throngs of local school children on field trips. With a population of 1.6 million, Aleppo is second only to Damascus in size, but number one in terms of economic importance. Aleppo's bazaar dwarfs the *al-Hamidiya* of Damascus: "Aleppo often boasts that it has the largest covered souq in the world -- a complex maze several miles long that dates back to the Roman Empire<sup>6</sup>."

## Homs

Homs would be boasting its 4000-year-old architecture had earthquakes not destroyed much of it over the course of the millennia. Homs today is Syria's third largest city, with a population exceeding half a million. Even though tourists do not flock here, Homs plays a key role in Syria's economy and transportation. At 100 miles north of Damascus, travelers between Damascus and Aleppo or Tadmor have been stopping in Homs since time immemorial. Oil is refined in Homs, as is sugar and phosphates. A number of other mid-size and heavy industries are located here, including factories and mills.



© Damascus Online  
Mosque in Homs

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<sup>6</sup> "Terror War Hurts Syrian Market" from the CNN website, <http://www.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/meast/02/18/syria.market/>



© Stuart Whatling  
Ruins in Palmyra

## Tadmor and Palmyra

Board a bus in Homs and head east. Before long, you have left the green Orontes River Valley behind to face tedious, dry desert in all directions. Continue on for about 90 miles and suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, you see palm trees and ancient Roman columns. Welcome to Tadmor, “the city of dates,” formerly known as Palmyra, “the city of palms.”

Situated on the Silk Road, which extended from China all the way to the Mediterranean Sea, Tadmor is an oasis town in the middle of the Syrian Desert. Tadmor—then Palmyra—was once a glorious, semi-autonomous city state in Roman Syria (more on this in the history section). The ruins of Palmyra still stand as a monument to past glory and attract thousands of tourists annually.

## Hama

The first spectacle to greet visitors to the city of Hama (population 273,000<sup>7</sup>) is a set of enormous wooden water wheels. These *norias* were originally built in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and the largest of them measures 72 feet in diameter<sup>8</sup>. Hama is yet another Syrian city that traces its roots back to the earliest pages of history. Hittite in origin (3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C.E.), control passed to the Arameans in the 11<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., then to the Assyrians,



© Bob and Clarice Hoffmann  
Waterwheels in Hama

Persians, Greeks, Seleucids, Byzantines, Muslim Arabs, Crusaders, back to the Muslims again, Egyptian Mamluks, Ottomans, then finally to the Syrian Arab Republic. What has attracted so many conquerors to this town? It could be the strategic location: mid-way between Damascus and Aleppo, 50 miles east of the Mediterranean Sea, and surrounded by rich agricultural land. Or it could be the flowers: Hama is famous for its beautiful gardens, irrigated by the Orontes River.

## Latakia

For a vacation on the Syrian Riviera, try Latakia! Situated on the Mediterranean Sea some 200 miles north of Damascus, this seaport and beach resort was founded in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.E. by the Seleucid commander, Seleucos Nicator. He named it Laodicea—after his mother. The Greeks, however, were not the first to inhabit the area: the city of Ugarit, north of Latakia at *Ras Shamra*, was an ancient settlement that was destroyed almost a millennium before Alexander the Great marched across the ancient world.

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<sup>7</sup> “Hama” from *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*: Fourth Edition, 2000, on the website of Bartleby Bookstore: <http://www.bartleby.com/61/38/H0033800.html>

<sup>8</sup> “Hama” *Encyclopedia Britannica* from Encyclopedia Britannica Premium Service <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?eu=39793>

It is worth mentioning that Latakia is not only an attraction in and of itself, it is also a “jumping-off” point for other important landmarks. Already mentioned above, the ruins of Ugarit at Ras Shamra are just 10 miles north of the heart of Latakia. Excavations at Ugarit have unearthed well-preserved, priceless cuneiform tablets, documenting all aspects of Canaanite culture and corroborating or elucidating biblical texts. Further to the north is Ras Al-Basit; to the south is Tartus. Tourists in Latakia should not miss the chance to visit the Citadel of Salah ad-Din, some 20 miles east of the city, and the site of battles between Crusaders and Muslims.



© The Shunya  
Ruins of Quneitra, Golan Heights

### **Quneitra**

In the 1967 war with Israel, Syria lost a piece of land known as the Golan Heights, located in the southwestern corner of the country. The main city in the Golan Heights was Quneitra. During the battles of that war and later in the 1973 war, Quneitra underwent heavy barrages of bombing and artillery fire from both sides. In the cease-fire of 1974, Quneitra was returned to Syria. It is believed that the Syrian government has deliberately refrained from rebuilding Quneitra, opting instead to show it to the world as a mark of the “terrorism” of its enemy, Israel. To visit Quneitra, a tourist must request a special permit from the Syrian government.

# History

## Overview

*“From the Euphrates to the Mediterranean, from Zenobia to the Crusaders, there is not an inch of land in Syria that history and men have left untouched. A veritable open-air museum...”<sup>9</sup>”*

In recent years and perhaps now more than ever, the relationship between the United States and Syria has undergone a certain amount of strain and tension. Syria’s position on peace in the Middle East often seems at odds with our own. To understand Syrian political dynamics, it helps to learn what has transpired in Syria to bring this nation to its current status. Let us therefore trace the development of the Syrian nation back to the dawn of history and explore the factors of Syria’s past that have structured the present. Much of the following historical information was extracted from the website of the U.S. Library of Congress.



© gritty.org  
Fortress on the Syrian coast

## Ebla

Between 3500 and 3100 B.C.E., urban culture was getting a foothold in the city of Ebla, some 40 miles south-southwest of the present city of Aleppo. An excavation begun in the 1950s unearthed 17,000 cuneiform tablets that have provided an unparalleled insight into the economic, social, and political developments of that time. Furthermore, “the



© www.clipart.com  
Tablet with cuneiform writing

discovery of Ebla has had other important ramifications. The oldest Semitic language was thought to have been Amorite, but the newly found language of Ebla, a variant of Paleo-Canaanite, is considerably older<sup>10</sup>.”

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C.E., Ebla reached the zenith of its power and influence, ruling a portion of Syria that extended from the Orontes River Valley in the west to Mari in the far east (at the Euphrates River, near the present border with Iraq), south from the northern border of Canaan/Israel/Palestine, and north to the present Turkish border. According to the records collected and deciphered, women in Ebla played a significant role in the economy and politics of the society, which stands in contrast with most other ancient Middle Eastern civilizations.

<sup>9</sup> “Syria” from <http://www.middleeast.com/syria.htm>

<sup>10</sup> “Library of Congress Country Studies: Syria” from <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/sytoc.html>



© www.clipart.com  
Bust of Sargon

### Waves of Invaders

At roughly the same time Ebla was expanding, so was the Akkadian civilization in Mesopotamia... and Akkad had a mightier army. The Akkadian King Sargon attacked Ebla, and Naram-Sin (his grandson) conquered and laid waste to the city. Ebla survived, nevertheless, under the rule of the Akkadian kings. The Amorites then took Ebla in approximately the year 2000 B.C.E. Some 300-400 years later, the Amorites began facing irresistible pressure from all directions. From the north came the Hittites, who swept down and destroyed Ebla and ruled, off and on, until roughly 1000 B.C.E. From the south came the Egyptians who briefly controlled the entire region of Greater Syria, i.e., the land that includes the present-day states of Syria, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, and Jordan. From the east came the Assyrians, fresh from their conquest of Mesopotamia (more about the Assyrians below). From the west, i.e. the Mediterranean Sea, came the Philistines, the “Sea People” made famous in the biblical story of “David and Goliath.”

Already we see a pattern emerging: Syria becomes the stage on which rival nations, civilizations, and cultures fight their battles. So far, the Amorites, Akkadians, Egyptians, Assyrians, Philistines, and Hittites have left their mark.

*“Syria offered a considerable motive for the predatory powers of the region. Therefore, it is perhaps understandable that the great powers... expended much effort, along with blood to control this vitally strategic region<sup>11</sup>.”*

### Arameans and Assyrians

The Arameans enjoyed their pre-eminence in Syria between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E. Their most famous cities remain today the Syrian capital of Damascus and Aleppo, Syria’s commercial center. The Aramaic language became the lingua-franca of all of Greater Syria and retained linguistic dominance into the first millennium C.E. In fact, Aramaic is still spoken in a few Christian villages in Syria, including Maalula and Seydnaya, located in the hills not far from Damascus.



© Damascus Online  
Monastery in Seydnaya

The same Assyrians who ruled Mesopotamia and who would later crush the Israelites and burn Jerusalem to the ground, vanquished Syria in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. But the Assyrians’ star would rise and fall with relative brevity in Syria, for the Babylonians would conquer them in return only a century later, followed closely by the Persians in the

<sup>11</sup> “Who were the Hittites?” by Troy Fox, from the website of *Tour Egypt*: <http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/hittites.htm>

6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The Persians afforded the cities and villages of Syria a certain degree of sovereignty. The extent of this autonomy would fluctuate with the arrival of each new foreign ruler, from Alexander the Great in 333 B.C.E. to the Greek Seleucids just three decades later, to the Egyptians, Romans, Byzantines, and Arabs. Brief highlights of these regimes follow.



Historical depiction of Alexander the Great

### **Ancient Greek Conquest**

When Alexander the Great arrived in the land of Syria in 333 B.C.E., he brought not just his army and administration, but also a brand new world view and philosophy of life: Hellenism. The Syrian people would have their first exposure to Greek thought and “Western” culture and would be changed forever. After Alexander’s death, his successors were determined to carry on the Greek tradition. In 300 B.C.E., Seleucus Nicator founded the city of Antioch and in 296 B.C.E. he conquered the rest of Syria. In those years, the Seleucids and the Egyptians were intermittently at war with each other. In 241 B.C.E. Egypt achieved control of the Syrian coast. The Seleucids finally regained power in 198 B.C.E., but were destined to hang on to power for only half a century: the

Romans were now on the march.

### **When in Rome...**

The Romans came, saw, and conquered Syria in 64 B.C.E. As did their Seleucid predecessors, the Romans ruled Syria through periods of calm and interludes of turbulence. One of the more curious episodes of Syrian history under the Romans took place in the city of Palmyra. Palmyra started out as a sovereign desert kingdom in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. Shortly after the Roman conquest of Syria, the Roman Emperor Adrian visited Palmyra (129 B.C.E.) and declared Palmyra a free city. For some 400 years, Palmyra flourished. In 267 C.E., Queen Zenobia, of Arab-Nabatean heritage, assumed the reins of authority in Palmyra and challenged the power of Rome. In her short reign, Queen Zenobia took over Syria and lower Egypt, but she was captured by the Romans in 272, who terminated her ambitions. In a move typical of the Romans, they looted, sacked, and burned much of Palmyra. The city never returned to its original glory.



© www.clipart.com  
Bust of Zenobia

In 324 C.E. the Roman Empire, under Constantine, shifted its capital to Byzantium and gave it the name Constantinople. The Byzantines divided Greater Syria into two sections: the first had Antioch as its capital and the second had Hama. “Syria Secunda,” as it was known in Latin, also came to be known as Phoenicia, and was further divided into Phoenicia Prima, ruled from Tyre, and Phoenicia Secunda, having Damascus as the capital.

## The Spread of Islam

The Byzantines fought chronic wars with the Sassanid Persian Empire, with many of their battles in Syria. Both sides exhausted their treasuries on the military, which left them vulnerable to a new invasion force: the Arab army, marching north from the Arabian Peninsula. In the early 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E., the Prophet Muhammad began to spread the religion of Islam, starting in the city of Mekka and spreading throughout Arabia.<sup>12</sup> In 635, Byzantine Damascus surrendered to Khalid Ibn Al-Walid, one of the Prophet's generals. It was not long before Syria became a majority-Muslim state, but the Islamic government did tolerate Christians and Jews. Forced conversion was the exception rather than the rule.

Mu'awiya, of the Umayyad tribe, was appointed by the Caliph<sup>13</sup> Umar as the first governor in 639, making Damascus his capital. However, harmony did not reign in the newly expanding Muslim empire. Umar's successor, Uthman, led the effort to collect, compile, and codify an official version of the *Qu'ran*, the holy book of Islam. Uthman, however, was assassinated, and Ali – cousin and son-in-law to the late Prophet Muhammad – stepped in as the new Caliph. Uthman's family resented the fact that Ali did not punish Uthman's assassins—and Mu'awiya was a member of this family. For this reason, Mu'awiya refused to recognize Ali as the Caliph. Ali led his army to confront Mu'awiya. They parted without resolving their dispute, but Ali himself was slain in 661. At this point, Mu'awiya became the first Umayyad Caliph.



Arabs on horseback

## The Umayyad Era

The Muslim world expanded widely and rapidly. During the period known as the Umayyad Era, the Muslim armies marched across the Middle East and Africa; they sailed to Europe and conquered Spain; they penetrated Central Asia, northwest India, and reached the doorstep of China. All these campaigns started out in Syria and it was the Syrian Arab Muslims themselves who supplied most of the manpower. That manpower was not just military: wherever the Umayyads marched, their architects and builders followed and constructed mosques. The two most famous of these are the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

*Mu'awiyah stands out as one of the few caliphs who is depicted both in Muslim historiography and in modern scholarship as a decisive force in Islamic history... a person whose actual accomplishments were of great magnitude... These accomplishments lay primarily in political and military administration, through which Mu'awiyah was able to rebuild a*

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<sup>12</sup> Abd al-Aziz Al-Saud founded the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1926. Before that, it was just called Arabia.

<sup>13</sup> The word "caliph" (Arabic *khaleefa*) means "successor." The four "righteous" caliphs were the first four men who took over the leadership of the Muslim community after the Prophet Muhammad died. The first was Abu Bakr; the second, Umar; the third, Uthman; and the fourth, Ali.

*Muslim state that had fallen into anarchy and to renew the Arab–Muslim military offensive against unbelievers*<sup>14</sup>.

The Umayyad Dynasty would last for just under a century, during which time Arabic replaced Aramaic and Greek as the principal language of Syria. By the mid 700s, however, dissent from within and resentment from without would weaken the Umayyad grip on power. In 750 the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyads and established a new caliphate in Baghdad that would last for 500 years. The proud Umayyad Syrians never quite accepted Abbasid ascendancy. Abu Ali Hassan, a Shiite<sup>15</sup> prince also known as *Sayf ad-Dawla* (“Sword of the State”), established the Hamdani kingdom in Aleppo, which ruled throughout the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The Hamdanis were finally defeated by the Muslim Seljuk Turks, who swept in from the northeast in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and ruled from Aleppo and then Damascus until the 1090s.

### **Fatimid Rule**

Meanwhile, the Shiite Fatimids<sup>16</sup> invaded Syria from Egypt. Unlike the Umayyads or Abbasids, the Fatimids had no tolerance for non-Muslims. From 966 to 1021, the Fatimid caliph Abu Ali Mansur al-Hakim terrorized Christians and Jews, burning their holy places and forcing them to flee to the mountains. Eventually he was assassinated, but he left a legacy. His followers conceived a new religion that lives on to this day in Syria, Lebanon, and Israel/Palestine: the Druze, a secretive offshoot from Islam, in which reincarnation constitutes a central belief.

While the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries in Syria proved quite volatile politically, it was still a time of great intellectual ferment which gave birth to the poets Al-Ma’ari and Al-Mutanabbi, the anthologist Abu’l-Faraj Al-Isbahani, and the philosopher Al-Farabi.

### **Saladin and the Ayubids**

The 12<sup>th</sup> century brought the Christian Crusaders to Greater Syria, who proceeded to occupy Antioch, Jerusalem, Al-Karak (in what is now Jordan), and the Syrian coast. It was the Kurdish warrior Salah ad-Din al-Ayubi, known in the West as Saladin, who led the Muslims to defeat the Crusaders and take back their cities. The Crusaders surrendered Jerusalem to Saladin in 1187. Saladin founded the Ayubid Dynasty and ruled the Muslim world from the Tigris, beyond the Nile to North Africa, and south to the Sudan. He died of malaria in 1192 and immediately the empire began to break apart. The Ayubids would continue



© Frank and Ruth Harold  
Crac des Chevaliers

<sup>14</sup> “Mu’awiyah I” *Encyclopedia Britannica* from Encyclopedia Britannica Online. <http://www.eb.com>

<sup>15</sup> *Shiah* is a branch of Islam that regards the caliph Ali and his descendants as the only legitimate successors to the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>16</sup> The Fatimids were a Muslim dynasty that sought power based on their claim that they were descendants of Fatima, the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter.

ruling Egypt until 1260. The successors to the Ayubids in Egypt were the Mamluks, who repelled the invasions of the Mongols and eventually extended their dominance through Syria to the Euphrates River in the 1300s. The Mongol Tamerlane<sup>17</sup> invaded Syria in 1401, devastated Aleppo and Damascus, and weakened the Mamluks. The Mamluks finally fell to the Turks in the 1500s, and Syria became part of the Ottoman Empire.

### **In the Ottoman Empire**

Under the Ottomans, Syria flourished economically and culturally, especially during the first two centuries of the empire. Agriculture and trade expanded, education became more widespread and available, and political stability prevailed. Non-Muslims also did well in this Muslim empire. Christians and Jews held positions of high authority and responsibility in the ministries of government. Things began to fall apart in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul lost control of the hinterlands, and the Bedouin<sup>18</sup> tribesmen rode in to fill the vacuum. While Aleppo and Damascus maintained their security and wealth, the outlying cities and villages fell prey to the Bedouin marauders.



Bedouins, late-19th century

For a brief period in the 1800s, the Ottomans were chased out of Greater Syria by Egypt's Muhammad Ali. For ten years, his son Ibrahim Pasha ruled Syria, but in 1839, the first European adventure since the Crusades ensued: British and Austrian forces landed on the Syrian coast to restore the Ottomans back to power. This would not be the last that Syria would hear from Europe. Entropy worsened for the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Syria. With the rise of the European powers, uneasiness spread among the Muslims that Christians and Jews could threaten them economically and politically with their western allies and protectors.

In 1908, the Turkish nationalist "Young Turks" challenged the Ottoman regime, though they failed to topple it. Nationalism, which had already captured the European political consciousness, now became the operative political mentality in the Middle East. After the Turks caught the nationalist fever, so did the Arabs, including the Syrian Arabs. This same phenomenon of intense nationalism must be counted among the many complex factors implicated in igniting the First World War in 1914. Syria once again became a battlefield in a war fought by foreign powers. As part of the Ottoman Empire, Syria became a staging area for attacks by the Ottomans under German command against British positions in Egypt.

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<sup>17</sup> Tamerlane is alternately known as Tamburlaine, Timur, and Timur Leng.

<sup>18</sup> Bedouins are primarily nomadic peoples of the Middle East.



© Damascus Online  
King Faisal, 1918

### British Occupation

The British officer, T.E. Lawrence (“Lawrence of Arabia”), helped to organize an Arab army in the Hejaz (Red Sea coast of Arabia), with the support of Husayn, the Sharif of Hejaz<sup>19</sup>, to fight against the Turks. Husayn’s son Faysal led his warriors across the burning sands of Arabia into Syria, and captured Damascus. Arab nationalists, especially Syrians, rejoiced that the day of their sovereignty had finally arrived. It was not to be. Faisal was named King, but his powers would be curtailed by European meddling. In 1916, the British and French had signed the “Sykes-Picot” agreement<sup>20</sup> which essentially carved out spheres of influence for them in the

Middle East. Syria and Lebanon fell into the hands of the French. In 1923, five years after the end of WWI, the Lausanne Treaty formalized the French Mandate over Syria and Lebanon, and the British Mandate over Palestine, Transjordan, and Iraq. When Faisal opposed the Europeans seizing power, the French Army banished him from Syria.



© Damascus Online  
French troops in Syria, 1920



© Damascus Online  
French troops leave Syria, 1946

### Nationalist Fervor

The 1920s and 30s saw Syrian nationalist anger rising to a higher pitch. They were frustrated that the window had closed upon their aspirations of independence and they resented the dismemberment of “Greater Syria,” which left them bereft of Palestine, Lebanon, and Transjordan. In 1925, a Syrian nationalist revolt erupted and simmered for two years. It was all down-

hill from there. The French and the Syrians negotiated treaties, councils, and agreements, but the outbreak of the Second World War put everything on hold. Syrians finally won full independence in 1946, and to this day, Syrians celebrate “Evacuation Day” every April 17<sup>th</sup>, commemorating the end of French occupation.

### Rise of the Ba’thists

In 1948, Syria participated in the war against the newly-formed state of Israel and was defeated along with its Arab allies. In the aftermath of Arab defeat in Palestine, discontent rose in Syria. In March 1949 Brigadier General Husni al-Zaim brought President Quwatly down in the first of a long series of coups d’état. Five months later in August, Colonel Sami al-Hinnawi overthrew Zaim. Meanwhile, a political party was planning, organizing, and waiting in the wings for its turn to act: The Ba’th Party, a secular, nationalist-socialist grouping that would eventually take control and not let go. Before the Ba’th could do so, however, many more coups would take place. Colonel

<sup>19</sup> Traditionally, the Sharif of Hejaz was entrusted with the protection and custody of Islam’s holiest shrines in Mecca and Medina. That honor would later pass to the Saud family after they defeated Husayn.

<sup>20</sup> For the actual wording, see <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/mideast/sykes.htm>.

Adib Shishakli toppled Hinnawi in December 1949. Coups would take place in 1951 and again in 1954. The Ba’th Party’s time had come:

*By 1955 the balance began to swing in favor of leftwing elements, notably the Ba’th Party and the Syrian Communist Party, the only parties in Syria with effective organizations and definite platforms and the only ones not based on sectarian interests. Their platforms coincided on some issues, and they sometimes cooperated in achieving their goals: economic and political reform aimed at dislodging the ineffective entrenched leadership that was at once quasi-feudal, mercantile, and Western connected; Arab unity; and close cooperation with the Soviets to counter alleged Western designs on the Arab homeland<sup>21</sup>.*

With Syrian politics turning to the left, the communist Soviet Union was seen as a more reliable ally than the western powers. The Ba’thists, however, did not trust their own communist partners. In 1958, Syria and Egypt joined together to form the United Arab Republic. Because Egyptian President Gamal Abd al-Nasser opposed all political parties, the Ba’thists expected that their rivals would be eliminated by the union between the two countries. It turned out, however, to the dismay of the Syrian Ba’thists, that under the UAR umbrella, their party was also driven underground. In consequence of this and as a result of Egyptian meddling in Syrian affairs, another coup d’etat took place in Damascus and Syria withdrew from the UAR in 1961. The Ba’thists in the Syrian Army pulled off yet another coup in 1963 and grabbed power.



© Damascus Online  
Signing the UAR Treaty, 1958

### **War with Israel**

On June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1967, Israel launched a strike against Syrian, Jordanian, and Egyptian positions. Within six days, Israel had achieved the greatest land-grab in modern Middle Eastern history: they took the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip from Egypt; Jerusalem and the West Bank from Jordan; and the Golan Heights from Syria. In the process, they destroyed the Egyptian and Syrian Air Forces. On June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1967, a cease-fire was proclaimed and monitored by UN observers.



© Damascus Online  
The Six Day War, 1967

### **The Last Coup**

As always after a disaster, fingers were pointed, blame was assigned, and the stage was set for the last Syrian coup d’etat in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1970, Hafez Al-Assad, the Syrian Ba’thist Minister of Defense, seized power from the communist “Neo-Ba’th” politicians, named himself the new Prime Minister, and eventually became the president, with absolute powers. He served for 30

<sup>21</sup> “Syria: Radical Political Influence” *Encyclopedia Britannica Online* <http://www.eb.com>

years until his death in 2000. Over the course of these three decades, Assad constructed a dictatorial regime that would, through secret police and brute force, tolerate no opposition. On October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1973, Egypt and Syria attacked Israel simultaneously with the objective of recovering land lost in 1967. The worst of the fighting was over within a month and actually resulted in a loss of land for Syria. In April of the following year, however, a cease-fire between Syria and Israel restored the Golan Heights city of Quneitra to Syria, which was viewed as a triumph for the Syrian people.

### **Internal Conflict**

When war broke out between Iran and Iraq in 1980<sup>22</sup>, many Arab countries aligned themselves with Iraq; Syria however did no such thing. For certain complex religious, political, and economic reasons, Syria saw it in its strategic interest to support Iran against Iraq. For one thing, the Assad family belongs to the Alawi sect, a branch of Shiite Islam. Saddam Hussein's Iraqi regime was Sunni, but Iran is Shiite. Second, Syria and Iraq have vied for leadership of pan-Arab nationalism since the early days of the Ba'thist Party, which started in Syria, spread to Iraq, and then split into two rival divisions. Third, Syria received tangible economic benefits during the Iran-Iraq war. In return for allowing the Iranian Air Force to land in Damascus, Iran provided Syria with cheap oil. Later on, the Syrian Army participated in the first war against Iraq, "Desert Storm," and saw action against Iraqi troops.

### **Civil War**

Mention has been made of the Alawi Muslim background of the Assad family. The fact that the Assad regime does not embrace the Sunni interpretation of Islam, and that the regime is in fact quite secular, has never sat well with Syria's Sunni majority, particularly the fundamentalists. In the late 1970s and early 80s, a fundamentalist group called the Muslim Brotherhood began to incite open rebellion against the government of Syria. They also attempted to assassinate President Assad and committed violent acts against facilities and individuals linked with the government in the major cities (Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Latakia, and Tartus). The straw that broke the camel's back was a 1982 ambush against government troops who were searching for members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, President Hafez Al-Assad sent in the army, crushed the rebellion, and destroyed a large part of the city. When the dust settled, thousands and thousands of people lay dead. No such dissident movements have arisen since the blood bath at Hama.



© Damascus Online  
Hafez al Assad, 1970

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<sup>22</sup> Please refer to "Iraq in Perspective" and "Iran in Perspective"  
<http://www.lingnet.org/orientation/default.html>

# Economy

## Historic Overview of the Syrian Economy

Syria's centralized and state-run economy is mainly based on oil and agriculture. Socialism became the official economic policy after the formation of the United Arab Republic (UAR)<sup>23</sup> by Egypt and Syria in 1958.<sup>24</sup> Syria's main trading partner and economic model was the Soviet Union.<sup>25</sup> Following the Soviet Union's example, Syria started implementing "five-year" economic plans in 1960 with limited results.<sup>26</sup> Under President Hafez Al-Assad's leadership, Syria's infrastructure improved slightly, providing electricity and better roads. However, economic progress was severely limited due to stringent political controls, which provided few possibilities for private enterprise.<sup>27</sup>



© Bob and Clarice Hoffmann  
Oil refinery

## Economic Reform and Lifting of Restrictions

In 1989, Syria began developing newly discovered oil and natural gas reserves. Foreign companies were brought in to design, build, maintain, and operate their new wells, pipelines, and refineries. This influx of foreign companies has helped institute Syria's new economic reforms. In 1991 the Syrian government passed a new law, Investment Law No. 10, creating incentives for the development of private enterprises. Businesses gained the right to retain 75% of foreign exchange earnings and importers were allowed to set up foreign exchange accounts in Syria of assets held abroad.<sup>28</sup> Credit card usage by residents and nonresidents was authorized by the Ministry of Economy and Foreign Trade in 1995. Since coming to power in September 2000, President Bashar Al-Assad, the son of former President Hafez Al-Assad, has taken additional steps towards privatization.

Internet service with highly restricted access of information has become available only to companies, embassies, and the Syrian government. The government is currently developing e-commerce guidelines that will facilitate Syria's entry into the world's largest market place. In addition, cellular phone services are emerging, although only on an extremely limited basis due to the expensive nature of such services.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Syria seceded from the UAR in 1961.

<sup>24</sup> The economy, Administration of the economy. *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. (2004). <http://www.britannica.com>.

<sup>25</sup> Gardner, Frank. (2000). Syrian MP calls for deeper reform. *BBC News*. <http://www.bbc.com>

<sup>26</sup> Five-Year Plans were used in "Soviet economic practice of planning to augment agricultural and industrial output by designated quotas for a limited period of usually five years. Nations other than the former USSR and the Soviet bloc members, especially developing countries, have adopted such plans for four, five, or more years." (Five-Year Plan, Russian Soviet and CIS History. <http://www.allRefer.com/encyclopedia>).

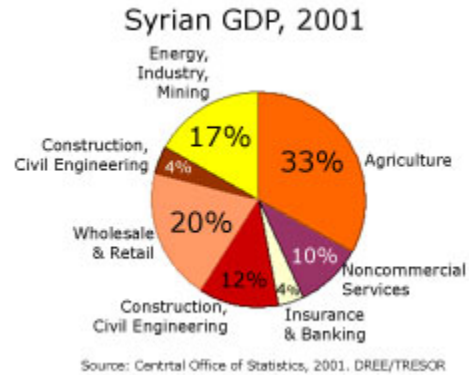
<sup>27</sup> Obituary: Syria's shrewd master (2000). *BBC News*. <http://www.bbc.com>.

<sup>28</sup> A Study on the Syrian Economy. (1999). *Arabic News*. <http://www.arabicnews.com>

<sup>29</sup> Gavlak, D. (1999) Syria – Economy, Part 3 of 3, *Voice of America*, <http://www.fas.org/news/syria/991210-syria1.htm>

## Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

Syria's purchasing power parity for 2002 was estimated at USD<sup>30</sup> 59.4 billion.<sup>31</sup> Syria's economy is dominated by: (1) agriculture; (2) wholesale and retail sales; (3) energy, industry and mining. These three sectors cumulatively represent 70% of the country's total GDP (gross domestic product).



The CIA World Factbook predicts that:

“External factors such as the international war on terrorism, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the war between the US-led coalition and Iraq probably will drive real annual GDP growth levels back below their 3.5% spike in 2002.”<sup>32</sup> Additionally, Syria's population growth rate is higher than the nation's economic growth rate, which helps account for the persistent decline in GDP.

## Exports

Crude oil is Syria's greatest export commodity. Oil and oil derivatives make up 77% of Syria's total exports, while 11%<sup>33</sup> is provided by agricultural products, such as fruits and vegetables (5%), cotton fiber (4%), and meat and live animals (2%).<sup>34</sup> The remaining 12% of exports is comprised of manufactured products, including textiles, jewelry, works of art, and antiques. Recently, modernized state-owned textile agencies have emerged as some of Syria's top producers and contribute 3% to Syria's total exports.<sup>35</sup> Syria also happens to be the world's sixth largest exporter of olives. Nearly half of Syrian exports are purchased by Germany, Italy and France.<sup>36</sup>

## Imports

Syria's development of oil industries and the need to modernize its agricultural sector forces the country to import large quantities of machinery and transport equipment (21%), food and livestock (18%), and metal and metal products (15%)<sup>37</sup> Textiles, chemicals, and chemical products are imported as well.<sup>38</sup> Again, Italy, Germany, and France provide most of Syria's imported goods. The furniture manufacturing industry imports 90% of its wood from Russia and Romania. Apart from legal imports and exports, there are also

<sup>30</sup> USD = US dollars

<sup>31</sup> Syria - Economy Overview. *The World Factbook*. (2003)  
<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/sy.html>

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> Economy, Industry & Manufacturing. (2000). *Café-Syria*. Retrieved on January 22 from:  
<http://www.cafe-syria.com/Industry.htm>.

<sup>36</sup> French Economic Mission to Damascus. *Mission Economique de Damas*. (2002).  
<http://www.dree.org/syrie>

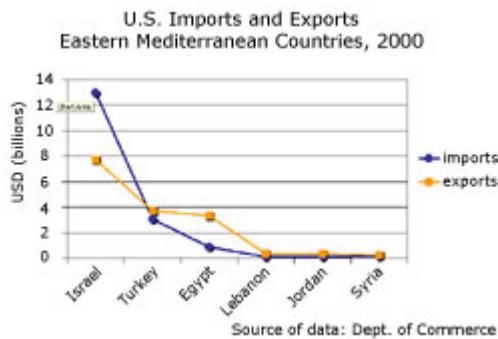
<sup>37</sup> The World Factbook (2003), op.cit. 2000 est.

<sup>38</sup> MapZones Syria Country Profile. (2002). <http://www.mapzones.com>

illegal trading transactions in Syria. According to US lawmakers, “Syria's illegal imports and transshipments of Iraqi oil have earned Syria \$50,000,000 or more per month as Syria continues to sell its own Syrian oil at market prices.”<sup>39</sup>

### Trade with the United States

US trade with Syria is minimal. The US primarily exports agricultural products, irrigation equipment, and medical supplies to Syria. From 1992 to 2003, US markets have accounted for an average of USD 101.25 million (.029% total Syrian imports) entering the Syrian economy every year.<sup>40</sup> When compared to Syria’s overall trade, which totaled



USD 5.1 billion in imports and USD 6.1 billion in exports in 2002, it becomes even clearer that the US plays a minor role in Syria’s trade.<sup>41</sup> The figures are also low when compared to US trade with Israel, Turkey, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan. As indicated from the chart, Syria, along with Jordan and Lebanon, has the least amount of access to US markets of all of the Eastern Mediterranean countries. Only USD 160 million worth of goods were imported from Syria to the US in 2002, as compared to USD

274 million worth of goods that were exported by the US to Syria. This is in sharp contrast to US trade with Israel: USD 12.96 billion were imported from Israel to the US and USD 7.75 billion was exported to Israel.

In all likelihood, US trade with Syria will further decrease in 2004 unless Syria adopts new policies regarding both Lebanon and the war on terrorism. In December 2003, President Bush signed into law HR 1828, the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Act of 2003. This legislation allows the president to issue sanctions on Syria to discourage support for international terrorist groups and the occupation of Lebanon. Currently, Syria is suspected of providing refuge to Hezbollah, Hamas, PFLP-GC<sup>42</sup>, and the PIJ<sup>43</sup>, as well as basing privileges in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley under Syrian control.

### Minerals and Natural Resources

Syria’s mineral wealth includes: oil, phosphates, chrome, manganese, asphalt, salt, and iron. Petroleum and natural gas are considered to be Syria’s main natural resources. In the 1980s, large oil fields were discovered and oil began playing a significant role in the economy. The Syrian government formed partnerships with international companies,

<sup>39</sup> US House of Representatives: “Syria Accountability Act and Lebanese Sovereignty Act to Combat Terrorism – HR 1828”. (2003). <http://www.gotc.gov>

<sup>40</sup> Trade (Imports, Exports and Trade Balance) with Syria. (2004). *U.S. Census Bureau*. <http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5020.html>

<sup>41</sup> Syria Accountability Act and Lebanese Sovereignty Act to Combat Terrorism – HR 1828. Op. cit.

<sup>42</sup> Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC)

<sup>43</sup> Palestine Islamic Jihad

including Conoco and Shell oil companies, to assist in the development of its oil industry from extraction to refinement. Syria currently markets its crude oil and exports fuel oil.<sup>44</sup>

According to the 2003 World Almanac, there are 2.2 billion barrels of crude oil and 8.4 trillion cubic feet of natural gas within Syrian fields. Oil fields are located in the northeastern region of the country, primarily in Deir ez-Zour. Oil refineries for this crude oil are located in the cities of Baniyas and Homs. Al-Fural Petroleum Company (AFPC), a joint venture owned by Syrian Petroleum Company (SPC), Shell Oil Company, and PetroCanada, is among Syria's main oil producers.<sup>45</sup> Syria's oil output hit its highest point in 1996 at 590,000 barrels per day, but oil reserves are steadily being depleted.<sup>46</sup> The US Energy Information Administration predicts that by 2005 Syria will become a net importer of oil.<sup>47</sup>

## Industry

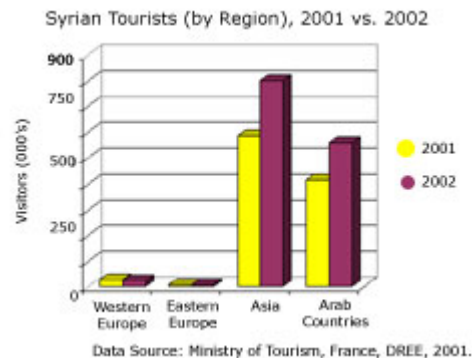
Most of Syria's main industries continue to be state-run. Oil and agribusiness constitute Syria's main industries. Textiles, chemicals, engineering, cement and building materials, beverages, and tobacco products represent other important industries.

## Tourism

Most visitors to Syria come from neighboring Arab countries or Asia. The most popular times of the year to visit Syria are during spring (especially in April and May) and during fall (mainly September and October). During these times, Asians as well as Europeans visit Syria, but it is the Asians who dominate the tourism business. The summer months (esp. July and August) mostly bring large numbers of visitors from neighboring Arab countries.<sup>48</sup>

Tourists spend most of their time in the cities of Damascus, Latakia and Aleppo.

Approximately 80% of the hotels in Syria are located in these three cities.



## Agriculture

Syrian economic success is closely linked to the success of its agriculture businesses since a third (33%) of Syria's GDP and 40% of its work force is dependent on this sector.<sup>49</sup> Several challenges make the development of the agricultural sector difficult, since the desert limits Syria to only 28% arable land; the amount of irrigated fields is only 20%, leaving 80% of Syria's crops dependent on rain-fed sources; finally, water

<sup>44</sup> Energy Information Administration: Syria. (2003). *Country Analysis Briefs*. <http://www.eia.doe.gov/>

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Geography and population. (1997). *Aquastat*. Retrieved January 22, 2004 from: <http://www.fao.org/waicent/faoinfo/agricult/agl/aglw/aquastat/countries/syria/index.stm>

resources, such as the Orontes and Euphrates Rivers, do not originate in Syria, causing complex water sharing disputes.<sup>50</sup>

The majority of Syrian farms, unlike most Syrian businesses, are privately owned (95%); nevertheless, marketing and transportation remain operated by the state. Syria's main crops include cotton, grains, lentils, olives, sugar beets, and chickpeas. Cotton is the country's top cash crop, accounting for 50% of the agricultural portion of the GDP.<sup>51</sup> Production of cotton has grown to the point that Syria is able to export parts of its harvest. Other segments of agriculture production, like fruits and vegetables, are also currently at levels which allow for export of surpluses. Production of wheat was 4,745,000 metric tons and the production of corn was 216,000 metric tons in 2001.<sup>52</sup> Wheat and barley are grown in close to two-thirds of Syria's cultivated areas.<sup>53</sup> Animal products include beef, lamb, eggs, poultry, and milk.



© The Shunya  
Women working on a farm



© gritty.org  
Fieldwork using the traditional method

The modernization of irrigation practices is critical in order for Syria to increase its total food production. According to the Syrian Ministry of Irrigation, only 152,000 hectares of land are irrigated using modern equipment.<sup>54</sup> The European Union (EU) provided Syria with two grants totaling USD 2.7 million in 1985 and 1995 towards an irrigation project in the Lower Euphrates Valley. The project resulted in the construction of a factory at Mayadeen/Deir-Ezzor province that produces concrete pipes, channels, and other parts to build irrigation systems throughout the country.<sup>55</sup> In the year 2000, approximately USD 20 million worth of agricultural equipment imports entered Syria. These imports included irrigation equipment, harvesting machinery, and potato and beet lifting trucks.<sup>56</sup> The lack of modern crop rotation practices creates further setbacks to Syria's agricultural output by causing the depletion of vital nutrients in the soil.

<sup>50</sup> Economy, Agriculture. (2000) *Café-Syria*. <http://www.cafe-syria.com/Agriculture.htm>

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

<sup>52</sup> World Almanac. 2003

<sup>53</sup> Economy, Agriculture. (2000) *Café-Syria*. <http://www.cafe-syria.com/Agriculture.htm>

<sup>54</sup> Syria, Water Resources. (1987). Country Study & Guide. *AllRefer*.

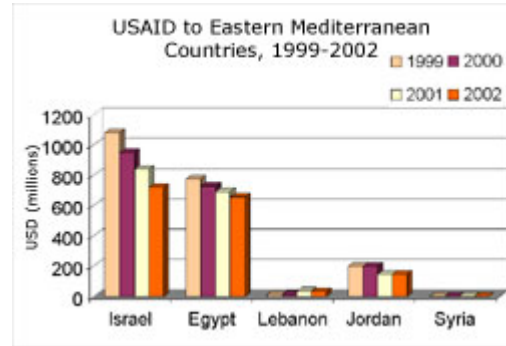
<http://reference.allrefer.com/country-guide-study/syria/syria62.html>,

<sup>55</sup> Delegation of the European Commission to Syria,  
[http://www.delsyr.cec.eu.int/en/eu\\_and\\_syria/projects/13.html](http://www.delsyr.cec.eu.int/en/eu_and_syria/projects/13.html)

<sup>56</sup> French Economic Mission to Damascus-Tourism in Syria: Summary. *Mission Economique de Damas*. (2002). *Le Tourisme en Syrie - Fiche de synthèse*. <http://www.dree.org/syrie>

## Standard of Living

Over 70% of Syrians earn salaries of less than \$100 per month.<sup>57</sup> When compared to the more than \$200 per month in expenditures that the average Syrian incurs to support a family, one begins to realize that Syria's economy is in crisis.<sup>58</sup> With an inflation rate of 0.9%, this means that 15-25% of the 5.2 million Syrian comprising the labor force live below the poverty line.<sup>59</sup>



© Aramco Services Company  
Syrian laborers in Lebanon

Syria's economic problems will likely only intensify as the next generation of workers comes of age. Close to 60% of Syria's population is currently under 20 years of age. It is estimated that Syria is experiencing an unemployment rate of 25-30%.<sup>60</sup> Due to low salaries and high unemployment, many Syrians resort to working in Lebanon (some have work permits while others work there illegally). Since 1976 Syrian military troops have occupied Lebanon, creating the

controversial opportunity for Syrian workers to enter the country. The Wall Street Journal states that "An estimated one half million to one million Syrians work in Lebanon, sending home annually between one and three billion dollars. For Syrian workers Lebanon is heaven, salaries are about double..."<sup>61</sup>

Between 1999 and 2002, the United States has provided numerous countries with USAID<sup>62</sup> funds. During this time period Syria has received no US aid at all while billions of dollars were given to Israel and Egypt. At a time when Syria is most in need of foreign investment and assistance in its venture into free enterprise, a significant source of funds is being withheld.

## Bank Reform

Syria's banking system is predominately government-owned and administered. The Central Bank of Syria is the main bank and governing body for six specialized branch banks: Commercial Bank of Syria, Industrial Bank, Savings Bank, Housing Loan Bank, People's Bank, and the Agricultural Bank.

Private banks were given permission to operate within Syria in 2001.<sup>63</sup> These private institutions continue to follow the directions and leadership of the Central Bank. Even so,

<sup>57</sup> Plaut, Steven. Electronic journal *NATIV, A Journal of Politics and the Arts, Volume Thirteen, Number 1(72), January 2000*),

<sup>58</sup> Syria: Odd man out in a tough neighborhood, *Asia Times* article, Oct. 9, 2003.  
[http://atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/EJ09Ak05.html](http://atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/EJ09Ak05.html)

<sup>59</sup> 2003 CIA World Factbook. Op. cit.

<sup>60</sup> GeographyIQ, Syria-Economy: [http://www.geographyiq.com/countries/sy/Syria\\_economy\\_summary.htm](http://www.geographyiq.com/countries/sy/Syria_economy_summary.htm)

<sup>61</sup> Wall Street Journal. July 19, 1995 issue.

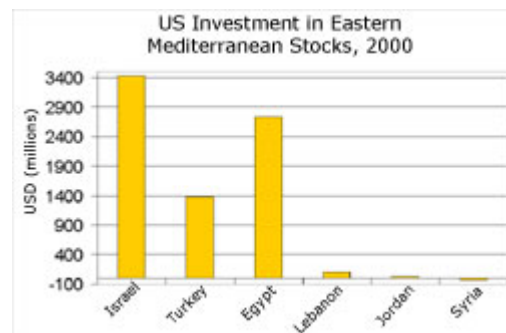
<sup>62</sup> USAID = The United States Agency for International Development, <http://www.usaid.gov>

<sup>63</sup> 2003 CIA World Factbook, op<sub>2</sub> cit.

these new private banks are able to exercise more freedom in rates charged and given and can decide to whom loans will be provided. Along with privatization, the Syrian government has started to permit banks to deal in hard currency and foreign investors can now open accounts using foreign currency. In 1996 Syrian citizens gained the privilege of depositing foreign currency into Syrian banks without having to disclose the source of the money. They have also gained the right to transfer hard currency abroad as long as it is for educational expenses, medical needs, and other non-commercial expenses.<sup>64</sup> As a safeguard against corrupt financial transactions, President Bashar Al-Assad issued a decree in September 2003 that provides a legal framework to the banking system to protect against money laundering.<sup>65</sup> The decree introduced a new agency, the “Agency for Combating Money Laundering” (ACML), to head this initiative.<sup>66</sup>

### Stock Exchange

The Central Bank’s new willingness to trade in hard currencies is a start towards the establishment of a national stock exchange. According to the daily Syrian political newspaper Al-Thawra, Syria is planning to open its first securities stock exchange as part of a “seven-year plan”. In accordance with the plan, the exchange rate would be standardized and private banking would be established by 2004.<sup>67</sup>



### Conclusion

Syria historically maintained a socialist, state-dominated economy. The past two decades saw the Syrian government release some controls on the economy. The move towards privatization of business and banking may help Syria’s economy meet the expectation of sustained growth of 3.5% (GDP) for the time period 2002-2006. The Syrian government created seven free trade zones to help promote foreign investment. They allow foreign companies to deal in hard currencies, and assure that profits are transferable out of Syria. In order to receive support from the west, however, Syria will need to comply with the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Act by ceasing to support terrorist groups and by pulling out its troops from Lebanon.



A Syrian farmer and his tractor © gritty.org

<sup>64</sup> Syrian Arab Republic. Ministry of Economy and Foreign Trade. [www.syrecon.org](http://www.syrecon.org)

<sup>65</sup> “The transactions that fall within the definition of money laundering operations are divided in ten categories: drug trafficking, organized crime, terrorism, weapons trafficking, human trafficking, organized prostitution, trafficking in weapons of mass destruction, trafficking in human organs, embezzlement of public and private funds and forgery of payment.” –AME Info-Middle East Business News site, <http://www.ameinfo.com>

<sup>66</sup> The Syria Report, *Syria issues money laundering law*, October 2003 issue, [www.syria-report.com/The\\_Syria\\_Report\\_October\\_03.pdf](http://www.syria-report.com/The_Syria_Report_October_03.pdf)

<sup>67</sup> Monday Morning, Lebanese News website and article archives: <http://www.morning.com>

## Society and Culture

### Ethnic Groups

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



© The Shunya  
Bedouin man

The Alawites represent about 2 million people in Syria and most subsist on agriculture. President Bashar Al-Assad—like his late father Hafez—is Alawite, as are most members of his parliament.

The geographic distribution of the different groups of people in Syria follows a historical past, with the Syrian Arabs being dominant in the western and central areas. Towards the east lives most of the Kurdish population. The mountainous regions and valleys are populated largely by Christians. The Druze concentrate in the south, while most Armenians live in Aleppo.

### Literature and Arts

“Writing is the mother of eloquence and the father of artists,” according to a Syrian saying<sup>68</sup>. Syria's literary tradition is very rich and reciting poetry goes back to the ancient times. Many modern Syrian poets and writers have moved to Lebanon, where freedom of expression is not as limited as in Syria, and where most Arab publications are produced. Three major figures in modern Syrian literature are Qabbani, Riche, and Adonis, some of whose works are also available in English.

Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani became a national hero under President Hafez Al-Assad, who allowed him to be hailed across Syria as one of the nation's greatest poets. Qabbani's poetry used simple language and represented the cause of women long before that topic was addressed by others. His poetry also talked about the repression that he and his countrymen faced. Mona Helmi, Egyptian novelist, said: "His greatness came from his ability to put into beautiful words not only the ordinary actions between men and women, but also between the ruler and ruled and the oppressor and the oppressed."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Cultural Profile of Syria: Arts and Literature. <http://www.settlement.org/cp/english/syria/arts.html>

<sup>69</sup> Nizar Qabbani. [http://www.nizar.net/the\\_poet.htm](http://www.nizar.net/the_poet.htm)

One couplet in particular is often quoted by Arabs as a kind of shorthand for their frustration of life under dictatorship<sup>70</sup>.

*"O Sultan, my master, if my clothes are ripped and torn  
It is because your dogs with claws are allowed to tear me!"*

Qabbani's second wife, the Iraqi Balqis al-Rawi, was killed in the bombing of the Iraqi Embassy by pro-Iranian terrorists in Beirut in 1981. She was working for the embassy's cultural section.

*The Trial*<sup>71</sup>  
by Nizar Qabbani

*The East receives my songs, some praise, some curse  
To each of them my gratitude I bear  
For I've avenged the blood of each slain woman  
and haven offered her who is in fear.*

*Woman's rebellious heart I have supported  
ready to pay the price - content to die  
if love should slay me, for I am love's champion  
and if I ceased, then I would not be I.*

Omar Abou Riche, Syria's Ambassador to Washington in 1962, is another famous modern Arab poet, whose poems were translated into English in a collection entitled "*The Unstruck Melody*."

The mystical and the revolutionary dissolve into a harmonious vision in the writings of Ali Ahmad Said, a.k.a. Adonis, a Syrian poet and literary critic. A graduate of Damascus University with a doctorate from Beirut, he took up Lebanese citizenship later in his life. His influential writings have had a major effect on Arabic literature<sup>72</sup>.

Among Syrian actors and TV personalities, Duraid Laham, a chemist by profession, has become one of the most famous Syrian comedians. The former UNICEF Ambassador still acts in television shows.



© Asharq Al-Awsat  
Duraid Laham

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Nizar Qabbani. OldPoetry.com. <http://oldpoetry.com/poetry/25867>

<sup>72</sup> Biographies. <http://www.diamandagalas.com/defixiones/biographies.htm>



© Asharq Al-Awsat  
George Wassouf

## Syrian Music

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

## Social Customs

### Hospitality

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

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

### Syrian Food

Grains, vegetables, and fruit form the basis of most Syrian food. According to some sources, the famous *hummus* was praised by Plato and Socrates as early as 400 B.C.E.<sup>73</sup>. The main ingredient is a puree of garbanzo beans and to which *tahini* (a smooth paste made from sesame seeds), lemon, garlic and other spices are added according to taste. *Hummus* is considered a staple food of Arabic cuisine and is offered as an appetizer dip or with the main entry with other vegetables.



© Susan Melehani  
Restaurant in Damascus

<sup>73</sup> <http://www.ritefoods.com/hummus.html>

Another famous staple of the Syrian cuisine is *labneh*, mostly prepared as a breakfast food, which is very popular in most Arab countries. It is easy to make *labneh*. Salt is added to some low-fat yoghurt, and then the mixture is put into a cheese cloth and hung above the sink overnight. The next day, garlic and spices are added to the hardened salty yoghurt to give it a special taste. If the mixture is kept in the cheese cloth for two to three days, it becomes drier and it can be kept even longer. In this case, balls are formed from the mixture and put into a container filled with olive oil. They are kept refrigerated until they are served with fresh parsley or vegetables.

Vegetables are stuffed with meat and rice in Syrian cuisine and if prepared well, Syrian food is a very healthy, low-cholesterol, low-fat food that is easy to prepare. The main course is usually followed by Arabic coffee or *shai* (Arabic tea) and pastries.

Syrian desserts are often comprised of honey-soaked pastry that is filled with nuts and other ingredients. One of the most well-known and popular Arabic pastries is *baklava*, which dates back to 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.<sup>74</sup>. *Halawat al-Jibna* is another delicious doughy pastry that is filled with cream cheese and usually covered in syrup.



© www.hat.net  
Syrian pastries

## Male-Female Relationships

In Syria, marriage is the only respectable context for male-female relationships. Dating, per se, is rare, and pre-marital sex is virtually unheard of. The number of children born out of wedlock is next to nil. Boys and girls go to separate schools, though university classes are coeducational. Syria is a socially conservative society; as long as visitors recognize and respect this reality, they will feel most welcome. For example, if a foreign male visitor in Damascus meets a Syrian woman in a public place, such as a bookstore or a museum, and finds her interesting, he should forget about pursuing his interest. Do not invite her for a cup of tea. Do not flirt. This would dishonor the woman and her family.



© Mogens B. Christiansen  
Women with camcorders

### Arranging the Marriage

Marriage in Syria is still largely an arranged affair. The mother of the young man seeks marriage candidates, preferably from among cousins, or failing that, then from the daughters of close friends and neighbors whom she trusts. (If his mother is not alive, then his aunt would take this responsibility upon herself.) She visits the candidate's family and meets the young lady and the young lady's mother. The young man's mother learns of the candidate's good attributes and qualities and determines if the young lady would make a good wife for her son. If that is the case, the two

<sup>74</sup> <http://www.kitchenproject.com/history/Baklava.htm>

mothers set a date for the young man and both of his parents to come calling. This is the first step.

### **The Process of Engagement**

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



© www.hat.net  
Buses and a church

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

### **Differences in Marriage Tradition between Christians and Muslims**

Engagement procedures apply to both Muslim and Christian families. In Syria, a person is known by his family, not by his religion. Muslim or Christian, he or she is known as the son or daughter of so-and-so, the father or mother of so-and-so. In other aspects, however, Christian and Muslim marriages do differ, especially if we are talking about a pious Muslim family.

### **The Christian Wedding**

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

### **The Muslim Wedding**

Muslims, in contrast, do not necessarily marry in a mosque. An *imam*<sup>75</sup> meets with the bride, groom, and the parents, either in his office or at the home of the groom, and reviews the marriage contract to verify its validity. He recites certain *suras* (chapters) or

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<sup>75</sup> An *imam* is a Muslim prayer leader.

*ayat* (verses) from the *Qur'an* (Koran) and signs the documents to legalize the marriage. There is no party at this ceremony. The groom and bride return separately to their respective parents' house, attended by their siblings, and perhaps their closest cousins and dearest friends. The parties are held the next day. For conservative Muslim families there are separate parties for the men and the women, because most of the women are veiled and should not be the focus of attention of the men.

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

## Sports

The Syrian people are big sports fans, both in terms of participation and spectatorship. Basketball, volleyball, badminton, tennis, wrestling, boxing, body building, and soccer are the most popular sports. It is worth pointing out that soccer is not played in Syria quite as widely as it is in certain other Arab countries, such as Egypt, Kuwait, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco. Nevertheless, Syrian interest in soccer is keen enough to have established and maintained an extensive league with some 120 clubs with 25,000 players, 1,500 trainers, and 425 referees<sup>76</sup>. Furthermore, irrespective of their playing preferences, when it comes to watching the professionals, *qurat al-qadam* (soccer) is number one.



© Aramco Services Company  
Children playing soccer

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<sup>76</sup> These statistics translated from the original Arabic on the official page of the Syrian Football Federation, <http://www.syrian-soccer.com/14/thedihad.htm>

# Current Issues

## US-Syrian Relations

All is not quite well in US-Syrian relations. First of all, “while not part of President Bush’s ‘axis of evil,’ Syria has been on the U.S. list of sponsors of terrorism since the list’s 1979 inception<sup>77</sup>.” Syria landed on that list because it has provided safe refuge, financing, and weapons to a number of organizations considered to be terrorist groups by the US Department of State, including Hezbollah, Hamas, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Palestine Islamic Jihad. Second, Syrian troops remained in Lebanon for three decades, withdrawing only after being forced to bow to the pressures of the popular Lebanese Cedar Revolution in April of 2005. As Congressman Gary Ackerman had stated before the withdrawal, “Syria is also behaving in a grossly irresponsible fashion in Lebanon, a country it has occupied since 1976 contrary to international law, the will of the Lebanese people, and the Taif accords, which Syria pledged to honor<sup>78</sup>.” Third, the U.S. tends to look down on governments that violate



© Bob and Clarice Hoffmann  
Mediterranean sunset

human rights, and Syria falls into that category. Assad’s handling of the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in Hama is just the tip of the iceberg; dissent is simply not permitted in Syria, and the Ba’thist security apparatus enforces obedience to the authoritarian regime. Finally, Syria stands as an enemy to Israel, a strategic US ally. So far, Syrian public relations experts have not made a convincing case for the US to change its policy toward Syria.

## Field Notes from Syria



© Bob and Clarice Hoffmann  
Unusual transportation

Our friend Robert has kindly shared his experiences of his trip in Syria. The following excerpts from his travelogue shed light on some important and interesting details.

During my travels in Syria I observed a country that has tremendous economic potential, but is hamstrung by a government that has too much control. Syria produces all the food it needs and has an industrial base that can provide a start for larger scale developments, but the governmental fear of losing control of the people limits the capabilities of the country. People are afraid to talk about internal affairs with strangers. Those who did talk had little understanding of Syria’s position in the world arena.

<sup>77</sup> “US-Syrian Relations,” from the *Chicago Tribune*, published on the website of *NY Newsday*, 15 April 2003, <http://www.newsday.com/news/nationworld/iraq/chi-0304150347apr15,0,4914034.story>

<sup>78</sup> Press release, 18 September 2002, US House of Representatives, 5<sup>th</sup> District – New York, <http://www.house.gov/ackerman/press/ussyriastmt.htm>

## Politics

The government is comprised of the Chief-of-State, the People's Council, and the Judiciary. The Chief-of-State, Bashar Al-Assad, was elected by referendum with no real opposition. The Ministers are appointed by the Chief-of-State. The People's Council is elected by popular vote for four-year terms, but the Ba'th Party is guaranteed 50% of the legislative seats by the constitution. The Judiciary is appointed by the Chief-of-State.

Bashar Al-Assad has done a good job of consolidating power and has recently rearranged the Cabinet to have a more progressive profile. He is reform-minded in economic policy, but not in political policy. A Syrian cab driver, who gave me a ride to the airport in Kuwait said, "If you try to change things too quickly in Syria, you die." There have been some changes, but they are few and slow.

Freedom in Syria is hampered. There have been amendments to the press laws, but all publications are controlled by the government. The people are sheltered from any outside influence that would make them question the regime. Internet cafes are springing up in the cities, but the content is severely filtered. The restrictions placed on information make it difficult for businesses and foreign government agencies to operate.



© Mogens B. Christiansen  
New construction in Damascus

The main stumbling block in the peace process between Syria and Israel is the Golan. Many people think that if the Golan were returned, Syria would make peace with Israel despite the Palestinian issue, which still looms large. Syria presents itself as the only true advocate of the Palestinians. In many instances, when you see a Syrian flag, there is also a Palestinian flag, but in conversations with Syrians most were concerned with the Golan and the Palestinian issue took a back seat. Israel is the reason why the Syrian Army stays in Lebanon.

Syria is an insular society that is slowly changing. Bashar Al-Assad will only allow change at a pace he can control. He has tight control of the media and thus the information the people receive. That becomes their reality and secures his regime. The country is politically stable because it is tightly controlled.

## Military

With the insular nature of the society, it is hard to get a good read of the Syrian military. There is no professional NCO Corps and the Army is based on conscription. There are three corps—one in the Golan, one in Lebanon, and one in reserve. The mission of the armed forces is mostly to keep the regime in power, distribute money and benefits, help unemployment by conscription, then fight the nation's battles. All the decisions concerning the military are made by Bashar and the Secretary of Defense.

Military equipment is old, outdated, and much of it no longer has manufacturers for spare parts. There have been no new acquisitions since the fall of the USSR. All efforts go

into upgrades and maintenance. Special Forces are probably the equivalent of light infantry.

Several military sites in the desert had badly maintained perimeter fences and little military equipment on hand. What is there is in need of repair. There are many broken down military vehicles on the side of the road.

## Analysis



© Damascus Online  
Store in a rural area

Syria is a stable country, but in need of some reform. It is unlike other Arab nations in that it does not lack natural resources. With proper loosening of the government controls it could develop into a first world country. Israeli-Syrian relations may improve if the Golan is returned to Syria. After that, there will be an opportunity for peace. Militarily the nation is not a threat. There is not a viable Army or Air Force and we know of no WMD program.

## Recommendations

### Money

The exchange rate was approximately 51 Syrian dinars to 1 USD. I recommend obtaining about \$50 worth of dinars prior to arrival and have all your expected travel money in US dollars. It is easy to exchange dollars, but there are no ATMs and no personal checks are taken except at the embassy. You will pay \$8 to enter Syria.

### Lodging

All the hotels take credit cards. The Cham Palace is overpriced and run by the government. There are many smaller less expensive hotels that are clean. There are many opportunities for eating out at the hotels and restaurants and the food is enjoyable. I never experienced any sickness.

### Travel means

Driving is easy. Highways are great. I used taxis in the larger cities to avoid the headache of parking and traffic. If the car doesn't have a meter, make sure of the price before you get in. Plan your trip ahead as Syria will only allow a 15-day visa.



© The Shunya  
Omar and his taxi

## The Author's Opinion

Americans who have had the privilege of visiting Syria return to the US impressed with the hospitality of the Syrian people. One of the authors of this text worked briefly at the US Embassy in Damascus in 1990. During his free time he explored Damascus, Palmyra, Homs, and Aleppo, and was treated with the utmost kindness and openness everywhere he went. In one instance, he was on a bus from Palmyra to Homs. By a stroke of good

luck, the bus broke down in the middle of the desert. *Good* luck? Yes. Outside the bus under the burning sun, waiting for the driver to fix the flat tire, half a dozen Homs college students, noticing the American, surrounded him and engaged him in conversation. Astonished that this American spoke Arabic, they pressed closer. When they realized he would miss his connection to Aleppo, they insisted that he spend the night with them in Homs. He gratefully accepted their offer, received royal treatment, and stayed in touch with them for several years after that.

One cannot extrapolate the mood of a nation from just a few weeks of touring. Nevertheless, this author got the distinct impression that Syrians sincerely like Americans for the most part, irrespective of Syrian-US relations. In terms of direct people-to-people contacts, there exists a great potential for US-Syrian friendship.

Another factor working in favor of an improvement in the relationship between our two nations is the cosmopolitan character of the Syrian people. They have been dealing with foreigners for 5,000 years: Egyptians, Akkadians, Assyrians, Hittites, Philistines, Canaanites, Greeks, Romans, Persians, Arabs, Turks, and French. They have been there, done that, and seen it all. They take pride in their extraordinary ancestry, and they also attach profound importance to their centrality in the politics of the Arab World.



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Street in Aleppo