

SYRIA in Perspective

An Orientation Guide



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DEFENSE LANGUAGE INSTITUTE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CENTER

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Profile

Introduction

Located in the Middle East, Syria occupies a sensitive geopolitical region that has traditionally functioned as a crossroads between Asia, Africa, and Europe. Home to some of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, Syria has an extensive history of diverse cultural contact and exchange. Today, the nation is a predominantly Muslim country with minority populations of Christian and Jewish peoples.¹



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Northwest edge of Damascus, Syria

Historically, throughout centuries of imperial expansion and collision, Syria's strategic location made it prone to conflict and political turmoil. This trend continued into the 20th century, as Syria experienced successive periods of waning Ottoman rule, temporary independence, and French occupation. The period following Syria's independence from the French was marked by a long running series of military coups and a brief, but failed union with Egypt, when the two countries combined to form the United Arab Republic.²

Since 1970, Syria's political situation has been determined by an authoritarian regime established by Hafiz al-Assad, a former Minister of Defense and a leading member of the Ba'th political party. During his rule, al-Assad instituted rigid political controls and a centrally planned socialist economy. After al-Assad's death in 2000, his son, Bashar, was elected president in an unopposed referendum, and he has since maintained power. Aside from limited reforms in the economic sphere, the regime has largely followed Hafiz al-Assad's authoritarian practices and policies.³

Over the past several decades, Syria has been actively or passively involved in a number of regional conflicts, including an ongoing and often hostile territorial dispute with Israel and a long-term occupation of Lebanon (spanning 1976–2005).⁴ To various degrees, Syria has also supported a number of radical militant groups that the U.S. has officially designated as terrorist organizations, including Hamas and Hezbollah. (The U.S. has listed Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism since 1979.) In recent years, Syria has served

¹ Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Syria." May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm>

² Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. "Country Profile: Syria." April 2005. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Syria.pdf>

³ Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Syria." May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm>

⁴ Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Syria." May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm>

as both a destination country for large numbers of Iraqi refugees and as a transit country for foreign fighters entering Iraq.⁵

Facts and Figures⁶

Location:

Middle East, bordering the Mediterranean Sea, between Lebanon and Turkey

Area:

185,180 sq km (115,065 sq mi)

Note: includes 1,295 sq km (805 sq mi) of Israeli-occupied territory

Border Countries:

Iraq 605 km (376 mi), Israel 76 km (47 mi), Jordan 375 km (233 mi), Lebanon 375 km (233 mi), Turkey 822 km (510 mi)

Climate:

Mostly desert; hot, dry, sunny summers (June to August) and mild, rainy winters (December to February) along coast; cold weather with snow or sleet periodically in Damascus

Terrain:

Primarily semiarid and desert plateau; narrow coastal plain; mountains in west

Land Use:

Arable land: 24.8%

Permanent crops: 4.47%

Other: 70.73% (2005)

Natural Hazards:

Dust storms; sandstorms



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Flag of Syria

⁵ Council on Foreign Relations. Fletcher, Holly. "Backgrounder: State Sponsor: Syria." February 2008. <http://www.cfr.org/publication/9368/>

⁶ All information in this section comes directly from the following source: Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Factbook*. "Syria." 21 August 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

Environment—Current Issues:

Deforestation; overgrazing; soil erosion; desertification; water pollution from raw sewage and petroleum refining wastes; inadequate potable water

Population:

19,747,586

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 (July 2008 est.)

Median Age:

21.4 years (2008 est.)

Population Growth Rate:

2.189% (2008 est.)



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Syrian man

Life Expectancy at Birth:

70.9 (2008 est.)

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: 0.89 male(s)/female

Total population: 1.05 male(s)/female (2008 est.)

Total Fertility Rate:

3.21 children born/woman (2008 est.)

HIV/AIDS—Adult Prevalence Rate:

Less than 0.1% (2001 est.)

Nationality:

Noun: Syrian(s)

Adjective: Syrian

Ethnic Groups:

Arab 90.3%, Kurds, Armenians, and other 9.7%

Religions:

Sunni Muslim 74%, other Muslim (includes Alawite, Druze) 16%, Christian (various denominations) 10%, Jewish (tiny communities in Damascus, Al Qamishli, and Aleppo)

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: 79.6%

Male: 86%

Female: 73.6% (2004 census)



© Abanima / Wikipedia.org
Damascus

Country Name:

Conventional long form: Syrian Arab Republic

Conventional short form: Syria

Local long form: Al Jumhuriyah al Arabiyah as Suriyah

Local short form: Suriyah

Former: United Arab Republic (with Egypt)

Government Type:

Republic under an authoritarian military-dominated regime

Capital:

Damascus

Administrative Divisions:

14 provinces (muhafazat, singular—muhafazah); Al Hasakah, Al Ladhiqiyah, Al Qunaytirah, Ar Raqqah, As Suwayda', Dar'a, Dayr az Zawr, Dimashq, Halab, Hamah, 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 a combination of French and Ottoman civil law; Islamic law is used in the family court system; has not accepted compulsory International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) jurisdiction.

Suffrage:

18 years of age; universal

Executive Branch:

Chief of state: President Bashar al-Assad (since 17 July 2000); Vice President Farouk al-Shara (since 11 February 2006) oversees foreign policy; Vice President Najah al-Attar (since 23 March 2006) oversees cultural policy

Head of government: Prime Minister Muhammad Naji al-Utri (since 10 September 2003); Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Abdallah al-Dardari (since 14 June 2005)

Cabinet: Council of Ministers appointed by the president

Elections: president approved by popular referendum for a second seven-year term (no term limits); referendum last held on 27 May 2007 (next to be held in May 2014); the president appoints the vice presidents, prime minister, and deputy prime ministers

Election results: Bashar al-Assad approved as president; percent of vote—Bashar al-Assad 97.6%

Legislative Branch:

Unicameral People's Council or Majlis al-Shaab (250 seats; members elected by popular vote to serve four-year terms)

Elections: last held on 22–23 April 2007 (next to be held in 2011)

Election results: percent of vote by party—NA; seats by party—National Progressive Front (NPF) 172, independents 78

Judicial Branch:

Supreme Judicial Council (appoints and dismisses judges; headed by the president); national level—Supreme Constitutional Court (adjudicates electoral disputes and rules on constitutionality of laws and decrees; justices appointed for four-year terms by the President); Court of Cassation; Appeals Courts (Appeals Courts represent an intermediate level between the Court of Cassation and local level courts); local level—Magistrate Courts; Courts of First Instance; Juvenile Courts; Customs Courts; specialized courts—Economic Security Courts (hear cases related to economic crimes); Supreme State Security Court (hear cases related to national security); Personal Status Courts (religious; hear cases related to marriage and divorce)

Political Parties and Leaders:

Legal parties: National Progressive Front or NPF [President Bashar al-Assad, Dr. Suleiman Qaddah] (includes Arab Socialist Renaissance (Baath) Party [President Bashar al-Assad]; Socialist Unionist Democratic Party [Fadlallah Nasr al-Din]; Syrian Arab Socialist Union or ASU [Safwan Qudsi]; Syrian Communist Party (two branches) [Wissal Farha Bakdash, Yusuf Rashid Faysal]; Syrian Social Nationalist Party [Ali Qansu]; Unionist Socialist Party [Fayez Ismail])

Opposition parties not legally recognized: Arab Democratic Socialist Union Party [Hasan Abdul Azim]; Arab Socialist Movement; Democratic Baath Party [Ibrahim Mahkos]; People's Democratic Party [Riad al Turk]; Revolutionary Workers' Party [Abdul Hafeez al Hafez]

Kurdish parties (considered illegal): Kurdish Democratic Front [Abdul Hamid Darwish] (includes four parties); Kurdish Coordination [Abdul Hakim Bashar] (includes Azadi Party [Kheirudin Murad], Future Party [Masha'l Tammo], Yekity Party [Hasam Sale])

other parties: Nahda Party [Abdul Aziz al Mislet]; Syrian Democratic Party [Mustafa Qalaaji]



© Thomas Stellmach
Baath party banner over a street in Aleppo

Political Pressure Groups and Leaders:

Damascus Declaration National Council [Riyad Seif, secretary general] (a broad alliance of opposition groups and individuals including: Committee for Revival of Civil Society [Michel Kilo, Riyad Seif], Communist Action Party [Fateh Jamous], Kurdish Democratic Alliance, Kurdish Democratic Front, Liberal Nationalists' Movement, National Democratic Front, National Democratic Rally, and Syrian Human Rights Society or Hras [Fawed Fawuz]); National Salvation Front (alliance between former Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam, the SMB, and other small opposition groups); Syrian Muslim Brotherhood or SMB [Sadr al-Din al-Bayanuni] (operates in exile in London; endorsed the Damascus Declaration, but is not an official member)

International Organization Participation:

Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa, Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, Arab Monetary Fund, Council of Arab Economic Unity, Food and Agriculture Organization, Group of 24, Group of 77, International Atomic Energy Agency, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, International Civil Aviation Organization, International Chamber of Commerce, International Criminal Court (signatory), International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, International Development Association, Islamic Development Bank, International Fund for Agricultural Development, International Finance Corporation, International Federation of Red Crescent Societies, International Hydrographic Organization, International Labor Organization, International Monetary Fund, International Maritime Organization, Interpol, International Olympic Committee, Inter-Parliamentary Union, International Organization for Standardization, International Telecommunications Satellites Organization,

International Telecommunication Union, League of Arab States, Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency, Nonaligned Movement, Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries, Organization of the Islamic Conference, United Nations, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, United Nations Industrial Development Organization, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, World Tourism Organization, Universal Postal Union, World Customs Organization, World Federation of Trade Unions, World Health Organization, World Intellectual Property Organization, World Meteorological Organization

GDP—Real Growth Rate:

4.3% (2007 est.)

GDP—Per Capita (PPP):

USD 4,700 (2007 est.)

GDP—Composition by Sector:

Agriculture: 24%

Industry: 27.9%

Services: 48.2% (2007 est.)

Labor Force:

5.462 million (2007 est.)

Labor Force—By Occupation:

Agriculture: 19.2%

Industry: 14.5%

Services: 66.3% (2006 est.)

Unemployment Rate:

9% (2007 est.)

Population Below Poverty Line:

11.9% (2006 est.)

Inflation Rate (Consumer Prices):

12.2% (2007 est.)



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Syrian Central Bank in Damascus

Exchange Rates:

Syrian pounds per U.S. dollar—50.0085 (2007), 51.689 (2006), 50 (2005), 48.5 (2004), 52.8 (2003)

Note: data for 2004–06 are the public sector rate; data for 2002–03 are the parallel market rate in Amman and Beirut; the official rate for repaying loans was 11.25 Syrian pounds per U.S. dollar during 2004–06.

Telephones—Main Lines in Use:

3.452 million (2007)

Telephones—Mobile Cellular:

6.7 million (2007)



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Telecommunication advertisement in Aleppo

Telephone System:

General assessment: fair system currently undergoing significant improvement and digital upgrades, including fiber-optic technology

Domestic: the number of fixed-line connections has increased markedly since 2000; mobile-cellular service growing rapidly and teledensity about 35 wireless telephones per 100 persons; coaxial cable and microwave radio relay network

International: country code—963; submarine cable connection to Cyprus; satellite earth stations—1 Intelsat (Indian Ocean) and 1 Intersputnik (Atlantic Ocean region); coaxial cable and microwave radio relay to Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey; participant in Medarabtel (Middle East Telecommunications Project of the International Telecommunications Union)

Radio Broadcast Stations:

AM 14, FM 2, shortwave 1 (1998)

Television Broadcast Stations:

44 (plus 17 repeaters) (1995)

Internet Users:

3.47 million (2007)

Airports:

90 (2007)

Airports—With Paved Runways:

Total: 26

Over 3,047 m: 6

2,438 to 3,047 m: 15
914 to 1,523 m: 3
Under 914 m: 2 (2007)

Military Branches:

Syrian Armed Forces: Syrian Arab Army, Syrian Arab Navy, Syrian Arab Air and Air Defense Forces (includes Air Defense Command) (2008)

Military Service Age and Obligation:

18 years of age for compulsory military service; conscript service obligation—30 months (18 months in the Syrian Arab Navy); women are not conscripted but may volunteer to serve (2004)



DoD Photo
Syrian soldier during Operation Desert Shield

Manpower Fit for Military Service:

Males age 16–49: 4,242,401
Females age 16–49: 4,218,648 (2008 est.)

Military Expenditures—Percent of GDP:

5.9% (2005 est.)

International Disputes:

Golan Heights is Israeli-occupied with the almost 1,000-strong UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) patrolling a buffer zone since 1964; lacking a treaty or other documentation describing the boundary, portions of the Lebanon–Syria boundary are unclear with several sections in dispute; since 2000, Lebanon has claimed Shebaa farms in the Golan Heights; 2004 Agreement and pending demarcation settles border dispute with Jordan; approximately two million Iraqis have fled the conflict in Iraq with the majority taking refuge in Syria and Jordan.

Trafficking in Persons:

Current situation: Syria is a destination and transit country for women and children trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor; a significant number of women and children in the large and expanding Iraqi refugee community in Syria are reportedly forced into commercial sexual exploitation by Iraqi gangs or, in some cases, their families; women from Indonesia, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Ethiopia, and Sierra Leone are recruited for work in Syria as domestic servants, but some face conditions of involuntary servitude, including long hours, nonpayment of wages, withholding of passports, restrictions on movement, threats, and physical or sexual abuse

Tier rating: Tier 3—Syria again failed to report any law enforcement efforts to punish trafficking offenses in 2007; in addition, the government did not offer protection services

to victims of trafficking and may have arrested, prosecuted, or deported some victims for prostitution or immigration violations; Syria has not ratified the 2000 UN TIP Protocol (2008)

Illicit Drugs:

Syria is a transit point for opiates, hashish, and cocaine bound for regional and Western markets; weak anti-money-laundering controls and bank privatization may leave it vulnerable to money laundering.

Geography

Introduction

Modern-day Syria was once part of a larger geographical territory that encompassed the coastal and inland areas along the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Known as Greater Syria, or the Levant, this region roughly included the current states of Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, as well as the present-day Palestinian territories and a portion of southern Turkey. (The extent of Greater Syria varies according to source.) As a fertile tract of land between the sea and the desert, Greater Syria was for centuries an important site of trade and passage between the African, European, and Asian continents. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century, Western powers partitioned the region into the distinct nation-states that comprise the area today.⁷



© Ihsan Attar
Sunset over the Mediterranean Sea, Syria

Location and Area

In its modern form, Syria occupies the northern portion of the Greater Syrian region. The country shares its northern border with Turkey, and to the east and southeast, it shares a border with Iraq. To the south lies Jordan. On Syria's far southwestern edge lies the Golan Heights region, the site of Syria's ongoing territorial dispute with Israel. (Lebanon also claims a portion of Golan Heights.)⁸ This region is currently occupied by Israel, which shares a 76 km (47 mi) border with Syria at Golan Heights. Located to the north of Israel, Lebanon lies between the Mediterranean Sea and Syria's western border. Syria's relatively short expanse of Mediterranean coastline (193 km or 120 mi) begins at Lebanon's northern border and runs to the southern border of Turkey. As a whole, Syria constitutes an area of 185,180 sq km (71,498 sq mi), a figure that includes the 1,295 sq km (500 sq mi) region of Golan Heights, which Syria continues to claim. At this size, Syria is slightly larger than the state of North Dakota.⁹

Geographic Divisions and Topographic Features

Syria's topography demonstrates significant diversity as one moves from the Mediterranean coast (in the west) to the Syrian Desert (in the southeast). The western region of the country is characterized by a narrow coastal plain and two major mountain chains. The expansive eastern



© Hovic / flickr.com
Outside the village of Nasira

⁷ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Syria*. "Chapter 1: Historical Setting." April 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+sy0011\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+sy0011))

⁸ Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Factbook*. "Lebanon." 4 September 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/le.html>

⁹ Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Factbook*. "Syria." 21 August 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

region largely consists of steppe or desert plateau interspersed with river basin, low elevation mountain ranges, and occasional oases.

Coastal Plain

Bounded by mountains to the immediate east, a narrow plain runs along Syria's Mediterranean coast. The width of the plain varies according to the reach of the nearby mountains; the plain is widest in the north near the port city of Latakia and in the south near the Lebanese border. Because of its extremely fertile soil and Mediterranean climate, the coastal plain is the site of intense agricultural development. It is also densely populated. The terrain along the coastline varies from sandy shores to rugged, rocky promontories and cliffs.¹⁰

Mountains

The Jabal an Nusayriyah mountain range rises from the coastal plain to form a rugged north-south boundary running parallel to the coast. The peaks of the Jabal an Nusayriyah average 1,212 m (3,976 ft) in elevation,¹¹ with a highpoint of 1,524 m (5,000 ft) marking the northern end of the range.¹² The range's western slope, indented with deep ravines, receives significant moisture from the Mediterranean Sea. Numerous historic castles and fortresses built by either Arabs or Crusaders populate the mountains of this region. The range's eastern slope descends rapidly into the richly fertile Ghab Depression, which is part of the Great Rift Valley.¹³ At the southern end of the range, the Jabal an Nusayriyah descends into Homs Gap, a traditional trade and passage route separating the Jabal an Nusayriyah and another major Syrian range, the Anti-Lebanon Mountains.



© Hovic / flickr.com
Coastal mountains of Syria

Running roughly northeast to southwest, the Anti-Lebanon Mountains form the boundary between Syria and Lebanon. Syria's highest point, Jabal al-Shaykh, also known as Mt. Hermon (2,814 m; 9,232 ft), is located in the southern reaches of this range, which averages 2,000 m (6,500 ft) in elevation.¹⁴ These mountains are often capped with snow in winter months. From Mt. Hermon, the range descends southward into the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights region.

Additional ranges populate the southern and central areas of the country. The Jabal al-Arab range, also known as the Jabal Druze, is found in the far south, near the Jordanian

¹⁰ *Syria*. Dougherty, Terri. "From Sea to Desert [pp. 11–12]." 2004. San Diego: Thomson Gale.

¹¹ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. "Country Profile: Syria." April 2005.
<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Syria.pdf>

¹² *Syria in Pictures*. Behnke, Alison. "The Land [p. 9]." 2005. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company.

¹³ *Syria and Lebanon*. Carter, Terry and Lara Dunston, Andrew Humphreys. "Environment [p. 57]." 2004. Footscray, Victoria: Lonely Planet Publications.

¹⁴ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Syria: The Land: Relief: The Mountains." 2008.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578856/Syria#>

border. These volcanic peaks are the traditional home of the Druze, one of Syria's many religious groups. The highpoint of the Jabal al-Arab is 1,800 m (5,905 ft).¹⁵ The Jabal ar Ruwaq, the Jabal Abu Rujmayn, and the Jabal Bishri are low elevation ranges that extend northeastward across the central plateau and southern desert.¹⁶ The Jabal Abu Rujmayn range reaches a highpoint of 1,390 m (4,560 ft) north of the oasis town of Palmyra, also known as Tudmur.

Eastern Plateau and the Syrian Desert

East of the western mountains and the Ghab Depression, northern Syria largely consists of semiarid to arid plateau, with vegetation ranging from agricultural crops to grass and shrub. In the north and northeast, the Euphrates River and its tributaries intersect the plateau and carry precious water through the region, allowing for agricultural development and human settlement. The far northeastern region of Syria is the Jazira Plain. Located between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, this expanse of grassland is an important agricultural region, particularly for cereal crops. As the northern region of Mesopotamia, the Jazira Plain extends southeastward into Iraq.¹⁷

Moving south from the Euphrates River Basin, the terrain transitions from steppe into the Syrian Desert, which comprises most of southeastern Syria and extends into Iraq and Jordan. The terrain in this region is dry, rocky, and largely barren, although there are occasional oases and some patches of scrub grass. Small populations of Bedouin, a tribe of nomadic pastoralists, live in this area.¹⁸ Originating in the southwest, a few low elevation mountain ranges extend across the desert plateau towards the northeast. The Hawran, a volcanic lava field interspersed with patches of fertile soil, is found in the southwest near the Jabal al-Arab range and the Syrian–Jordanian border.¹⁹ In the far southwest is the contested region of Golan Heights, which consists of foothills descending into plateau.

The Fertile Crescent

The cultivated region of the country that extends in an arc from the Jazira plain and the Euphrates River basin through northern Syria and south along the coastal plains is part of a region of the Middle East known as the Fertile Crescent. Stretching from Mesopotamia in Iraq to the



© Hovic / flickr.com
Euphrates River Basin

¹⁵ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Syria: The Land: Relief: The Mountains." 2008.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578856/Syria#>

¹⁶ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Syria: A Country Study*. "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Geography and Population: Land, Water, and Climate." April 1987.
[http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+sy0030\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+sy0030))

¹⁷ *Syria: A Historical and Architectural Guide*. Ball, Warwick. "Chapter 1: Introduction [pp. 1–11]." 2007. Northampton, Massachusetts: Interlink Publishing Group, Inc.

¹⁸ *Syria*. Dougherty, Terri. "From Sea to Desert [p. 10]." 2004. San Diego: Thomson Gale.

¹⁹ *Syria: A Historical and Architectural Guide*. Ball, Warwick. "Chapter 1: Introduction [pp. 10–11]." 2007. Northampton, Massachusetts: Interlink Publishing Group, Inc.

Nile Valley in Egypt, the Fertile Crescent is a swath of productive, hospitable land bordered by inhospitable desert. Endowed with precious water resources, the region has given rise to some of the world's earliest civilizations.²⁰ Today, Syria's population remains heavily centered in pockets within the Fertile Crescent, namely the coastal plain, the historic cities of Aleppo and Damascus (in the northwest and southwest, respectively), and the Jazira.²¹

Rivers and Lakes

Euphrates River

The Euphrates River, or Nahr al-Furat, is the principal source of water in Syria; it is responsible for roughly 80% of the country's water supply.²² Originating in Turkey, the Euphrates enters Syria near the town of Jarablos and flows diagonally, in a generally southeast direction, across Syria and into Iraq. Although only a fraction of its length is in Syria, the Euphrates is the country's longest river. In north central Syria, near the city of Ar Raqqa, a large dam on the Euphrates feeds a massive reservoir known as Buhayrat al Assad, Lake Assad. At roughly 60 km in length, the reservoir is the nation's largest body of water.²³ Constructed in the 1960s and 1970s, the Euphrates Dam (also known as the Tabaqa Dam) allows for intensive irrigation in the region and also serves as a source of hydroelectric power. To the east, two rivers originating in Turkey, the Balikh and the Khabur, flow southward into the Euphrates as left-bank tributaries.²⁴ Seasonal waterways, known as *wadis*, may also flow east and west into the Euphrates from the desert.²⁵

Orontes River

The Orontes River, or Nahr al-Asi, is an essential water source for western Syria. Originating in Lebanon, the Orontes enters Syria near Homs Gap and flows northward through the Ghab Depression and into Turkey, where it empties into the Mediterranean. On its route, the river supplies the Syrian cities of Homs and Hama; each city uses dams to direct irrigation water into their respective regions.²⁶ Lake Qatinnah, a reservoir located southwest of



© Hovic / flickr.com
Orontes River, City of Hama, Syria

²⁰ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Fertile Crescent." 2008.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/205250/Fertile-Crescent#>

²¹ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. "Country Profile: Syria." April 2005.

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Syria.pdf>

²² Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. "Country Profile: Syria." April 2005.

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Syria.pdf>

²³ *Syria and Lebanon*. Carter, Terry and Lara Dunston, Andrew Humphreys. "Palmyra to the Euphrates [p. 216]." 2004. Footscray, Victoria: Lonely Planet Publications.

²⁴ *Syria*. Dougherty, Terri. "From Sea to Desert [p. 13]." 2004. San Diego: Thomson Gale.

²⁵ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. "Country Profile: Syria." April 2005.

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Syria.pdf>

²⁶ *Syria in Pictures*. Behnke, Alison. "The Land [p. 12]." 2005. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company.

Homs, is supplied by the Orontes, as is Lake Rastan, a reservoir found between Homs and Hama. In the north, the river is an important source of irrigation water in the heavily cultivated Ghab Depression.

Barada River

Originating in the Anti-Lebanon Mountains, the Barada River is responsible for supplying the large southwestern city of Damascus, the Syrian capital. As the river approaches Damascus from the west, a series of ancient channels directs its flow across a large expanse of land, creating the Al-Ghutah Oasis. Before reaching Damascus, the river is fed by the Fijah Spring, a source of drinking water for the city. Beyond Damascus, the river drains into the desert.²⁷



© Sean Long
Barada River

Yarmuk River

In the southwest, the Yarmuk River forms a small portion of the Syrian–Jordanian border before flowing into the Jordan River as a tributary. The river originates in Syria, from the volcanic lava plateau near the Jabal al-Arab range.²⁸ Regional springs that supply the Yarmuk are used for irrigation in the Hawran Plateau.²⁹

Al-Kabir River

The Al-Kabir River forms a substantial segment of the Syrian–Lebanese border that runs roughly east-west from the northern end of the Lebanon Mountains to the Mediterranean coast. Fed by mountain springs and snowmelt, the river flows westward through the coastal Akkar Plain and empties into the Mediterranean Sea. Pollution from raw sewage and agricultural and industrial chemicals has detrimentally affected the river, which remains an important source of water in the region.³⁰

Tigris River

The Tigris River, a major source of water in the Middle East, forms a small section of the Syrian–Turkish border in the far northeast before crossing into Iraq.

²⁷ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Barada River.” 2008. <http://original.britannica.com/eb/article-9013259/Barada-River>

²⁸ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Yarmuk River.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/652081/Yarmuk-River#>

²⁹ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Syria: A Country Study*. “Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Geography and Population: Land, Water, and Climate.” April 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+sy0030\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+sy0030))

³⁰ Rural Poverty and Environment Program, International Research Development Centre. El-Awady, Nadia and Patrick Kavanagh. “Thirsty Sea, Tainted River: Shedding Light on the Middle East’s Threatened Border Waters.” No date. http://www.idrc.ca/uploads/user-S/11600768441Transboundary_water_eng.pdf

Underground Springs

Underground springs and rivers are a significant source of drinking and irrigation water in Syria, and they often contribute to rivers flowing on the surface. The Ghab Depression is known for its wealth of subterranean water resources, as numerous springs and underground rivers contribute to the regional supply.³¹ Springs can also occasionally be found in the desert, as sources for precious oases.

Lakes

The largest natural lake in Syria is Lake al-Jabbul, a seasonal saline lake located to the southeast of Aleppo, the country's major city in the north. Other saline lakes are found outside the cities of Damascus and Al Hasakah, which is located in the Jazira region of the northeast. In the southwest of the country, a small freshwater lake, known as Lake Muzayrib, lies to the northwest of Daraa.³²



© Hovic / flickr.com
A small lake in Syria

Climate

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

In the summer (May–August), Mediterranean breezes help cool the hot and humid conditions of the coastal plain. During this time, the average daily high along the coast is 29°C (84°F).³³ Winters (November–February) on the coastal plain are relatively mild, with temperatures ranging from 9 to 20°C (48 to 68°F). In the western mountains, average summer temperatures (22°C; 72°F) are cooler than anywhere else in the country. In the winter, temperatures in the mountains often drop below freezing at higher elevations.³⁴

East of the mountains, temperatures are more extreme and the air is typically dry. In the near eastern plateau, the cities of Damascus and Aleppo experience average daily highs

³¹ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Syria: A Country Study*. "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Geography and Population: Land, Water, and Climate." April 1987.

[http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+sy0030\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+sy0030))

³² Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Syria: The Land: Drainage: Surface Water." 2008.

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

³³ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Syria: The Land: Climate: Temperature and Precipitation." 2008.

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

³⁴ *Syria in Pictures*. Behnke, Alison. "The Land [p. 13]." 2005. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company.

of 33 to 37°C (91 to 99°F) in the summer and average daily lows of 1 to 4°C (34 to 40°F) in the winter. Further east, in the desert, average daily highs range from 37° to 40°C (99 to 104°F) in the summer, although temperatures may reach 46°C (114°F) or higher.³⁵ Such extremes often occur when hot, sand-bearing winds blow in from the Arabian Desert. Known as *khamisin*, these dangerous winds are most common in the early and late summer months.³⁶ Nonetheless, the desert can be quite cold in the winter, with temperatures falling to freezing levels. Throughout Syria, the spring and fall seasons are generally mild and pleasant as the temperature gradually increases or decreases according to season; average temperatures during these periods range between 15 and 21°C (60 and 70°F).³⁷

As one would expect, annual precipitation varies dramatically from the coast to the desert. In the west, the coastal plains and mountains receive approximately 76–102 cm (30–40 in) of rainfall per year, with higher elevations receiving some precipitation as snow. With the mountains trapping Mediterranean moisture on the western slope, the eastern plateau experiences markedly less rainfall. In the Fertile Crescent region of the eastern plateau (which includes the cities of Aleppo and Damascus), annual precipitation ranges between 25 and 51 cm (10–20 in).³⁸ Beyond the semiarid steppe, in the true desert of the southeast, annual rainfall may be as minimal as 8–13 cm (3–5 in). However, during periods of drought, some desert areas may receive no rain at all.³⁹ Overall, the Syrian rainy season runs from November to May, with the months of December–February receiving the most precipitation.⁴⁰



© Hovic / flickr.com
A rainy afternoon in Aleppo, Syria

³⁵ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Syria: The Land: Climate: Temperature and Precipitation.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578856/Syria#>

³⁶ BBC Weather. “Country Guide: Syria.” 2008. http://www.bbc.co.uk/weather/world/country_guides/results.shtml?tt=TT002850

³⁷ *Syria*. Dougherty, Terri. “From Sea to Desert [p. 9].” 2004. San Diego: Thomson Gale.

³⁸ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Syria: The Land: Climate: Temperature and Precipitation.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578856/Syria#>

³⁹ *Syria in Pictures*. Behnke, Alison. “The Land [p. 13].” 2005. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company.

⁴⁰ BBC Weather. “Country Guide: Syria.” 2008. http://www.bbc.co.uk/weather/world/country_guides/results.shtml?tt=TT002850

Major Cities

Damascus (Dimashq)

Damascus is the capital of Syria and the nation's center for government, commerce, and culture. It is the largest city in the country, with an estimated 1.6 million people living in the city proper,⁴¹ and upwards of six million living in the greater metropolitan area (population estimates for most Syrian cities vary widely).⁴² Located east of the Anti-Lebanon Mountains⁴³ near the edge of the Syrian Desert, the city lies within the irrigated oasis of al-Ghutah, which is fed by the Barada River and additional mountain springs. Damascus is commonly known as “al-Sham,” which refers to its relative location in the northwest of the Arabian Desert.⁴⁴ Often described as the world's oldest continuously inhabited city, Damascus has a long history as an important site of trade and cultural exchange along the intercontinental crossroads of the Middle East. Throughout several millennia of existence, it has been both conqueror and conquered. The city has been occupied or conquered by a number of peoples and empires, including the Israelites, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Crusaders, Mongols, Mamluks, Ottoman Turks, and French.⁴⁵ Today, the city exhibits a mixture of antiquity and modernity.



© Brian Steele
Damascus Panoramic

Damascus has two general divisions: the ancient city center, or Old City, and the sprawling modern city, much of which has developed since the latter years of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent French occupation. Clearly defined by its encompassing walls, the Old City is found on the southern bank of the Barada River. The famous Umayyad Mosque, which houses the tomb of Saladin, a revered Muslim sultan, and Straight Street, a road mentioned by Paul in the New Testament of the Bible, are found in this district. Surrounding the Old City is the modern expanse of Damascus, which primarily extends to the north, across the Barada River, and to the west. This vast urban expanse consists of modern boulevards, public squares, government buildings, residential and commercial areas, universities, and industrial plants and factories. (The latter are predominantly located in the southern, eastern, and northeastern areas of the city.)

⁴¹ CityPopulation.de. Brinkhoff, Thomas. “Syria.” 7 August 2007.

http://www.citypopulation.de/Syria.html#Stadt_gross

⁴² Lonely Planet. “Damascus: History.” 2008.

<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/worldguide/syria/damascus/history>

⁴³ The name means that the range lies geographically “opposite” to the Lebanon Mountain range.

⁴⁴ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Damascus.” 2008.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/150420/Damascus#>

⁴⁵ *Syria and Lebanon*. Carter, Terry and Lara Dunston, Andrew Humphreys. “Damascus [p. 77].” 2004. Footscray, Victoria: Lonely Planet Publications.

As the nation's capital, Damascus acts as a hub for governmental operations, including a variety of state-run industries, some of which are military-related.⁴⁶ The city is also a center of Islamic study and practice. As its population has rapidly expanded in recent decades, the city's infrastructure, water supply, and services have been severely strained and the region has suffered from pollution problems. Furthermore, urban sprawl has eliminated much of the surrounding farmlands and vegetation of the al-Ghutah Oasis, which in the past was renowned for its rich gardens and orchards. In recent years, the city has been the site of several small-scale terrorist attacks, including a bombing outside the local U.S. embassy in 2006.⁴⁷ The city is also home to the headquarters of certain terrorist organizations, including Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which the Syrian government does not recognize as terrorist organizations.⁴⁸

Aleppo (Halab)

Located on the plateau in northwestern Syria, Aleppo is the second largest city in the country and is an important regional hub for commerce and industry. The population of its greater metropolitan area is roughly 4.5 million.⁴⁹ Like Damascus, Aleppo is thought to be one of the oldest continuously populated cities in the world; evidence suggests that it has been inhabited for several millennia—at least since the 3rd millennium B.C.E., but potentially much longer.⁵⁰ The city was for centuries a major trading post on intercontinental commercial routes, and, like Damascus, it has been occupied by a number of different peoples and powers. Throughout its history it has also suffered a number of devastating earthquakes, which, at various times, leveled the city and killed large numbers of inhabitants.⁵¹



Aleppo's ancient center, or Old City, is surrounded by the modern metropolis, which contains a central district known as the New City. Aleppo's most prominent feature is a large citadel constructed on a raised mound in the northeastern quarter of the Old City. Built and fortified over several centuries, the citadel consists of a prominent tower, a mosque, the Ayyubid Palace, and various other structures. Although the mound was long utilized for its defensive position, the compound most famously served as a Muslim stronghold against Crusader armies during the 12th century. Also located in the Old City,

⁴⁶ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Damascus." 2008.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/150420/Damascus#>

⁴⁷ Times Online. Booth, Jenny. "Terror Attack on US Embassy in Damascus." 12 September 2006.

http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article636301.ece

⁴⁸ Council on Foreign Relations. Fletcher, Holly. "Backgrounder: State Sponsor: Syria." February 2008.

<http://www.cfr.org/publication/9368/>

⁴⁹ *Syria*. Dougherty, Terri. "From Sea to Desert [p. 14]." 2004. San Diego: Thomson Gale.

⁵⁰ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Aleppo." 2008.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/13837/Aleppo#>

⁵¹ *Syria and Lebanon*. Carter, Terry and Lara Dunston, Andrew Humphreys. "Aleppo [pp. 174–175]." 2004. Footscray, Victoria: Lonely Planet Publications.

Aleppo's *souq*, or bazaar, is one of the most famous in the Middle East due to its immense size and authenticity, as it remains the center of the city's commercial activity.⁵²

Major components of Aleppo's local industry include textile manufacturing, most famously of silk, and food processing, predominantly of nuts and dried fruits. The city's *souq* acts as a market for regional agricultural produce, which is heavily supported by the nearby Euphrates River and al-Assad reservoir to the east. As in the past, Aleppo remains an important transportation corridor for the region, and it is also a locus for intellectual pursuits, as it is home to a major university, several *madrassas*, or Islamic theological schools, and other educational institutions.⁵³ The city is also home to a significant Christian population, including many descendants of Armenians who were expelled from nearby Turkey in the early 20th century.⁵⁴

Homs (Hims)

Syria's third largest city, Homs, is situated in the Orontes River Valley in the western region of the country, roughly halfway between Aleppo in the north and Damascus in the south. Homs Gap, the corridor between the Jabal an Nusayriyah and the Anti-Lebanon Mountains, lies directly west of Homs, making the city a major transit point for travel between the coast and the interior, as well as between Aleppo and Damascus. The Orontes River and nearby reservoir, Lake Qatinnah, are essential for supplying the city and the fertile farmlands in the surrounding region. Local produce ranges from fruits and vegetables to grains, such as wheat and corn, and cotton.⁵⁵ However, Homs is better known as a major industrial hub, most notably as the site of Syria's largest oil refinery. Silk manufacturing and the production of fertilizers (using phosphates) are also important components of local industry.⁵⁶ The city is also home to a major military academy. The population of the greater Homs region is approximately 1.6 million.⁵⁷



© syrialooks / flickr.com
The Central Square, Homs, Syria

Homs is located on the former site of the ancient city of Emesa, which was the home of a few Roman emperors, as well as a center for the worship of the sun god, El Gebal (or Baal).⁵⁸ Before the advent of Islam, Homs was a hub for Christian practice, and the city retains a small Christian population to this day. In terms of architecture and layout, much

⁵² *Syria and Lebanon*. Carter, Terry and Lara Dunston, Andrew Humphreys. "Aleppo [pp. 178, 181]." 2004. Footscray, Victoria: Lonely Planet Publications.

⁵³ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Aleppo." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/13837/Aleppo#>

⁵⁴ *Syria and Lebanon*. Carter, Terry and Lara Dunston, Andrew Humphreys. "Aleppo [p. 173]." 2004. Footscray, Victoria: Lonely Planet Publications.

⁵⁵ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Hims." 2008. <http://original.britannica.com/eb/article-9040501/Hims>

⁵⁶ *Syria*. Dougherty, Terri. "From Sea to Desert [p. 16]." 2004. San Diego: Thomson Gale.

⁵⁷ MSN Encarta. "Syria Facts and Figures." 2008. http://encarta.msn.com/fact_631504872/syria_facts_and_figures.html

⁵⁸ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Hims." 2008. <http://original.britannica.com/eb/article-9040501/Hims>

of the old city has been torn down and removed. Although not within the city itself, a major regional monument is the Krak des Chevaliers, a Crusader fortress located in the nearby Jabal an Nusayriyah. The city itself is home to a mosque built in honor of Khalid ibn al-Walid, a revered Arab general known as “the sword of Allah.” Al-Walid famously brought Islam to Syria in 636 C.E.⁵⁹

Latakia (Al-Ladhiqiyah)

Located on a harbor on Syria’s northern Mediterranean coast, Latakia is the country’s chief port city. The site has a long history of occupation, including by such peoples as the Phoenicians, Seleucids, Romans, Arabs, Christian Crusaders, and Ottoman Turks. Numerous earthquakes and prolonged battles between Muslims and Christian Crusaders severely damaged much of the city’s ancient architecture. Today, the Roman ruins of the Temple of Bacchus and the Triumphal Arch are virtually the only remaining artifacts. In recent decades, the city has received substantial development assistance from the al-Assad regime, which has ties to the region through the Alawite sect of Islam.⁶⁰ Hafiz al-Assad was born in the Latakia region, which has long been a home to the minority Alawite sect to which he belonged.



© Samir Abuksam
Latakia, Syria

The fertile coastal plain surrounding the city is a major agricultural region, particularly for the production of tobacco, fruits, cotton, and grains. These goods comprise many of the city’s primary exports. Latakia’s other industries include vegetable oil processing, cotton ginning, sponge fishing, and tourism.⁶¹ With its Mediterranean location and influx of diverse cultures, Latakia is known as the most cosmopolitan and least conservative city in Syria.

Hama (Hamah)

Hama is located north of Homs in the Orontes Valley. Unlike Homs, the Orontes River flows through the center of Hama, providing for the city’s famous gardens and tree-lined river banks. Along the river, the city retains a number of huge medieval waterwheels, known as *noria*, which were formerly used to irrigate the surrounding region. Like Homs, Hama serves as a marketplace and processing center for the produce grown in the fertile Orontes Valley; major crops include grains, cotton, fruits, and vegetables. Textile manufacturing, cement production, and flour milling are components of local industry. As a center of Sunni Islam, the majority Islamic sect in Syria, Hama is known for its

⁵⁹ *Syria and Lebanon*. Carter, Terry and Lara Dunston, Andrew Humphreys. “Orontes Valley [pp. 155–158].” 2004. Footscray, Victoria: Lonely Planet Publications.

⁶⁰ *Syria and Lebanon*. Carter, Terry and Lara Dunston, Andrew Humphreys. “The Coast and Mountains [pp. 143–144].” 2004. Footscray, Victoria: Lonely Planet Publications.

⁶¹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Latakia.” 2008.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/331236/Latakia#>

traditional and conservative character. The city's history is marked by a recent, notorious event when, in 1982, the al-Assad regime violently suppressed an insurgent group known as the Muslim Brotherhood. After weeks of fighting between Syrian soldiers and Muslim Brotherhood rebels, thousands of people were left dead and up to one fourth of Hama's old city was destroyed.⁶²

Environmental Concerns

Syria's many environmental concerns largely stem from overuse or mismanagement of the nation's limited land, water, and timber resources. Agriculture remains a major component of the Syrian economy, and its intensive practices and monopolization of resources has produced a number of detrimental effects. In recent years, the country has used 86–90% of its annual water supply for agricultural purposes, largely for the irrigation of cereal crops. The resulting depletion of some regional water sources, including freshwater springs, and overall declines in groundwater levels have led to serious shortages. In some areas, water deficiencies have forced agricultural activity to cease, thus requiring local residents to relocate. Furthermore, as underground aquifers have been depleted, the salinity of the groundwater has increased and the overall water quality has declined. This, in turn, has led to increased health concerns and higher costs for water treatment.⁶³

The pollution of groundwater and surface rivers with raw sewage, agricultural additives, and industrial chemicals has further strained the country's water supply. The al-Kabir River is one important water resource that has been severely degraded by such pollution.⁶⁴ Another major concern regarding Syria's water supply is the nation's heavy reliance upon the Euphrates River, which originates in Turkey and ultimately flows into Iraq. In the last few decades, serious tensions (and near conflicts) have arisen between Syria, Turkey, and Iraq over access to the river's resources. This was particularly the case in the 1990s, after Turkey constructed an extensive series of dams (including the massive Ataturk Dam) on the Euphrates and Tigris River systems, which diverted large amounts of water and reduced the downstream flow to Syria and Iraq.⁶⁵ However, of late, the three countries have made coordinated efforts to



© Ihsan Attar
Pollution in the Barada River

⁶² Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Hamah." 2008. <http://original.britannica.com/eb/article-9038991/Hamah>

⁶³ United Nations Development Programme. United Nations Country Team in Syria. "Syrian Arab Republic: Common Country Assessment 2005 [pp. 51–52]." 2005. <http://www.undp.org.sy/pdf/CCA%20final.pdf?phpMyAdmin=xmOXzXVfLI705fbItaqCMDpyUf5>

⁶⁴ Rural Poverty and Environment Program, International Research Development Centre. El-Awady, Nadia and Patrick Kavanagh. "Thirsty Sea, Tainted River: Shedding Light on the Middle East's Threatened Border Waters." No date. http://www.idrc.ca/uploads/user-S/11600768441Transboundary_water_eng.pdf

⁶⁵ Today's Zaman. "Syria Wants Bigger Share from Euphrates." 3 January 2008. <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=130715>

better develop and share the river's resources, which have become increasingly vital to Syria and Iraq due to recent droughts.⁶⁶

Intensive agricultural and industrial practices have seriously affected the land as well. In some areas, the long-term use of rudimentary methods of irrigation has increased the salinity of the soil; this has reduced its fertility and diminished overall crop yields.⁶⁷ Deforestation (largely due to the demand for timber)⁶⁸ and the overgrazing and unsustainable development of rangelands in the Syrian steppe have also led to serious degradation.⁶⁹ With the removal of trees and surface vegetation, many areas have been increasingly exposed to erosive forces, which, in turn, have heightened the risk of desertification. In 2002, a report for the National Action Plan to Combat Desertification (NAP) in Syria stated that 59% of the country's surface area was affected or threatened by desertification. This includes Syria's coastal plain, which has experienced considerable soil erosion due to a combination of heavy rainfall, intensive agricultural land use, and industrial activity.⁷⁰ Air pollution, particularly in the large cities of Damascus and Aleppo, is also a problem, in part due to a prevalence of older vehicles that produce higher levels of emissions.⁷¹

In an effort to combat these trends, the Syrian government has developed a National Environmental Strategy and Action Plan in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme. It has also signed several other environmental treaties and initiatives in recent years. Overall, the country has had some success, such as in its reforestation and water sanitation programs.⁷² In any case, as climate conditions have become more extreme and the Syrian population continues to grow, the country will continue to face serious environmental threats.

⁶⁶ Today's Zaman. "Turkey, Iraq, Syria to Initiate Water Talks." 12 March 2008.

<http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=136183>

⁶⁷ World Bank/METAP. "Syrian Arab Republic Cost Assessment of Environmental Degradation [p. 15]." 9 February 2004.

<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTMNAREGTOPENVIRONMENT/Resources/SyriaCountryReportEng.pdf>

⁶⁸ *Syria in Pictures*. Behnke, Alison. "The Land [p. 15]." 2005. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company.

⁶⁹ World Bank/METAP. "Syrian Arab Republic Cost Assessment of Environmental Degradation [p. 17]." 9 February 2004.

<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTMNAREGTOPENVIRONMENT/Resources/SyriaCountryReportEng.pdf>

⁷⁰ United Nations Development Programme. United Nations Country Team in Syria. "Syrian Arab Republic: Common Country Assessment 2005 [pp. 52–53]." 2005.

<http://www.undp.org.sy/pdf/CCA%20final.pdf?phpMyAdmin=xmOXzXVfL1705fbI1taqCMDpyUf5>

⁷¹ World Bank/METAP. "Syrian Arab Republic Cost Assessment of Environmental Degradation [p. 11]." 9 February 2004.

<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTMNAREGTOPENVIRONMENT/Resources/SyriaCountryReportEng.pdf>

⁷² United Nations Development Programme. "Syria MDGs at a Glance." No date.

<http://www.undp.org.sy/index.php?page=content&id=mdg%20nat>

Natural Hazards

Syria's climate and geographic location make it vulnerable to a variety of natural disasters, including droughts, floods, earthquakes, dust storms, and sandstorms. Syria is prone to periods of limited rainfall, and with its inherently hot and dry conditions, it occasionally suffers from devastating droughts. Most recently, in 2007 and 2008, above-average temperatures and below-average rainfall and water levels contributed to a severe drought in the region. As a result, the nation's wheat yields were dramatically diminished, with wheat production for winter 2008/2009 expected to reach its lowest level in 17 years, when similarly severe droughts struck the nation from 1989–1991.⁷³ In the intervening period, another major drought affected the country from 1998–2000,⁷⁴ affecting approximately 329,000 people.⁷⁵

Floods are also a serious hazard in Syria, particularly during the winter rainy season and the spring, when the runoff of melting snow occurs. Between 2000 and 2003, 18 flood events of various degrees occurred in Syria, resulting in the widespread damage of infrastructure. In recent years, the most infamous flood was manmade. In June of 2002, the Zeyzoun Dam in northwestern Syria burst, wiping out five villages in its wake, and killing 26 people.⁷⁶

Situated within the region where the Arabian, African, and Eurasian continental plates converge, Syria is exposed to significant seismic activity. Specifically, the city of Damascus is located near the Dead Sea Fault System and its active arm, the Sergaya fault.⁷⁷ During the period from February 2004 to March 2005, 80 earthquakes measuring between 0.6 and 5.4 on the Richter scale occurred in the Damascus region.⁷⁸ While the majority of such recent earthquakes have been minor, the region has experienced major seismic events in the past. In 1759, a massive earthquake (estimated at more than 7.0 on the Richter scale) destroyed Damascus and the Lebanese city of Beirut.⁷⁹ In the 12th

⁷³ Foreign Agricultural Service, United States Agricultural Service. Commodity Intelligence Reports. "Syria: Wheat Production in 2008/2009 Declines Owing to Season-Long Drought." 9 May 2008.

⁷⁴ United Nations Development Programme. United Nations Country Team in Syria. "Syrian Arab Republic: Common Country Assessment 2005 [p. 53]." 2005.

⁷⁵ Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters. Emergency Events Database. "Syrian Arab Republic: Country Profile – Natural Disasters." 2008. <http://www.emdat.be/Database/terms.html>

⁷⁶ United Nations Development Programme. United Nations Country Team in Syria. "Syrian Arab Republic: Common Country Assessment 2005 [p. 53]." 2005. <http://www.undp.org.sy/pdf/CCA%20final.pdf?phpMyAdmin=xmOXzXVfLl705fbItaqCMDpyUf5>

⁷⁷ United Nations Development Programme. United Nations Country Team in Syria. "Syrian Arab Republic: Common Country Assessment 2005 [p. 52]." 2005.

⁷⁸ United Nations Development Programme. Reuters AlertNet. IRIN. "Syria: Government Upgrades Disaster Management." 23 May 2005.

http://www.undp.org/cpr/disred/documents/press/2005/may/reutersan_230505.pdf

⁷⁹ United Nations Development Programme. United Nations Country Team in Syria. "Syrian Arab Republic: Common Country Assessment 2005 [p. 52]." 2005.

<http://www.undp.org.sy/pdf/CCA%20final.pdf?phpMyAdmin=xmOXzXVfLl705fbItaqCMDpyUf5>

century, an earthquake near Aleppo killed upwards of 230,000 people in one of the deadliest seismic events in world history.⁸⁰ Today, the western region of the country continues to be the most susceptible to seismic activity.⁸¹

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



© Tomas Luyten
During a sandstorm

⁸⁰ Earthquake Hazards Program, United States Geologic Survey. “Most Destructive Known Earthquakes on Record in the World.” 16 July 2008. http://earthquake.usgs.gov/regional/world/most_destructive.php

⁸¹ United Nations Development Programme. United Nations Country Team in Syria. “Syrian Arab Republic: Common Country Assessment 2005 [pp. 52–53].” 2005. <http://www.undp.org.sy/pdf/CCA%20final.pdf?phpMyAdmin=xmOXzXVfLl705fbItaqCMDpyUf5>

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...”⁸²

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



© James (Jim) Gordon
Ancient fortress in Syria

Ebla

Between 3500 and 3100 B.C.E., urban culture was gaining a foothold in the city of Ebla, some 53 km (33 mi) southwest of the present city of Aleppo.⁸³ An excavation begun in the 1960s unearthed 17,000 cuneiform tablets that have provided an unparalleled insight into the economic, social, and political developments of that time.⁸⁴ The discoveries at Ebla also had linguistic importance, as Eblaite, the language of Ebla, proved to be much older than Amorite, at the time considered to be the oldest known Semitic language.⁸⁵



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Part of the excavated city of Ebla

⁸² MiddleEast.com. “Syria.” No date. <http://www.middleeast.com/syria.htm>

⁸³ Bartleby.com. *The Encyclopedia of World History*, 6th Ed. “II. Ancient and Classical Periods, 3500 B.C.E–500 C.E. B. Kingdoms of Western Asia and Africa, to 323 B.C.E. 5. Syria-Palestine, c. 3500–323 B.C.E. c. Ebla and Mari.” 2001. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. <http://www.bartleby.com/67/102.html>

⁸⁴ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Ebla.” 2009. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/177615/Ebla>

⁸⁵ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Syria*. “Chapter 1. Historical Setting: Ancient Syria.” April 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2?r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+sy0012\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2?r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+sy0012))

In the 3rd millennium B.C.E., Ebla reached the zenith of its power, exerting its influence from northern Syria southward to modern-day Lebanon and eastward all the way to northern Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq).⁸⁶ Its importance as a commercial center connected it to trading centers as far away as Egypt to the south, modern-day Iran to the east, and the Aegean Sea to the west.^{87, 88}

Waves of Invaders⁸⁹

At roughly the same time Ebla was expanding, so, too, was the Akkadian civilization in Mesopotamia. There is conflicting evidence on which ruler actually carried out Ebla's destruction; either the Akkadian King Sargon or his grandson Naram-Sin conquered and laid waste to the city between 2200 and 2300 B.C.E. Ebla was rebuilt but did not thrive until it was once again sacked by invading Amorites around 2000 B.C.E. Tablet writings found during excavations in the 1930s at the ruins of Mari, one of the Amorite capitals located on the Euphrates River near the modern border of Iraq, provide a wealth of information about the history and geography of this era.⁹⁰



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Bust of an Sargon of Akkad

For much of the latter half of the second millennium B.C.E., modern-day Syria became the battlefield upon which numerous dynasties, emerging from all directions, vied for power. The region's importance as a commercial crossroads provided the motivation for regional rulers to extend their domain over the area.⁹¹ First to arrive, coming from the north in what is today Turkey, were the Hittites, who destroyed many of the Amorite cities in northern Syria and southern-most Turkey (e.g., Ebla, Aleppo, Alalakh) around 1600 B.C.E.⁹² During the early part of the 13th century B.C.E, the Hittites and Egyptians battled for supremacy at the Battle of Kadesh, located near the modern city of Homs along the Orontes River. This well-chronicled battle (even though the chronicles disagree on many of the details) is one of the most vividly described historical examples of chariot warfare.^{93, 94}

⁸⁶ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Ebla." 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/177615/Ebla>

⁸⁷ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. "Country Profile: Syria." April 2005.

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Syria.pdf>

⁸⁸ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Ebla." 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/177615/Ebla>

⁸⁹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Ebla." 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/177615/Ebla>

⁹⁰ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Mari." 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/364795/Mari>

⁹¹ TourEgypt.net. Fox, Troy. "Who Were the Hittites?" <http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/hittites.htm>

⁹² Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Syria: History: Early History." 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578856/Syria>

⁹³ TourEgypt.net. Fox, Troy. "The Actual Battle of Kadesh (The Battle of Kadesh, Part II)."

<http://touregypt.net/featurestories/kadesh.htm>

To the east, in the Jazira Plain, lay the Mitanni kingdom, whose center was located on the Khabur River (a major tributary of the Euphrates). This kingdom was populated by the Hurrians, a group of people who are thought to have moved westward from northern Mesopotamia.⁹⁵ During the mid 14th to early 13th centuries B.C.E., however, this kingdom was conquered first by the Hittites and then subsequently by Assyria, the former Mitanni vassal state lying to the east.⁹⁶

Aramaeans, Assyrians, and Persians

By the end of the 11th century B.C.E., a group of tribespeople with shadowy historical origins began to form states in northern Syria southward to the Anti-Lebanon Mountains along the modern-day Lebanon border. These tribal people, known collectively as Aramaeans, would over time come to briefly rule much of modern-day Syria, including a southern principality whose capital was Damascus.⁹⁷ Ultimately, however, a revitalized Assyrian kingdom would gain control over all of their Syrian lands by the late 8th century B.C.E.⁹⁸ Nonetheless, the cultural influence of the Aramaeans continued well beyond the demise of their power, with Aramaic, the Aramaean language, continuing on as the *lingua franca* of much of Greater Syria (roughly equivalent to modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and Palestine)⁹⁹ well into the first millennium C.E. Even today, Aramaic is still spoken in a few Christian villages in Syria, located in the hills not far from Damascus.¹⁰⁰



© Hendrik Daquin
Palmyra Sunrise

Assyrian dominance over Mesopotamia and ultimately most of the Middle East reached its peak in the late 8th century B.C.E., but it declined quickly thereafter.¹⁰¹ Near the end of the 7th century B.C.E., Assyria was conquered by the Babylonians, who themselves were defeated less than a century later by the Persian forces of Cyrus the Great.¹⁰² For the next two centuries, the Syrian lands were part of the Persian Achaemenid Empire, one of

⁹⁴ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Battle of Kadesh.” 2009.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/309464/Battle-of-Kadesh>

⁹⁵ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Hurrian.” 2009.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/277330/Hurrian>

⁹⁶ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Mitanni.” 2009.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/385882/Mitanni>

⁹⁷ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Damascus: History.” 2009.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/150420/Damascus>

⁹⁸ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Aramaean.” 2009.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/32018/Aramaean>

⁹⁹ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Syria*. “Glossary.”
http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/syria/sy_glos.html#Greater

¹⁰⁰ New York Times. Worth, Robert F. “In Syrian Villages, the Language of Jesus Lives.” 22 April 2008.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/22/world/middleeast/22aramaic.html>

¹⁰¹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. The Neo-Assyrian Empire (746–609): Tiglath-pileser III and Shalmaneser V.” 2009. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/376828/Mesopotamia>

¹⁰² Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Cyrus II.” 2009.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/148758/Cyrus-II>

the largest land empires in history.¹⁰³ Under Persian rule, the cities and villages of Syria were given a certain degree of sovereignty, a pattern that would periodically repeat over the succeeding centuries as new foreign rulers conquered the region.¹⁰⁴

Ancient Greek Conquest

When Alexander the Great arrived in the land of Syria in 333 B.C.E., he brought not just his army and administration, but also a brand new worldview and philosophy of life: Hellenism. As Greek colonizers came to the new lands, a synthesis of Greek and native Syrian cultures took place; the Syrian people would have their first exposure to Greek thought and “Western” culture.

After Alexander’s death in 323, his military officers battled for supremacy within the conquered territories. One of these military leaders was Seleucus I Nicator, who consolidated a large kingdom (known historically as the Seleucid Empire) in the last part of the 4th century B.C.E. that included most of modern-day Syria. Much of the next century, however, would be marked by a series of wars between the forces of the Seleucid dynasty and the Ptolemaic dynasty of Egypt (another Greek successor state from Alexander’s conquests).¹⁰⁵



© PHGCOM / Wikimedia.org
Coin of Seleucus I Nicator

The Seleucid era in Syria was marked by the promotion of Greek culture, the development of a streamlined administrative structure that consolidated military and civilian power, and the founding of several cities. Perhaps most notable of the new cities was Antioch (located on the Orontes River in modern-day Turkey near the Syrian border), which served as the Seleucid principal capital. Constant fighting during the wars with Egypt, however, took its toll over time, and the Seleucid dynasty’s decline began in earnest in the early 2nd century B.C.E. with the first defeats to Roman forces. An increasingly shrinking empire would continue on until 64 B.C.E., when the Romans would finally complete their takeover of the Seleucid lands.¹⁰⁶

The Roman and Byzantine Era

Syria was a Roman province for over four centuries, although its borders would change several times during that period. Antioch was at this time the capital and premier city of the province. It was surpassed only by Rome and Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul)

¹⁰³ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Syria: History: Early History.” 2009. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578856/Syria>

¹⁰⁴ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Syria*. “Chapter 1. Historical Setting: Ancient Syria.” April 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+sy0012\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+sy0012))

¹⁰⁵ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Syrian Wars.” 2009. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/579047/Syrian-Wars>

¹⁰⁶ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “History of Mesopotamia: Mesopotamia from c. 320 B.C. to 620 A.D.: The Seleucid Period.” 2009. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/376828/Mesopotamia>

in terms of its size and importance within the Roman Empire.¹⁰⁷ Damascus, on the southern edge of the Syrian province, also continued to grow through its importance as a trading center on the route between Europe and the Parthian cities of Mesopotamia. Like Antioch, Damascus also became a center for the early Christian community in the region.¹⁰⁸

In 330 C.E. Constantine I, the first Christian Emperor of the Roman Empire, inaugurated the Empire's new capital at the rebuilt ancient city of Byzantium, which was later renamed Constantinople.¹⁰⁹ During the more than three centuries of Byzantine rule, Syria was several times the base for attack against Persian Sassanid Empire forces to the east, as well as the target of reciprocal Sassanid military campaigns. In 540 C.E., Antioch was captured



© Hovic / flickr.com
Remnants of Roman ruins, west Syria.

and briefly held by the armies of Sassanid ruler Khosrow I.¹¹⁰ Approximately 70 years later, the Sassanids, now under the leadership of Khosrow II, the grandson of Khosrow I, once again conquered Antioch, as well as much of the rest of the eastern Byzantine Empire. However, the military success of the Sassanids in the early part of the 7th century would prove to be fleeting. By the time the Sassanid armies were fully beaten back by the forces of Byzantine Emperor Heraclius around 628 C.E., both sides had exhausted their treasuries on the military, leaving them vulnerable to a new invading force marching north from the Arabian Peninsula.^{111, 112}

¹⁰⁷ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Antioch." 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/28297/Antioch>

¹⁰⁸ *Cities of the Middle East and North Africa: A Historical Encyclopedia*. Dumper, Michael. "Damascus [p. 120]." 2006. Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO

¹⁰⁹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Istanbul." 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/296962/Istanbul>

¹¹⁰ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Khosrow I." 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/316888/Khosrow-I>

¹¹¹ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Syria*. "Chapter 1. Historical Setting: Ancient Syria." April 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+sy0012\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+sy0012))

¹¹² Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Ancient Iran: The Sāsānian Period: Triumph of the Arabs." 2009. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/851961/ancient-Iran/32144/The-Sasanian-period#ref=ref755340>

The Spread of Islam

In the early decades of the 7th century C.E., in the Arabian oasis city of Mecca, a local merchant known as Muhammad (later given the title of Prophet) began to teach about the revelations that he had received from the archangel Gabriel while fasting and meditating in a nearby cave. The collection of these revelations would form the basis of the Quran, the fundamental religious text of Islam. At the time of Muhammad's teachings, a significant portion of the Meccan economy was based on pilgrimages to the Kaaba, a local polytheistic temple that held idols sacred to local tribal religions. The monotheistic message of the Prophet Muhammad, in which there was no god but Allah, was foreign to the desert tribespeople of the time, and he and his followers would encounter resistance and even persecution as a result of his teachings. In 622 the Prophet Muhammad journeyed to the northern city of Yathrib (modern-day Medina), where the first Muslim community would take root over the next six years. An increasing number of conversions, as well as military excursions against pockets of resistance, would ultimately unite Mecca and most of the rest of the Arabian Peninsula under Islam by the time of the Prophet's death in 632.¹¹³



Courtesy of Wikipedia
The Investiture of Ali

After Muhammad's death, Islam spread quickly through the neighboring regions of the Middle East. In 635, Byzantine Damascus surrendered to Khalid Ibn Al-Walid, one of the Prophet's generals, and by 640, the remainder of Syria was firmly under the control of Arab Muslim forces. In exchange for payment of a poll tax, all residents of the newly conquered lands were guaranteed their personal safety and the safety of their possessions and churches. For members of some Christian sects, such as the Nestorians and Jacobites, conditions actually improved under Arab Muslim rule compared to the Byzantine era.¹¹⁴

Mu'awiya, of the Umayyad clan, was appointed by the Caliph¹¹⁵ Umar as the first governor of the Syrian territories in 639, making Damascus his capital. However, harmony did not reign in the newly expanding Muslim empire. After Umar was assassinated in 644, his successor, Uthman, was chosen by a six-man *shura* (council) as an apparent compromise choice over other, more likely candidates within the group.¹¹⁶ Like Mu'awiya, Uthman was a member of the Umayyad clan. As caliph, he led the effort to collect, compile, and codify an official version of the Quran. In 656, Uthman, too, was

¹¹³ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Muhammad: The Life of Muhammad." 2009.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/396226/Muhammad>

¹¹⁴ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Syria: History: Medieval Period: Islamic Conquest." 2009.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578856/Syria>

¹¹⁵ The word "caliph" (Arabic *khaleefa*) means "successor." For Sunni Muslims, the four *rashidun* ("rightly guided") caliphs were the first four leaders of the Muslim community after the Prophet Muhammad died. The first was Abu Bakr; the second, Umar; the third, Uthman; and the fourth, Ali. Shi'a Muslims deny the legitimacy of the first three caliphs and consider Ali to be their first imam.

¹¹⁶ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Uthmān ibn Affān." 2009.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/620653/Uthman-ibn-Affan>

assassinated by Egyptian rebels in his Medina home, and Ali, cousin and son-in-law to the late Prophet Muhammad, was chosen as the new caliph.

As Uthman's kin, Mu'awiya was obliged to revenge his murder. When Ali, the new caliph, did not apprehend Uthman's killers, Mu'awiya refused to recognize Ali as the caliph. Ali's response was to invade Syria. His army was met by that of Mu'awiya at the Battle of Siffin on the Euphrates River near the present-day Iraqi–Syrian border. Both the battle itself and the mutually agreed-upon arbitration after the battle proved indecisive in the struggle for the caliphate.¹¹⁷ Ali was subsequently slain in 661 by a group of his former followers who considered his decision to arbitrate the caliphate a repudiation of the Quran.¹¹⁸ After Ali's death, Mu'awiya proclaimed himself the first Umayyad caliph, with his capital at Damascus. Ali's followers, meanwhile, broke away from Sunni Islam, forming the Shi'a ("party of Ali") branch of Islam.

The Umayyad Era

The Muslim world expanded ever more widely and rapidly thereafter. During the 89-year period known as the Umayyad Era (661–750), Muslim armies marched across the Middle East and Africa; they sailed to Europe and conquered Spain; they penetrated Central Asia, northwest India, and reached the doorstep of China. All these campaigns were based out of Syria, and it was the Syrian army itself that supplied most of the manpower.¹¹⁹



© nicholas macgowan
The courtyard of the Umayyad Mosque

Art and architecture also flourished under Umayyad rule. Two of the most famous buildings from this era, still standing today, are the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.¹²⁰

During the Umayyad dynasty, most Syrians converted to Islam and Damascus underwent an Arabization process.¹²¹ Arabic replaced Aramaic and Greek as the principal language of Syria, Arabic coinage replaced the old Byzantine and Sassanid currency, and Arabs took on many of the financial administrative duties formerly carried out by Greeks and Persians.¹²² By the mid 8th century, however, dissention from within, and resentment

¹¹⁷ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Battle of Siffin." 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/543526/Battle-of-Siffin>

¹¹⁸ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Khārijite." 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/316391/Kharijite>

¹¹⁹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Umayyad Dynasty." 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/613719/Umayyad-dynasty>

¹²⁰ Metropolitan Museum of Art. Yalman, Suzan. "The Art of the Umayyad Period (661-750)." 2008.

http://www.metmuseum.org/TOAH/HD/umay/hd_umay.htm

¹²¹ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Syria*. "Chapter 1. Historical Setting: Muslim Empires: Umayyad Caliphate." April 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstty:@field\(DOCID+sy0014\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstty:@field(DOCID+sy0014))

¹²² Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Umayyad Dynasty." 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/613719/Umayyad-dynasty>

from without, would weaken the Umayyad grip on power. In 750 the Abbasids, a dynasty of Meccan origin who were aided militarily by forces from northeast Persia, applied the final blow when they defeated the Umayyads at the Battle of the Great Kab River in Mesopotamia.¹²³ The Abbasids thereafter established a new caliphate in Baghdad that would last for 500 years, in which Syria was merely a province.

Nonetheless, periods of resistance against Abbasid authority periodically occurred within the Syrian lands. One of these challengers to Baghdad was Abu al-Hasan Ali, a Shi'ite prince also known as *Sayf al-Dawla* ("Sword of the State"). *Sayf al-Dawla* established the Hamdanid dynasty in Aleppo around 945, and today he is remembered most famously as the patron of the legendary Arab poet al-Mutanabbi.¹²⁴ During the 50-plus years of Hamdanid rule in Aleppo, much of the time was spent battling the Byzantine Greeks on the northern border in eastern Anatolia. The Hamdanid dynasty in Aleppo faded during its later years as the next wave of invaders emerged from the south.¹²⁵

Fatimid Rule

The rulers of the Fatimid Dynasty belonged to the Isma'ili sect of the Shi'ite branch of Islam and claimed descent from Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad and wife of Ali, the first Shi'a imam. Their empire originated during the early 10th century in the area of North Africa now occupied by eastern Algeria, Tunisia, and western Libya. After several failed attempts, the Fatimids conquered Egypt in 969 and shortly thereafter established the new city of Cairo as their capital.¹²⁶ From Egypt, the Fatimid forces drove north, conquering Damascus and southern Syria in 978. They would remain until 1076, although their hold on the region was at times somewhat nominal and marked by several interruptions.¹²⁷ Aleppo and northern Syria became the scene of an ongoing struggle for supremacy between the Fatimid and the Byzantine Empire after the Hamdanid dynasty began its final decline. Small principalities were able to take hold in this region for several decades owing to the lack of a dominant central power.¹²⁸



© Zereshk / Wikimedia.org
Seljuq artifact

¹²³ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Abbāsīd Dynasty." 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/465/Abbasid-dynasty>

¹²⁴ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Sayf al-Dawlah." 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/526146/Sayf-ad-Dawlah>

¹²⁵ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Hamdānīd Dynasty." 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/253288/Hamdanid-dynasty>

¹²⁶ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Cairo: History: Early History." 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/88520/Cairo>

¹²⁷ *The Ismā'īlīs: Their History and Doctrine*. Daftary, Farhad. "Fātimīd Ismā'īlīsm [pp. 174–176]." 1992. Cambridge, Engl: Cambridge University Press.

¹²⁸ *A History of Islamic Societies*. Lapidus, Ira Marvin. "15. The Arab Middle East: Egypt and Syria in the 'Caliphal' Age [p. 287]." 2002. Cambridge, Engl: Cambridge University Press.

The Seljuk Turks, a sultanate led by the rulers of Turkmen tribespeople who had migrated from Central Asia to Persia and ultimately pushed westward into Mesopotamia and Anatolia, ended the Fatimid period in Syria during the last half of the 11th century. The Seljuks, however, were only to have a short-term presence in Syria themselves. Toward the end of the 11th century, under pressure from European Christian Crusaders, the Seljuk empire began to fragment, eventually devolving into small principalities in central Anatolia.¹²⁹ The Crusaders, meanwhile, entered the Near East region and began occupation of coastal areas and cities such as Antioch, Jerusalem, Edessa (in modern-day southern Turkey), and Al-Karak (in modern-day Jordan), forming what became to be known as the Crusader states.¹³⁰ Notably, the cities of Aleppo and Damascus were both besieged by Crusader forces, but never fell.^{131, 132}

Saladin, the Ayyubids, and the Mamluks

It was the Kurdish warrior Salah al-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyubi, known in the West as Saladin, who led the Muslim forces to defeat the Crusaders and take back Muslim cities. The Crusaders surrendered Jerusalem to Saladin in 1187, and much of the remainder of the Crusader states fell shortly thereafter (although subsequent Crusades would briefly regain some territory).¹³³ Saladin, as founder of the Ayyubid Dynasty, ultimately would rule all the Muslim lands from the Tigris, beyond the Nile to North Africa, and south to the Sudan. He died of malaria in 1192, and the Ayyubid empire began to inexorably break apart.¹³⁴



Courtesy of Wikipedia
"Saladin rex Aegypti"

The successors to the Ayyubids in Egypt were the Mamluks, a dynasty founded by the Turkish generals of slave armies, who were able to repel the initial invasions of the Mongols in 1260 and eventually extended their dominance through Syria to the Euphrates River in the 1300s.^{135, 136} Unfortunately for the Mamluks, however, a second Mongol invasion, under the military leadership of Tamerlane (also known as Timur), was more successful. Tamerlane invaded Syria in 1401, and in the process devastated Aleppo and

¹²⁹ Islamicity.com. "The Seljuk Turks." No date. <http://www.islamicity.com/Mosque/ihame/Sec9.htm>

¹³⁰ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Syria: History: Medieval Period: From the 9th to the 12th Century." 2009. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578856/Syria>

¹³¹ SyriaGate.com. Miller, Carol. "Aleppo." 2004.

<http://www.syriagate.com/Syria/about/cities/Aleppo/aleppo-cm.htm>

¹³² Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Damascus." 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/150420/Damascus>

¹³³ HistoryWorld.net. "History of the Crusades." No date.

<http://www.historyworld.net/wrldhis/PlainTextHistories.asp?ParagraphID=fpf>

¹³⁴ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Syria*. "Chapter 1. Historical Setting: Muslim Empires: Succeeding Caliphates and Kingdoms." April 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+sy0015\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+sy0015))

¹³⁵ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Mamlük." 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/360799/Mamluk>

¹³⁶ Applied History Research Group, University of Calgary. "The Islamic World to 1600: The Il-Khanate." 1998. http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/islam/mongols/

Damascus. After the Mongols left Syria, the Mamluks would reclaim the lost territories, but a weakened financial foundation and internal decay left their armies vulnerable when the Ottoman Turks under Sultan Selim I invaded in 1516–17.^{137, 138}

The Ottoman Era

In contrast to the previous centuries that had witnessed a seemingly nonstop parade of empires and dynasties vie for control of Greater Syria, the era of the Ottoman Empire in Syria lasted 400 years, with only one significant interruption. Agriculture improved for awhile in parts of Syria under Ottoman administration, and Aleppo thrived as a trading center with Europe. Damascus gained a special role within the Ottoman world because of its position as the starting point for Muslims making the annual *Hajj* (“pilgrimage”) to Mecca. Over time, however, economic and political stagnation set in within the Ottoman domain, and Syria in particular became something of a backwater.



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Ibrahim Pasha

Ottoman central administration of its provinces slackened; janissaries (the Sultan’s elite soldiers), always a harsh security force, lost their discipline and deteriorated into a law unto themselves; taxes increasingly burdened villages as *mültizim* (“tax farmers”) abused their powers.^{139, 140} By the early 19th century, the Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul lost control of the hinterlands, and Bedouin tribesmen from the Arabian deserts rode in to fill the vacuum. While Aleppo and Damascus maintained their security and wealth, the outlying cities and villages fell prey to the Bedouin marauders.¹⁴¹

During the 1830s, the Ottomans were chased out of Greater Syria by the forces of Egypt’s ruling *pasha* (“leader”) Muhammad Ali. For nearly 10 years, his son Ibrahim Pasha ruled Syria, but in 1841 European forces intervened, assisting the Ottoman armies in forcing the Egyptians to withdraw from Syria. For most of the European powers, a weakened Ottoman Empire was still preferable to the potential geopolitical crisis that might ensue if the empire were to collapse altogether.¹⁴² European influence in Ottoman-held Syria continued to grow, with local Catholic and Orthodox populations placed under the protectorships of France and Russia, respectively. European goods also began to flood

¹³⁷ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Mamlük.” 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/360799/Mamluk>

¹³⁸ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Ottoman Empire: The Peak of Ottoman Power, 1481-1566: Domination of Southeastern Europe and the Middle East: Selim I.” 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/434996/Ottoman-Empire>

¹³⁹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Syria: History: Ottoman Period: Ottoman Government, 16th-17th centuries, Decline of Ottoman Authority.” 2009. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578856/Syria>

¹⁴⁰ *Syria: A Historical and Architectural Guide*. Ball, Warwick. Chapter 2. Historical Background: The Modern Period [p. 44].” 2007. Northampton, Mass: Interlink Books.

¹⁴¹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Syria: History: Ottoman Period: Ottoman Government, 16th-17th Centuries, Decline of Ottoman Authority.” 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578856/Syria>

¹⁴² Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Syria: History: Ottoman Period: Egyptian Domination.” 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578856/Syria>

into the region, disrupting the local economy. Many Muslims grew resentful towards Christian and Jewish merchants who had established trade agreements with the Europeans.¹⁴³

End of the Ottoman Era

During the last 25 years of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century, the Ottoman Empire was ruled by Sultan Abdulhamid II. As he came to power, the Empire found itself effectively bankrupt. The financial problems that had been building for decades within the Empire accelerated as a result of the hugely expensive Crimean War with Russia. It was financed through European loans that continued after the war and eventually built up a staggering load of debt.^{144, 145} Under Abdulhamid II, a European-administered debt bureau was created that managed the debt repayment and even was in charge of collecting taxes and overseeing revenues in some Ottoman provinces.



Courtesy Univ. of Texas Libraries
Abdul Hamid II

As the Ottoman economy increasingly came under European domination, the Sultan embraced Pan-Islamism, a broad ideology advocating the unification of all Muslim lands. No doubt one of the Sultan's objectives was to use Pan-Islamism as a means of deterring European nations from using their economic domination of the Ottomans to press for political objectives. Most European empires now had Muslim lands within their areas of control; they feared the unrest that might occur if subjects grasped their ethnic or religious identities, and pressed for nationhood on this basis.

The colonial powers, including the Ottomans, had good reason to fear such nationalist movements. Within Syria itself, the philosophy of Pan-Islamism—which the Sultan viewed only as a tool to solidify internal support within what was left of his empire—was willingly adopted by many in this largely Muslim region.^{146, 147} Ultimately, however, it would not deter the stirrings of an independence movement among the Syrian Arabs, especially after the Young Turk revolution in 1908 led to the effective dissolution of the power of the Ottoman sultanate. Relations between Turks and Arabs worsened after the revolution, and Arab nationalist political parties began to emerge in Syria, Egypt, Constantinople, and even Paris.¹⁴⁸ The Ottoman Empire's entrance into World War I on the side of Germany and Austria (the Central Powers) gave hope to Syrian Arab

¹⁴³ Syria. Dougherty, Terri. "Chapter 2. Conquered by the Great Empires of History: Egyptian Occupation [p. 28]." 2004. Farmington, Hill, Mich: Lucent Books.

¹⁴⁴ *The International Debt Crisis in Historical Perspective*. Lipson, Charles. "International Debt and National Security: Britain and America [p. 198]." 1992. Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Press.

¹⁴⁵ *The Balkans: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers, 1804-1999*. Glenny, Misha. "The Realm of Ruins: Reform and Decay, 1839-1878 [pp. 85-90]." 1999. New York: Viking

¹⁴⁶ Naqshbandi.org. "Abdulhamid II." http://www.naqshbandi.org/ottomans/khalifa/s34_detail.htm

¹⁴⁷ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Syria: History: Ottoman Period: Ottoman Rule Restored." 2009. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578856/Syria>

¹⁴⁸ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Syria: History: Ottoman Period: Ottoman Rule Restored." 2009. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578856/Syria>

nationalists that independence would be obtained after the war if the Ottomans/Germans/Austrians were defeated.¹⁴⁹

World War I

During World War I, Syrian Arab nationalists aligned themselves with Hussein, the Sharif of Hejaz (Red Sea coast of Arabia), who was virtually alone among Arab leaders in deciding to fight against the Ottoman Turks. Hussein's army, with assistance from British officer, T.E. Lawrence (later known as Lawrence of Arabia) and under the command of Hussein's son Faisal, captured the strategically important Red Sea port of Aqaba.¹⁵⁰ In October 1918, Faisal's forces triumphantly entered Damascus. Arab nationalists, especially Syrians, rejoiced that the day of their sovereignty had finally arrived. But it was not to be. Faisal was named King of Syria in March 1920, but his reign would be short, owing to European meddling. In 1916, the British and French had signed the Sykes-Picot agreement, a document that carved out for them in advance spheres of influence in the Middle East after the war was to end. Under the agreement, Syria and Lebanon fell within the French mandate. When the French invaded Damascus in July 1920, Faisal went into exile in London. One year later, he was named king of the new government of Iraq, a region under the British sphere of influence that included much of the ancient region of Mesopotamia.¹⁵¹



Courtesy of Wikipedia
T.E. Lawrence | "Lawrence of Arabia"

The French Mandate

During the 1920s, Syrian calls for independence became more forceful. The French mandate over Syria, under the auspices of the League of Nations, asserted that the French government would help Syria prepare for eventual self-governance. However, in the view of most Muslim Syrians, the French did not seem to be expediting that process. Syrian nationalists also resented the dismemberment of Greater Syria under the French and British mandates, which had removed Palestine, Lebanon, and Transjordan (modern-day Jordan). In 1925, a Syrian nationalist revolt, initiated by Druze rebels in southern Syria, erupted and continued to simmer for two years.¹⁵²



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Signing the Franco-Syrian Treaty of Independence

¹⁴⁹ *Syria*. Dougherty, Terri. "Chapter 2. Conquered by the Great Empires of History: Ottoman Defeat [p. 29]." 2004. Farmington, Hill, Mich: Lucent Books

¹⁵⁰ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "T. E. Lawrence." 2009.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/332960/T-E-Lawrence>

¹⁵¹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Faysal I." 2009.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/202997/Faysal-I>

¹⁵² Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Syria: History: The French Mandate." 2009.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578856/Syria>

Much of the first half of the 1930s witnessed unsuccessful negotiations between the French and Syrian nationalists over a framework for ultimate independence. But with a change of the French government in 1936, these negotiations quickly turned fruitful. An agreement outlining the terms and details of Syrian independence was reached in 1936. The Syrian government quickly signed off on the agreement, but the French parliament never ratified it.

As Europe slipped into another World War, Syria would once again find itself a base of operations in the conflict, only this time under Allied control. After the French government fell to Germany in 1941, British, British Commonwealth, and Free French forces¹⁵³ invaded Syria in order to gain control of the region before the Germans. Both the British and Free French proclaimed Syrian independence upon entering Syria, and Syrians quickly went about the process of setting up a government. In 1945, the French delayed in transferring final control of armed forces in Syria, bombing Damascus when the Syrians refused to negotiate a treaty, and establishing French rights within Syria after independence. British leader Winston Churchill then threatened to use British forces to aid the Syrian government if the French attacks did not stop, which they soon did. In 1946, the French finally left Syria, and to this day, Syrians celebrate Evacuation Day every April 17, marking the end of French occupation.^{154, 155}

Coups

In 1948, Syria participated in the war against the newly formed state of Israel and was defeated along with its Arab allies. In the aftermath of Arab defeat in Palestine, popular discontent rose among Syrians against the democratically elected civilian government, which the army blamed for its defeat.¹⁵⁶ In March 1949 military forces loyal to Army Chief-of-Staff Husni al-Za'im removed President Shuhri al-Quwatli from office in the first of a long series of coups d'état—three in 1949 alone.¹⁵⁷ Motivation for these coups emanated from the divisive issue of Syrian political unity with Iraq, an idea whose popularity or lack thereof exposed the geographic, religious, and political divisions among the Syrian population.^{158, 159} The leader of



Courtesy of Wikipedia
President Husni al-Zaim of Syria

¹⁵³ Free French Forces were fighters during WWII that continued to fight Axis forces after France surrendered to Germany.

¹⁵⁴ *The Arab World: Past, Present, and Future*. Izzedlin, Nejla. "X. Syria and Lebanon [pp. 163–165]." 1953. Chicago, Ill: Henry Regnery Company.

¹⁵⁵ ArabicNews.com. "Syria Celebrates Evacuation Day." 17 April 1999. <http://www.arabicnews.com/ansub/Daily/Day/990417/1999041744.html>

¹⁵⁶ *Politics and Government in the Middle East and North Africa*. Dekmejian, R. Hrair. "The Arab Republic of Syria [p. 193]." 1991. Gainesville, Fla: University Press of Florida.

¹⁵⁷ *Syria*. Dougherty, Terri. "Chapter 3. Independent Syria [p. 33]." 2004. Farmington, Hill, Mich: Lucent Books.

¹⁵⁸ *The Syrian Land: Process of Integration and Fragmentation*. Landis, Joshua. "Shishakli and the Druzes: Integration and Intransigence [pp. 369–396]." 1998. http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/Joshua_Landis_Druze_and_Shishakli.htm

the third coup, Colonel Adib al-Shishakli, initially kept a low profile and let the political establishment bicker among themselves as popular discontent grew. One of al-Shishakli's civilian political allies during this time was Akram al-Hawrani, founder of the Arab Socialist Party, who rather unsuccessfully pushed for land reform measures.^{160, 161} In 1951, al-Shishakli staged a second coup against the political leadership of the country and actively took control of the country in a military dictatorship. All political parties except al-Shishakli's were banned and political dissent was aggressively squelched.¹⁶² As Syrian political leaders, including al-Hawrani, fled the country, al-Shishakli's heavy-handed tactics began to backfire. By 1954, al-Shishakli's base of support had dwindled, and he faced increasing opposition within the Syrian army. In February of that year, he was overthrown and forced into exile.^{163, 164}

The Baathists

As the Syrian government continued to undergo frequent changes, alternative political organizations were formed. Among these groups were the Baathists. Even prior to Syrian independence, the pan-Arab unity movement had spawned several political groups, one of which was the Baath (Arabic for "renaissance") Party, whose platform promoted political nonalignment, a secular embrace of Islamic values, and anti-imperialism.¹⁶⁵ Economically, the Baathists advanced a socialist agenda, a stance that was reinforced in 1953 when the Baath Party merged with al-Hawrani's Arab Socialist Party (ASP).^{166, 167} The party found its strongest support, particularly after the merger with the ASP, among the poorer groups within Syria: Druzes,



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Pres. Gamal Abd El Nasser, of Egypt

¹⁵⁹ *Politics and Government in the Middle East and North Africa*. Dekmejian, R. Hrair. "The Arab Republic of Syria [p. 193]." 1991. Gainesville, Fla: University Press of Florida

¹⁶⁰ *Historical Dictionary of Syria*, 2nd Ed. Commins, David Dean. "Hawrani, Akram al- [pp. 123–124]. 2004. Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press

¹⁶¹ *Syria: 1945-1986*. Hopwood, Derek. "Independence 1945-1970 [pp. 34–36]." 1988. Oxford, Engl: Routledge.

¹⁶² *Politics and Government in the Middle East and North Africa*. Dekmejian, R. Hrair. "The Arab Republic of Syria [p. 193]." 1991. Gainesville, Fla: University Press of Florida.

¹⁶³ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Adib al-Shishakli." 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/541174/Adib-al-Shishakli>

¹⁶⁴ Damascus-Online.com. "Shishakli, Adib al-." No date. http://www.damascus-online.com/se/bio/shishakli_adib.htm

¹⁶⁵ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Ba'th Party." 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/55912/Bath-Party>

¹⁶⁶ Al Jazeera English. Janabi, Ahmed. "The Arab Baath Socialist Party." 12 February 2008.

<http://english.aljazeera.net/focus/arabunity/2008/02/2008525184059317433.html>

¹⁶⁷ *Politics and Government in the Middle East and North Africa*. Dekmejian, R. Hrair. "The Arab Republic of Syria [p. 194]." 1991. Gainesville, Fla: University Press of Florida.

Alawites (a Shi'ite Muslim sect mostly living in the coastal mountain regions near Latakia), and peasant Sunnis and Christians.^{168, 169}

By 1957, with Syria once again under a parliamentary system, the Baath Party obtained a fragile position of political primacy within a left-wing political alliance that controlled the Syrian government.¹⁷⁰ The party, however, was already beginning to falter because of internal disarray and dissension, and its leadership position was being challenged by the growth of the Syrian Communist Party, a Baath Party ally in the alliance that was increasingly viewed as a political rival.¹⁷¹

In 1958, the Baath Party turned to Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, a pan-Arabist leader who was extremely popular in Syria, and proposed a political union between the countries. Thus was created the United Arab Republic (UAR), a three-and-a-half year experiment in nation building that drove not only the Syrian Community Party out of existence, but also the Baathists.¹⁷² Syria became very much the lesser partner in this new nation. In 1961, as Nasser continued moving forward toward the complete political and economic integration of Syria into the Egyptian-dominated UAR, a coup d'état led by conservative Syrian army officers took place in Damascus. Nasser, whose ambivalence toward the Egypt–Syria union never seemed to fade, did not resist the Syrian secession from the UAR.

Baath Ascendancy

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



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Hafez al-Assad

¹⁶⁸ *Politics and Government in the Middle East and North Africa*. Dekmejian, R. Hrair. “The Arab Republic of Syria [p. 195].” 1991. Gainesville, Fla: University Press of Florida.

¹⁶⁹ *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. George, Alan. “‘The Leading Party in Society and the State’: The Ba’ath Party [p. 66].” 2003. London: Zed Books.

¹⁷⁰ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Syria*. “Chapter 1. Historical Setting: After Independence: Radical Political Influence.” April 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+sy0022\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+sy0022))

¹⁷¹ *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. George, Alan. “‘The Leading Party in Society and the State’: The Ba’ath Party [p. 67].” 2003. London: Zed Books.

¹⁷² Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Syria*. “Chapter 1. Historical Setting: After Independence: United Arab Republic.” April 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+sy0023\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+sy0023))

years would be battling for control of the Syrian government.^{173, 174} In March 1963, the military Baathists staged a coup, and the reborn Baath Party gained power that it continues to wield to this day, albeit as only the political shell of itself that remains after four decades of Assad-family rule.

*Power Struggle*¹⁷⁵

Over the next few years, two factions within the Baath party—one that promoted Arab nationalism and a slow approach to socialism and another that was more concerned about advancing socialist reforms than re-establishing Arab unity—battled for party supremacy. The former group became known as the pan-Arab “nationalists,” while the latter faction was referred to as the “regionalists.” In 1966, Amin al-Hafiz, the Baathist military leader and most powerful figure among the nationalists, was overthrown in a bloody coup. Alawis Salah al-Jadid, the military leader of the regionalists, became the Baath Party leader, and the true power behind the civilian government. Hafez al-Assad, Hafiz’s fellow Alawite military colleague, took over as Minister of Defense.

Soon thereafter, however, the two men began to engage in a nearly four-year-long power struggle. During the 1967 Six-Day War against Israel, the Syrian Air Force was destroyed, and Israel took control of the Golan Heights from Syria. Syria’s crushing losses as part of the pan-Arab forces during this time contributed to the turning point in their relationship. Both men, as part of the Baathist military leadership, found themselves on the defensive following the war and needing to rebuild their power bases. Assad, whose views were now closer to the more moderate nationalists than the fervently socialist Jadid, focused on placing key supporters within the military leadership. Jadid, on the other hand, firmed up his support within the civilian political structure.¹⁷⁶

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

¹⁷³ *The Essential Middle East: A Comprehensive Guide*. Hiro, Dilip. “Assad, Hafiz [p. 55].” 2003. New York: Carroll & Graf.

¹⁷⁴ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Syria*. “Chapter 1. Historical Setting: After Independence: Neo-Baath Dominance, 1963-1966.” April 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+sy0025\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+sy0025))

¹⁷⁵ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Syria*. “Chapter 1. Historical Setting: After Independence: Neo-Baath Dominance, 1963-1966.” April 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+sy0025\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+sy0025))

¹⁷⁶ *Syria: 1945-1986*. Hopwood, Derek. “Independence 1945-1970 [p. 51].” 1988. Oxford, Engl: Routledge.

This “Correction Movement,” as it was referred to, ushered in three decades of Assad rule in Syria.^{177, 178}

The Early Assad Years

By 1971, Assad had firmly consolidated his control of the Baath Party and the Syrian government, and in March of that year became president after sweeping to victory in the first of a long string of unopposed elections during his tenure. He quickly bolstered relations with Egypt, Libya, and the Soviet Union, using Moscow as a source of military support for rebuilding Syria’s armed forces.¹⁷⁹



DoD Photo
Damaged armored vehicle from the October War

Assad’s early years of power, however, were not without challenges to his authority. As an Alawite (a Shi’ite sect that most Sunni Muslims consider heretical) he faced opposition from Sunni Muslims over the draft 1973 constitution that did not make Islam the state religion. After strikes and riots broke out in Sunni-dominant cities such as Hama and Hons, Assad had the draft amended so that the president was required to be Muslim. This insertion, however, then fueled further controversy over whether Alawites were true Muslims. Assad overcame this problem by obtaining an agreement with Musa al-Sadr, a prominent Shi’ite imam from Lebanon, to affirm that Alawites were part of a recognized tradition within Shi’ite Islam.^{180, 181}

Both Syria and Egypt continued to nurse their grievances with Israel, particularly over the territory from their countries (Golan Heights for Syria, the Sinai Peninsula and Suez Canal for Egypt) that was still under Israeli control from the 1967 war. In October 1973, both countries launched an attack against Israel. During the early days of fighting, Syrian forces regained the Golan Heights, but were then beaten back to their former positions in later fighting and even lost some new land. In April 1974, however, a U.S.-brokered disengagement agreement between Syria and Israel returned the now-demolished Golan Heights city of Quneitra to Syria, which was viewed as a triumph for the Syrian people.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁷ *Syria: 1945-1986*. Hopwood, Derek. “Independence 1945-1970 [pp. 51–52].” 1988. Oxford, Engl: Routledge.

¹⁷⁸ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Syria*. “Chapter 1. Historical Setting: After Independence: The Baath Redirections of 1966 and 1970.” April 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+sy0026\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+sy0026))

¹⁷⁹ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Syria*. “Chapter 5. National Security: The Regular Armed Forces: Foreign Influences in the Development of the Armed Forces.” April 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+sy0127\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+sy0127))

¹⁸⁰ Geocities.com. *Shi’ism, Resistance, and Revolution*. Kramer, Martin. “Syria’s Alawis and Shi’ism.” 1987. Boulder, Colo: Westview Press. <http://www.geocities.com/martinkramerorg/Alawis.htm>

¹⁸¹ Defense-Update.com. Eshel, David. “Iran’s Alawites: Iran’s Missing Link to Shiite Crescent?” 2007. <http://www.defense-update.com/newscast/1206/analysis/analysis-251206.htm>

¹⁸² Time.com. “Return to Quneitra.” 8 July 1974. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,943909-1,00.html>

Lebanon

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



© Franco Pecchio
Destroyed city of Hama

By 1978, Syria had switched sides in the Lebanese conflict and was now supporting Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) forces and the Muslim militias. As the civil war began to subside during the late 1980s, Syria still was militarily in control of a large part of Syria. Syria pledged in the 1989 Ta’if Accord, which laid the groundwork for the end to the Lebanese Civil War, to withdraw their forces to the eastern Bekaa Valley of Lebanon by the end of 1992, but this pledge was not fulfilled.¹⁸³ Ultimately, Syrian soldiers would remain in Lebanon for another 16 years.¹⁸⁴

Opposition Forces

As Sunni Muslim dissatisfaction with the Assad regime continued into the mid- to late 1970s, several opposition groups emerged in Syrian cities—most notably, the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni fundamentalist organization founded in Egypt in the late 1920s, that later spread throughout the Arab world. Violent attacks aimed at Syrian governmental and Baath Party targets as well as Alawites, during the late 1970s continued to escalate. In 1979, 50 Alawite cadets at an Aleppo military academy were killed by Muslim Brotherhood operatives.¹⁸⁵ Muslim Brotherhood attacks in Aleppo continued into 1980 and eventually spread to other cities, such as Hama, Homs, and the eastern city of Dayr az Zawr. A failed assassination attempt against Assad in June of that year further escalated the government’s response against the Muslim Brotherhood.

Violence continued to increase through 1981 and into 1982, triggering demonstrations and strikes in Sunni-dominant cities. For a time, it appeared that Syria, like Lebanon, might be on the path to civil war.¹⁸⁶ Ultimately, a brutal governmental response to a Muslim Brotherhood attack against government forces in the city of Hama crippled the

¹⁸³ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Lebanon: History: Lebanon After Independence: Lebanon’s Second Republic (1990-): Continuing Challenges into the 21st Century: External Intervention and Confessional Conflict.” 2009. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/334152/Lebanon/279120/Civil-war#ref=ref386586>

¹⁸⁴ International Herald Tribune. “After 29 Years, Syria Leaves Lebanon.” 26 April 2005. <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2005/04/26/africa/web.0426syria.php>

¹⁸⁵ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Syria*. “Chapter 1. Historical Setting: The Assad Era.” April 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+sy0027\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+sy0027))

¹⁸⁶ New York Times. Farquhar, Neil. “Hafez al-Assad, Who Turned Syria Into a Power in the Middle East, Dies at 69.” 10 June 2000. <http://www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/asadd3.htm>

anti-Assad movement. After the ambush, Syrian forces were ordered to attack Hama, leaving much of the old city in ruins. The number of deaths from the Hama action was estimated to range from 10,000 to 25,000 people.¹⁸⁷ No similar dissident movements have arisen since the bloodbath at Hama, although former vice president and foreign minister Abdul Khaddam, who was fired in June 2005, leads a dissident movement stationed in Europe. Formerly a rival to Assad, Abdel Halim Khaddam and his group demand regime change in Syria, but their external influence is considered weak.¹⁸⁸

Bashar al-Assad

Hafiz al-Assad died in June 2000, almost 30 years after the coup that brought him to power in Syria. His 34-year-old son, Bashar, became the new Syrian President upon his death. Medically trained in ophthalmology, Bashar's career path took an unexpected turn in 1994 when his older brother Basil, who was being groomed to succeed their father, died in an automobile accident. Bashar al-Assad soon after entered the Syrian military, rising to the rank of colonel by 1999.



© Agência Brasil
President Bashar al-Assad of Syria

After coming to power, Bashar al-Assad began to push forward modest reforms, primarily economic. Syria has long been dependent on oil exports, but declining oil reserves have increased the pressure to diversify the economy. The Baath Party continues to hold a monopoly on political power within Syria, although some baby steps have been taken to loosen the tight restrictions on political expression.¹⁸⁹

During 2005, Assad's government came under intense pressure from Western and Arab countries after former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri was assassinated by car bomb in February.¹⁹⁰ Syria was widely suspected of having played a role in the death of Hariri, who had expressed anger at Syria for its role in keeping pro-Syrian Lebanese President Émile Lahoud in office beyond his constitutional term limit.¹⁹¹ Hariri's death also triggered massive street protests in Lebanon against Syria's continued presence in the country. These demonstrations, collectively named the Cedar Revolution, were augmented by increased international pressure for Syria to uphold a 2004 UN Security Council resolution calling for all foreign nations to pull their forces out of Lebanon.

¹⁸⁷ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Syria*. "Chapter 1. Historical Setting: The Assad Era." April 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+sy0027\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+sy0027))

¹⁸⁸ Council on Foreign Relations. Pan, Esther. "Syria: Has Assad Dodged a Bullet?" 26 April 2006. <http://www.cfr.org/publication/10546/syria.html>

¹⁸⁹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Bashar al-Assad." 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/711020/Bashar-al-Assad>

¹⁹⁰ Mideast Monitor. Badran, Tony. "Saudi-Syrian Relations After Hariri." February 2006.

http://www.mideastmonitor.org/issues/0602/0602_2.htm

¹⁹¹ New York Times. Sachs, Susan. "Rafik Hariri, Ex-Premier of Lebanon, Dies at 60." 15 February 2005.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/15/international/middleeast/15hariri.html>

Recent Events

Ultimately, the uproar over Hariri's death forced Syria to back down. In April 2005, the remaining approximately 14,000 Syrian troops in Lebanon left the country.

Meanwhile, a preliminary report of a United Nations investigation into Hariri's death implicated several senior Syrian intelligence and administration figures, including Bashar al-Assad's brother and brother-in-law, in the bombing.^{192, 193, 194} While Assad's rule was shaken by the

fallout from the Hariri assassination, he managed to avoid having international economic sanctions placed on Syria, except for the United States, which first established sanctions in 2004.¹⁹⁵



© Jane Houle
Hamas Rally Damascus, Syria December 2008

In the aftermath of the Hariri assassination and its follow-up investigation, Syria strengthened its ties with Iran, a move that Western nations and many of the primarily Sunni Muslim countries of the Middle East viewed with concern.¹⁹⁶ Both Syria and Iran are key supporters of Hamas and Hezbollah, which the United States and several other countries have listed as terrorist organizations.

In 2008, it was announced that Syria and Israel had initiated indirect peace talks, with Turkey serving as intermediary.¹⁹⁷ The talks began only months after Israel bombed a suspected nuclear reactor under construction with, it was believed, the assistance of North Korea.¹⁹⁸ The Syrian-Israeli talks were later suspended in January 2009 during Israel's military actions in Gaza against Hamas, although some believe that the discussions will resume after the Gaza crisis is resolved.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹² Council on Foreign Relations. Pan, Esther. "Syria: Has Assad Dodged a Bullet?" 26 April 2006.

<http://www.cfr.org/publication/10546/syria.html>

¹⁹³ Sydney Morning Herald. Riechmann, Deb. "Syria Facing UN Sanctions." 23 October 2005.

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/syria-facing-un-sanctions/2005/10/22/1129775994535.html>

¹⁹⁴ Mideast Monitor. Badran, Tony. "Saudi-Syrian Relations After Hariri." February 2006.

http://www.mideastmonitor.org/issues/0602/0602_2.htm

¹⁹⁵ Embassy of the United States, Damascus. "U.S. Trade and Financial Sanctions Against Syria." No date.

<http://damascus.usembassy.gov/sanctions-syr.html>

¹⁹⁶ Mideast Monitor. Badran, Tony. "Saudi-Syrian Relations After Hariri." February 2006.

http://www.mideastmonitor.org/issues/0602/0602_2.htm

¹⁹⁷ Los Angeles Times. Boudreaux, Richard. "Turkey Mediating Israel-Syria Peace Talk." 25 April 2008.

<http://articles.latimes.com/2008/apr/25/world/fg-golan25>

¹⁹⁸ New York Times. Sanger, David E. "Bush Administration Releases Images to Bolster Its Claims About Syrian Reactor." 25 April 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/25/world/middleeast/25korea.html>

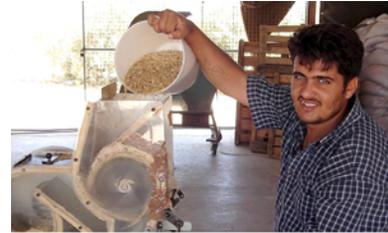
¹⁹⁹ Reuters. Oweis, Khaled Yacoub. "Syria Eyes Strategic Gains After Gaza War." 26 January 2009.

<http://uk.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUKTRE50P42N20090126?pageNumber=2&virtualBrandChannel=0>

Economy

Historic Overview

Syria's centralized and state-run economy is mainly based on oil and agriculture. During World War II, the presence of Allied forces provided various markets for economic growth. Syria, however, "lacked both the infrastructure and resources to promote economic prosperity."²⁰⁰



© Hovic / flickr.com
Wheat development and research center

Socialism became the official economic policy of Syria in 1963.²⁰¹ Syria's main trading partner and economic model at that time was the Soviet Union.²⁰² Following the Soviet Union's example, Syria started implementing "five-year" economic plans in 1960 (when it was still part of the United Arab Republic) with limited results.^{203,204} The country experienced a loss of capital, skilled workers, and administrators as centralized planning was increased. 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.²⁰⁵ By the late 1980s, there were frequent power outages and shortages of basic commodities.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁰ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Syria: A Country Study*. "Chapter 3. The Economy." April 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+sy0056\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+sy0056))

²⁰¹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Syria: Economy." 2009. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578856/Syria>

²⁰² BBC News. Gardner, Frank. "Syrian MP Calls for Deeper Reform." 7 December 2000. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/1058771.stm

²⁰³ Five-year plans were the "Soviet economic practice of planning to augment agricultural and industrial output by designated quotas for a limited period of usually five years. Nations other than the former USSR and the Soviet bloc members, especially developing countries, have adopted such plans for four, five, or more years." (AllRefer.com. "Five-Year Plan, Russian, Soviet, and CIS History." 2003. <http://reference.allrefer.com/encyclopedia/F/FiveYear.html>)

²⁰⁴ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Syria: A Country Study*. "Chapter 3. The Economy: Role of Government: Development Planning." April 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+sy0063\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+sy0063))

²⁰⁵ BBC News, World Edition. "Obituary: Syria's Shrewd Master." 10 June 2000. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/359051.stm

²⁰⁶ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Syria: A Country Study*. "Chapter 3. The Economy." April 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+sy0056\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+sy0056))

Economic Reform and Lifting 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.²⁰⁷ Within the next five years, the proportion of the economy in private hands rose from 35% to 70%. Credit card usage by residents and nonresidents was authorized by the Ministry of Economy and Foreign Trade in 1995. Toward the end of the 1990s, the progress resulting from Investment Law No. 10 had slowed considerably.²⁰⁸ Since coming to power in July 2000, President Bashar Al-Assad, the son of former President Hafez Al-Assad, has taken additional steps toward privatization.



© Richard Messenger
Bashir Assad's portrait on oil storage tanks in Syria

Internet service with highly restricted access of information became available only to companies, embassies, and the Syrian government in 2000. A comparison of internet hosts by country revealed that in 2000 Syria had zero hosts per 10,000 people compared to 10.93 per 10,000 in Lebanon and 20.5 in Kuwait.²⁰⁹ In 2003, Syria had four national Internet service providers and service was slow.²¹⁰ Since then, service has expanded to 7,857 Internet hosts (2008) serving 3.47 million users (2007). Cellular phone services have become very popular, and there are now (2007) nearly twice as many cell phones in use as there are land lines.²¹¹

Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

Syria's gross domestic product (GDP) for 2008, as measured by purchasing power parity, was estimated at USD 96.53 billion, up from USD 87.90 billion in 2005. By economic

²⁰⁷ Arabic News. "A Study on the Syrian Economy." 20 January 1999.

<http://www.arabicnews.com/ansub/Daily/Day/990120/1999012001.html>

²⁰⁸ BBC News, World Edition. Kafala, Tarik. "Syria: The Forces of Change." 3 June 2000.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/786365.stm

²⁰⁹ *Globalization and the Muslim World: Culture, Religion, and Modernity*. Schaebler, Birgit and Leif Stenberg, Eds. Huff, Toby E. "Globalization and the Internet: The Malaysian Experience [pp. 143–144]. 2004. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse Univ. Press.

http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&id=MCEvNsCxpF0C&dq=Globalization+and+the+Muslim+World:+Culture,+Religion,+and+Modernity&printsec=frontcover&source=web&ots=58WabDtaoR&sig=jD9yQMzMWxZ63s4Wt37KGmGWjh4&ei=1e-RSfW8B4KOQp8uZyoCw&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=5&ct=result#PPA138,M1

²¹⁰ *Middle East*. 2003. Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

²¹¹ Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Factbook*. "Syria." 22 January 2009.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

sectors, Syria's GDP breaks down as roughly 49.5% services, 28% industry, and 21.5% agriculture.²¹²

In 2008, the estimated GDP growth rate was 2.8%, whereas the growth rate of the population was 2.2%. This is an improvement over the last half of the 1990s and early 2000s, when Syria's annual GDP growth lagged behind Syria's population growth rate, resulting in stagnant economic growth.²¹³ Looking broadly at a breakdown of income, Syria continues to receive a large amount of its revenues from state-owned enterprises and property, although increasing privatization in some sectors has reduced this percentage.²¹⁴ In 2005, over a quarter of Syria's workforce was employed in low-paid public sector and government jobs.²¹⁵

Exports

Syria's total exports for 2008 were an estimated USD 13.12 billion.²¹⁶ Crude oil is Syria's main export commodity. Other important exported products include refined oil products, minerals, raw cotton, fruits, and grains.²¹⁷ Syria also happens to be the world's sixth largest exporter of olives. Syria's major export partners in 2007 were Iraq (30%), Lebanon (10%) Germany (9.7%), Italy (8%), Egypt (5.5%), Saudi Arabia (5.2%), and France (4.9%).²¹⁸



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Shipping livestock from Tartous, Syria

Imports²¹⁹

In 2008, Syria imported goods worth an estimated USD 14.32 billion. In addition to machinery and equipment for transportation, other key imports included metal and metal products, food and livestock, chemicals, and textiles. Saudi Arabia is Syria's largest import partner, supplying 12% of all Syrian imports. Other main import partners are China, Egypt, Italy, United Arab Emirates, Ukraine, Russia, Germany, and Iran.

²¹² Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Factbook*. "Syria." 22 January 2009. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

²¹³ Middle East Report. Haddad, Bassam. "Syria's Curious Dilemma." Fall 2005. <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer236/haddad.html>

²¹⁴ Heritage Foundation. *2009 Index of Economic Freedom*. "Syria." No date. <http://www.heritage.org/index/Country/Syria#labor-freedom>

²¹⁵ Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. U.S. Department of State. "Syria: Background Notes." May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm>

²¹⁶ Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Factbook*. "Syria." 22 January 2009. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

²¹⁷ Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. U.S. Department of State. "Syria: Background Notes." May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm>

²¹⁸ Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Factbook*. "Syria." 22 January 2009. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

²¹⁹ Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Factbook*. "Syria." 22 January 2009. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

Trade With Iran and the U.S.

While there has been much international discussion concerning Syria's political cooperation with Iran, the two nations have not been able to translate this into a strong economic relationship. The amount of trade between the two countries is relatively small, despite a highly publicized bilateral trade agreement that went into effect in 2004. The trade agreement is highly weighted in Iran's favor. In 2007, Iran exported USD 180 million in goods and services to Syria, whereas Syrian exports to Iran totaled only USD 20 million.²²⁰



U.S. trade with Syria is minimal; even so, it is nearly twice as large as that between Syria and Iran. One main reason that trade between the two countries is so low is because of economic sanctions applied by the U.S. against Syria in May 2004. The U.S. primarily exports agricultural products, irrigation equipment, and medical supplies to Syria. In 2007, USD 111 million worth of goods were exported from Syria to the U.S., as compared to USD 361 million worth of goods exported by the U.S. to Syria.²²¹ It should be noted that several U.S.-based companies carry out extensive trade with Syria through their foreign manufacturing operations. These operations are not subject to the sanctions, and their revenue is not included in the Syria-U.S. bilateral trade statistics.²²²

Mineral Resources

Syria is one of the world's leaders in the production of phosphate rock, much of which is exported and the remainder used for local production of phosphatic fertilizers and phosphoric acid.²²³ In 2007, Syria generated roughly 2.6% of the world's production of phosphate rock, most of which comes from desert mines located southwest of Palmyra.²²⁴ These mines are operated by the government-owned General Company for Phosphates and Mines, which also is responsible for managing Syria's salt production, from a mine located near the Euphrates River city of Dayr al-Zawr. Other mining and mineral processing operations within Syria include cement, gypsum, gravel and crushed rock,

²²⁰ Global Politician. Raphaeli, Nimrod and Bianca Gersten. "The Iran-Syria Alliance: The Economic Dimension." 29 July 2008. http://www.globalpolitician.com/25060-iran-syria#_edn9

²²¹ U.S. Census Bureau. "Trade in Goods (Imports, Exports, and Trade Balance) With Syria." 13 January 2009. <http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5020.html#2007>

²²² Jerusalem Post. "U.S.-Syrian Trade on Rise Despite Tensions." 18 May 2008.

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1210668664797&pagename=JPost/JPArticle/ShowFull>

²²³ Nation's Encyclopedia. "Syria-Mining." No date. <http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Asia-and-Oceania/Syria-MINING.html>

²²⁴ U.S. Geological Survey. Jasinski, Stephen M. "Phosphate Rock." January 2008.

http://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/commodity/phosphate_rock/mcs-2008-phosp.pdf

dolomite, and sulfur. Steel was produced at plants in Hama and the Mediterranean port cities of Latakia and Tartus.²²⁵

Energy Resources

Economically, petroleum and natural gas are Syria's most important natural resources. In the 1980s, large oil fields were discovered and oil began playing a significant role in the economy. The Syrian government formed partnerships with international oil companies, including ConocoPhillips and Shell, to assist in the development of its oil industry, from extraction to refinement. Ever since, crude oil has been the dominant Syrian export. In 2008, Syria exported an estimated 155,000 barrels of oil per day.²²⁶



© Taras Kalapun
Pipes for the Arabic Gas Pipeline Project

Most Syrian oil fields are located in the northeastern region of the country. Oil refineries for this crude oil are located in the cities of Baniyas and Homs; three additional refineries are in various stages of development, as are upgrades of the two existing refineries. The Al-Furat Petroleum Company (AFPC), a joint venture formed by the Syrian Petroleum Company (Syria's state-owned oil company), Shell, Indian-based Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC), and the China National Petroleum Company, is Syria's largest oil producer. Syria's crude oil output hit its highest point in 1996 at 582,000 barrels per day (bbd). But since then, oil production has declined, falling to an estimated 393,000 bbd per day in 2007.²²⁷ The Syrian oil ministry has responded by accelerating efforts to switch domestic power plants and industrial use to natural gas, so that Syria's crude oil may continue to generate export revenue.²²⁸ All of Syria's natural gas production is currently used domestically, and plans are being made to dramatically increase this production over the next few years by bringing more gas fields online.²²⁹

Manufacturing

Much of Syria's industrial production is related to its mineral and energy resources (e.g., refined oil products, fertilizers, cement and other building materials), with manufacturing making up a much small portion of the economy. The two largest manufacturing segments are



© todd epp / flickr.com
Damask cloth seller and his apprentice

²²⁵ U.S. Geological Survey. Yager, Thomas R. "The Mineral Industry of Syria." January 2008. <http://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/country/2006/myb3-2006-sy.pdf>

²²⁶ Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Factbook*. "Syria." 22 January 2009. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

²²⁷ Energy Information Administration, U.S. Department of Energy. *Country Analysis Briefs*. "Syria: Oil." March 2008. <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Syria/NaturalGas.html>

²²⁸ Energy Information Administration, U.S. Department of Energy. *Country Analysis Briefs*. "Syria: Natural Gas." March 2008. <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Syria/Oil.html>

²²⁹ Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. U.S. Department of State. "Syria: Background Notes." May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm>

textiles and clothing and food and beverage processing. Syria has long been known for its beautiful handmade manufactures—items such as mother-of-pearl inlays, hand engravings, silk brocades, and swords and blades—but production of most of these craftsperson items has declined since large-scale manufacturing was introduced.²³⁰

Tourism

With numerous ancient historical sites, religious shrines of several religions, and a warm Mediterranean coastline, Syria has ample potential to develop a strong tourism industry. Certainly Syrian officials recognize this potential as well as anyone. Facing declining oil export revenues, the Syrian government has placed increased emphasis on developing its tourist infrastructure.²³¹ Five Syrian locations are World Heritage Sites, including the ancient parts of Damascus and Aleppo, the nation's two largest cities. These two cities, along with the coastal city of Latakia, host a large percentage of the country's hotel rooms.

Presently, most travelers to Syria come from neighboring Middle East countries.²³² Visitors from the U.S. and Europe (particularly France and Germany) are beginning to increase in numbers, but the lingering bad publicity concerning the government's state support of terrorist groups continues to have a dampening effect on tourism travel from any location.²³³

Agriculture

Syrian economic success is closely linked to the success of its agricultural sector, which produces about one quarter of Syria's GDP and employs a large percentage of its work force.²³⁴ However, Syria faces several challenges in furthering the development of agriculture with the country. First, the desert limits the amount of arable land to about one third of the country's total area. Second, the percentage of irrigated fields is only 21%, leaving 79% of



²³⁰ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Syria: Economy: Manufacturing." 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578856/Syria>

²³¹ BBC News. Hunt, Katie. "Long Isolated Syria Warms to Tourism." 18 November 2008.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/7706757.stm>

²³² Nations Encyclopedia. "Syria—Tourism, Travel, and Recreation." No date.

<http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Asia-and-Oceania/Syria-TOURISM-TRAVEL-AND-RECREATION.html>

²³³ Syria Ministry of Tourism. Reuters. "Foreign Tourists Flock to Syria Despite Troubles." 16 July 2005.

<http://www.syriatourism.org/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=277>

²³⁴ Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. U.S. Department of State. "Syria: Background Notes." May 2007.

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm>

Syria's crops dependent on rain-fed sources.²³⁵ Finally, major water resources, such as the Orontes and Euphrates Rivers, do not originate in Syria, causing complex water-sharing disputes.

The majority of Syrian farms, unlike many Syrian businesses, are privately owned; nevertheless, the state continues to exert extensive marketing controls on crops deemed to be "strategic."²³⁶ Syria's main crops include cotton (the largest cash crop), grains (mostly wheat and barley), lentils, olives, sugar beets, chickpeas, grapes, pistachio nuts, and citrus fruit (along the coastal plain). Animal products include beef, lamb, eggs, poultry, and milk.²³⁷

The modernization of irrigation practices is critical in order for Syria to increase its total food production. To this end, the Syrian government invested about USD 600 million from 2001 to 2005 in modernizing irrigation systems, changing from open canal systems to pressurized systems.²³⁸ Water shortages, in part due to inefficient and antiquated irrigation systems, have already led to a decreased amount of acreage planted with cotton.²³⁹

Another problem affecting agricultural production in Syria is that some farmers do not regularly practice crop rotation, causing the depletion of vital nutrients in the soil. Some observers have pointed out that government agricultural subsidies contribute to this situation, because they often encourage farmers to plant the same crop each growing season.²⁴⁰

Standard of Living

Syria's economy has been improving since 2005. Investment from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, and Persian Gulf states has begun to flow into the country as it liberalizes and diversifies its long-time socialist economy. Western-style malls have opened in Damascus, and private-sector banking and insurance industries have



²³⁵ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. IRIN. "Syria: Livelihoods at Risk as UN Appeals for US \$20 Million." 7 October 2008. <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=80782>

²³⁶ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. "Country Profile: Syria." April 2005. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Syria.pdf>

²³⁷ New Agriculturist *on-line*. "Country Profile: Syria." No date. <http://www.new-agri.co.uk/02-5/countryp.html>

²³⁸ Food and Agricultural Organization. *International Symposium on Irrigation: Constraints and Solutions*. "Background." March 2006. <http://dotproject.fao.org/syria/background.php>

²³⁹ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. "Country Profile: Syria." April 2005. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Syria.pdf>

²⁴⁰ United Nations Development Programme. Dagge, John. "The World's Oldest Agricultural Sector Looks to the Future." 3 November 2008. <http://www.undp.org.sy/index.php/stories/60-environment-and-energy/347-the-worlds-oldest-agricultural-sector-looks-to-the-future->

taken root.^{241, 242, 243} Nevertheless, for the large percentage of the Syrian population living outside the wealthier neighborhoods of Damascus, poverty, rather than prosperity, remains the daily reality. The average monthly worker salary in Syria is about USD 220, whereas the average monthly household expenditure (in 2002) was USD 344. The gap between these two highlights the difficulties that many Syrians face in making ends meet.

Between 2003 and 2004, 11.4% of the Syrian population could not acquire basic needs for food and supplies, according to Syria's "first-ever nationwide report on poverty" published in July 2005 by the State Planning Commission and United Nations Development Programme.²⁴⁴ (More recent, reliable estimates on Syrian poverty are not available as of this writing.) With unemployment (9%, 2008) and consumer inflation (14.9%, 2008) also at high levels, many Syrians find themselves moving backwards rather than forwards economically. Some of the reasons for Syria's inflation problems include reduced food harvests due to drought, a reduction in government fuel subsidies, and a large influx of refugees from Iraq who have driven up rents in large cities such as Damascus.²⁴⁵

Not surprisingly, given the tough economic situation at home, large numbers of Syrians have long worked outside the country and sent remittances back to their families. Nearby Lebanon, only a few tens of kilometers from Damascus and Homs, has been one of the most popular destinations for Syrian workers; some have work permits, while others work there illegally. It is estimated that in the 1990s, when Lebanon experienced a construction boom, more than 1 million Syrian workers were in Lebanon, many working as manual laborers and earning about twice what they would have made for similar work in Syria. This number has since decreased to around 400,000, reflecting the reduced presence of Syrians in general since the Syrian military left the country in 2005.²⁴⁶

Bank Reform

Syria's banking system is predominantly government-owned and administered. The Central Bank of Syria is the main bank and governing body for the following specialized branch banks: Commercial Bank of Syria, Industrial Bank, Popular Credit Bank, Agricultural Cooperative Bank, and the Real Estate Bank.

²⁴¹ USA Today. Karam, Zeina. "Syrian Economy Opens—Will Its Politics Follow?" 8 September 2008. http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2008-09-08-2559772007_x.htm

²⁴² Zawya. "Syria—Insurance on the Rise." November 2007.

<http://zawya.com/printstory.cfm?storyid=ZAWYA20071111102648&l=115725071114>

²⁴³ American Public Media. Marketplace. "Syria Transfers to Modern Banking." 10 September 2007.

http://marketplace.publicradio.org/display/web/2007/09/10/syria_banks/

²⁴⁴ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. IRIN News. "Syria: Amid Rising Poverty, Local Charity Assists Poor." 28 November 2006.

http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?reportID=53260&SelectRegion=Middle_East

²⁴⁵ Brookings. "Global Economic Crisis: Mixed Forecast for Jordan and Syria." 1 December 2008.

http://www.brookings.edu/interviews/2008/1201_jordan_syria_dhillon.aspx

²⁴⁶ YaLibnan.com. Institute for War and Peace Reporting. "Syrian Workers Are the Victims of Lebanon-Syria Relations." 21 May 2008. http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2008/05/syrian_workers_1.php

Privately held banks were granted permission to operate within Syria in 2001, as long as a majority interest in the bank was held by Syrian citizens.²⁴⁷ These private institutions continue to follow the directions and leadership of the Central Bank. Even so, these new 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.²⁴⁸ In 2005, the first Islamic banks, which do not charge interest, were established in Syria.²⁴⁹ As of 2008, roughly 15% of all bank assets and liabilities were held by private banks in Syria.²⁵⁰



In May 2004, the Commercial Bank of Syria (CBS) was accused by the United States Department of the Treasury of allowing terrorist organizations to launder illegal proceeds generated from sale of Iraqi oil by Saddam Hussein's regime.²⁵¹ As a result, all U.S. banks (including overseas affiliates), financial institutions, and citizens were subsequently banned from holding accounts in the CBS. Syria's government, for its part, claims that it does uphold international standards for monitoring and policing money laundering. As evidence, it points to a law passed in 2004 establishing an Anti-Money-Laundering Commission.²⁵² This law was subsequently modified and strengthened in 2005 after consultation with the International Monetary Fund.²⁵³

Stock Exchange

The Central Bank's new willingness to trade in hard currencies was a start toward the establishment of a national stock exchange. The Syrian Securities and Exchange Commission (SSEC) has been a legal entity since June 2005. President Al-Assad nominated members of the SSEC on 8 February 2006 to manage the set-up of the future Damascus Stock Exchange. The stock exchange in Syria is seen as a way to attract money "in an economy that still offers few investment prospects," and it could "open the

²⁴⁷ MEED.com. "Private Banking Heralds End to State Monopoly Over Financial Sector." 11 October 2001. http://www.meed.com/news/2001/10/private_banking_heralds_end_to_state_monopoly_over_financial_sector.html

²⁴⁸ ANIMA. "Syria: Finance and Banking System" 29 January 2009. http://www.animaweb.org/en/pays_syrie_financesbanques_en.php

²⁴⁹ United Nations Development Programme. "Financial Transparency Country Profiles: Syria." 2009. <http://www.pogar.org/countries/theme.asp?th=12&cid=19>

²⁵⁰ Heritage Foundation. *2009 Index of Economic Freedom*. "Syria." 2009. <http://www.heritage.org/index/Country/Syria>

²⁵¹ America.gov. "Treasury Dept. Accuses Syrian Banks of Money Laundering." 12 May 2004. <http://www.america.gov/st/washfile-english/2004/May/20040512164434cpataruk0.5541651.html>

²⁵² Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Levitt, Matthew. "Global Anti-Terrorism Financing Group Challenged by Syria's Application." 31 May 2007. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2609>

²⁵³ United Nations Development Programme. "Financial Transparency Country Profiles: Syria." 2009. <http://www.pogar.org/countries/theme.asp?th=12&cid=19>

way for the privatization of state assets.”²⁵⁴ The Damascus Stock Exchange is currently slated to open in February 2009 with roughly 30 companies listed, although several earlier announced dates for the exchange’s opening have not been met.^{255, 256}

Conclusion

Syria historically maintained a socialist, state-dominated economy. The past two decades saw the Syrian government release some controls on the economy, establishing private banks and cutting interest rates, and allowing privatization of some business sectors. The Syrian government created seven free trade zones to help promote foreign investment, and it has allowed foreign companies to deal in hard currencies, helping to assure that profits are transferable out of Syria.²⁵⁷ Foreigners can now own companies, and may own land. In order to receive support from the West, however, Syria will need to comply with the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Act by ceasing to support terrorist groups. Alongside this, future long-term economic challenges to the Syrian economy include declining oil production, increased pressure on water supplies because of population growth, and water pollution.²⁵⁸



²⁵⁴ ArabicNews.com. “Syria Moves Closer to First Stock Market.” Yazigi, Jihad, Ed. 13 March 2006. <http://www.arabicnews.com/ansub/Daily/Day/060314/2006031411.html>

²⁵⁵ ANIMA News. Zawya. “Damascus Stock Exchange Should Start Operating in February This Year.” 6 January 2009. <http://www.animaweb.org/en/actu-detail.php?actu=5082>

²⁵⁶ Forward Magazine. “Maybe This Time for the Damascus Stock Exchange.” September 2008. <http://www.fw-magazine.com/content/maybe-time-damascus-stock-exchange>

²⁵⁷ ANIMA. “Syria: How to Invest in Syria?” 29 January 2009. http://www.animaweb.org/en/pays_syrie_pourquoiinvestir_en.php

²⁵⁸ Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Factbook*. “Syria.” 22 January 2009. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

Society

Ethnic Groups

Syria's population is fairly cohesive by heritage, but the different religious and ethnic communities have kept their identities. Arabic people represent 90% of the population and the rest is comprised of Kurds, Armenians, and others. As for religious affiliation, the Sunni Muslim group makes up 74% of the population; the Shia, Alawite, Druze, and other Muslim sects total about 16% of all Syrians; and Christians represent the remaining 10% of the population. Syrian Christians are mostly Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, or Greek Catholic. There are tiny, remnant Jewish communities in Damascus, Al Qamishli, and Aleppo.²⁵⁹ Arabic is spoken by most, but the sizable Kurdish and Armenian populations have kept their languages.



© syrialooks / flickr.com
Kara Duran, an Armenian populated village in Syria

The Alawites represent about 12% of Syria's population and most subsist on agriculture. President Bashar al-Assad—like his late father Hafez—is Alawite, as are a large number of senior officials in the Syrian military and intelligence agencies.²⁶⁰

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

Political Refugees

Syria has an increasing refugee problem. Refugees to Syria are mainly from two countries: Palestine (approximately 543,000 at the beginning of 2008) and Iraq (an estimated 1.3 million).²⁶¹ More Iraqi refugees have been entering Syria than any other country in the region since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.²⁶² In



© Catholic Relief Services / flickr.com
Iraqi boy with UN refugee registration papers

²⁵⁹ Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Factbook*. "Syria." 22 January 2009.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

²⁶⁰ The Independent. Fisk, Robert. "In the Land of the Alawites, an Arab Legend is Born." 17 June 2000.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/in-the-land-of-alawites-an-arab-legend-is-born-712778.html>

²⁶¹ U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants. *World Refugee Survey*. "Refugees and Asylum Seekers Worldwide (as of December 31, 2007)"

http://www.refugees.org/uploadedFiles/Investigate/Publications_&_Archives/WRS_Archives/2008/refugees_and_asylum_seekers_worldwide.pdf

²⁶² Washington Post. Wilson, Scott. "Iraqi Refugees Overwhelm Syria." 3 February 2005.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A58648-2005Feb2?>

late 2007, the numbers of Iraqi refugees entering Syria began dropping sharply as Syria tightened its visa requirements. In addition, some Iraqis began voluntarily returning to Iraq around this time, possibly because of the improving security situation in parts of the country.²⁶³

The refugee problem in Syria is causing rents to soar, schools to become overcrowded, and real estate values to spiral upward. Some of the wealthier Iraqi refugees have bought property in Damascus and built large homes. Real estate prices in the area rose 50% in 2004, seemingly as a result of the population influx.²⁶⁴ Crime and health problems are also rising in slum areas where refugees have settled, mainly around Damascus. Many refugee children cannot find a place in the public schools and are forced to live on the street, leading to further problems.

Literature and Arts

“Writing is the mother of eloquence and the father of artists,” according to a Syrian saying.²⁶⁵ Syria’s literary tradition is rich, and the recitation of 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 of the Arab publications are produced. Three major figures in modern Syrian literature are Nizar Qabbani, Omar Abu-Riche, and Adonis, some of whose works are also available in English.



Courtesy of wikipedia.org
Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani

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. Often the oppression of women shown in his poetry was simply a metaphor for 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.”²⁶⁶

One couplet in particular is sometimes recited by Arabs to express the frustrations of life under totalitarian rule:

²⁶³ International Catholic Migration Commission—U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Loughrey, Maryanne and Julianne Duncan. “Report of the ICMC-USCCB Mission to Assess the Protection Needs of Iraqi Refugees in Syria [pp. 3–4].” April 2008. http://www.usccb.org/mrs/iraqi_refugees_syria_4-2008.pdf

²⁶⁴ Washington Post. Wilson, Scott. “Iraqi Refugees Overwhelm Syria.” 3 February 2005. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A58648-2005Feb2?>

²⁶⁵ Citizen and Immigration Canada. Cultural Profiles Project. “Cultural Profile of Syria: Arts and Literature.” No date. <http://www.cp-pc.ca/english/syria/arts.html>

²⁶⁶ The New York Times. Jehl, Douglas. “Nizar Qabbani, Sensual Arab Poet, Dies at 75.” 01 May 1998. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D02E1DE123EF932A35756C0A96E958260&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=all>

“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*²⁶⁷

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, who was 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, (better known by the pseudonym “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.²⁶⁸

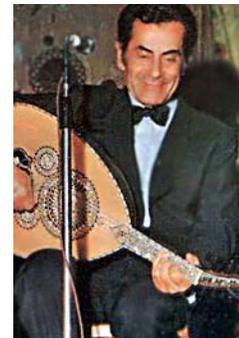


© Fabien Pfander
University of Damascus

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

Syrian Music

Syrian singers and musicians have made major contributions to the Arabic world of music. One of the most famous Syrian singers was



Courtesy of wikipedia.org
Farid el-Atrash

²⁶⁷ oldpoetry.com. “Nizar Qabbani: The Trial.” No date. <http://oldpoetry.com/poetry/25867>

²⁶⁸ DiamandaGalás.com. “Defixiones: Biographies.” No date. <http://www.diamandagalas.com/defixiones/biographies.htm>

Farid el-Atrash, whose songs are still famous throughout the Middle East. He also acted and sang in Syrian and Egyptian movies. Mayyada Hennawi is another name that attracts many listeners, as do George Wassouf and Asala Nasri, whose recordings can also be heard on Arabic radio and TV stations all around the Middle East and beyond.

Social Customs

Hospitality

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



© Charles Roffley
Smiles in the sun

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

Syrian Food

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

Another famous Syrian dish is *labneh*, mostly prepared as a breakfast food, which is very popular in most Arab countries. *Labneh* is easy to make at home. Salt is added to plain whole yogurt (not the low-fat, gelatin-added kind), and then the mixture is placed into cheesecloth—or even a large paper coffee filter—which is put in a strainer that is set inside a bowl, and refrigerated overnight or up to 2 days. The next day, garlic and spices can be added to the salty yogurt to give it a special flavor. If the mixture is kept in the cheesecloth for two to three days, it becomes drier and it can be rolled into balls and kept even longer. Roll each ball using about one tablespoon of the *labneh*, then put each ball into a container



© Francis Marciano
Kebabs

filled with olive oil. They are kept refrigerated until they are served with fresh parsley or vegetables.

Fresh vegetables are stuffed with meat and rice in Syrian cuisine; and depending on its preparation, Syrian food is very healthy, low in fat and cholesterol, and easy to prepare. The main course is usually followed by Arabic coffee or *shai* (Arabic tea) and pastries.

Syrian desserts are often made of honey-soaked pastry filled with nuts and other ingredients. One of the most well-known and popular Arabic pastries is baklava, which is thought to date back to the Assyrians around the 8th century B.C.E.²⁶⁹ *Halawat al-Jibna* is a doughy pastry filled with cream cheese and usually covered in syrup.

Male–Female Relationships

In Syria, marriage is the only respectable context for male-female relationships. Dating, per se, is rare, and premarital sex is virtually unheard of. The number of children born out of wedlock is almost none. 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 not pursue his interest. Do not invite her for a cup of tea. Do not flirt. This would dishonor the woman and her family.



© Jennifer Hayes
Young Syrian woman

Arranged Marriages

Marriage in Syria is still largely an arranged affair. The mother and other female relatives of the young man seek marriage candidates, preferably from among cousins, or failing that, then from the daughters of close friends and trusted neighbors. If his mother is not alive, then his aunt would take this responsibility upon herself. Once a candidate is identified, women from the groom's family visit the girl's family to meet her and her mother.²⁷⁰ The young man's mother learns of the candidate's good attributes, qualities, and abilities and determines if she would make a good wife for her son. If that is the case, the two mothers set a date for the young man and both of his parents to come calling to meet her family. This is the first step.

²⁶⁹ KitchenProject.com. "The History of Baklava." 11 May 2006.
<http://www.kitchenproject.com/history/Baklava.htm>

²⁷⁰ FW: the only way is forward. Bechara, Carole. "An Old Levantine Marriage." February 2009.
<http://www.fw-magazine.com/content/old-levantine-marriage>

The Process of Engagement

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



© Tomas Stellmach
On a date with chaperones

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

Differences in Marriage Tradition Between Christians and Muslims

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

The Christian Wedding

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



© Hovic / flickr.com
Aremnian Christian wedding in Aleppo, Syria

The Muslim Wedding

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

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

Sports

Syrians are big sports fans, both in terms of participation and spectatorship. Basketball, volleyball, badminton, tennis, wrestling, boxing, body building, and football (soccer) are the most popular sports. It is worth noting that soccer is not played in Syria quite as widely as it is in other Arab countries, such as Egypt, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, Syrian interest in soccer is keen enough to have established and maintained an extensive league with some 120 clubs made up of 25,000 players, 1,500 trainers, and 425 referees.²⁷¹ Furthermore, irrespective of their playing preferences, when it comes to watching the professionals, *qurat al-qadam* (soccer) is number one among Syrians.



© syrialooks / flickr.com
Mondial football fan's flags, Aleppo

²⁷¹ The-AFC. "Syria: Organisation Structure." No date. http://www.the-afc.com/eng/nassoc/country.jsp_SYR-242-1.html

Security

Introduction

Syria lies at the northern end of one of the world's most volatile regions. Two of its neighbors—Iraq and Lebanon—have been plagued by wars that have periodically devastated their countries, with Syria itself playing an active military role in the Lebanese conflict. Syria's southwestern neighbor, Israel, has fought three wars against Syria and its allies since 1948; it currently occupies the Golan Heights, which was Syrian territory after WWI until 1967. Syria's relations with its other two neighbors, Turkey and Jordan, have often been frosty as well, with stand-offs over issues ranging from water rights to terrorism support. The Assad regime has also had to face internal threats, and has responded by using its feared security apparatus to relentlessly discourage dissent.



© yonajon / flickr.com
Mosque bombed in 1967

Military

Syria has one of the Middle East's largest military forces, although in total numbers, its military has decreased in size from highs reached in the late 1990s. In recent years, estimates of Syria's active military manpower have ranged from 295,000 to 307,000 troops. The largest part of this force (215,000 troops) is assigned to the Syrian Army.²⁷² Syria also has a large number of combat aircraft, although much of this force is now considered obsolete in terms of fighting effectiveness. All of Syria's high-quality aircraft (MiG-25, MiG-29, Su-24) are of Russian design.²⁷³

For most of the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet Union was the primary supplier of arms and other equipment for the Syrian military, most of which was purchased on credit. For this reason, Syria's military expenditures were high during this time despite a weak economy. For example, pending reached as high as 23% of the Syrian GDP in 1983. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 forced Syria to reduce its military spending. Since 1993, Syrian military spending has averaged between 4 and 7% of the national GDP.²⁷⁴ Prior to 2005, Syria owed Russia USD 13 billion for its Soviet-era military purchases; Russia has



© Gene Bonventre
Three Syrian soldiers

²⁷² Center for Strategic and International Studies. Cordesman, Anthony H. "The Israeli and Syrian Conventional Military Balance: An Overview [pp. 14, 15]." 25 November 2008.

http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/081125_arab-israeli-syrian_conv_mil_bal.pdf

²⁷³ Center for Strategic and International Studies. Cordesman, Anthony H. "The Israeli and Syrian Conventional Military Balance: An Overview [p. 25]." 25 November 2008.

http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/081125_arab-israeli-syrian_conv_mil_bal.pdf

since waived USD 10 billion of this debt, reputedly in exchange for Syrian guarantees of future arms purchases from Russia.^{275, 276}

Syria's navy is the by far the smallest of its military forces. Its primary mission is to defend Syria's major ports at Tartus and Latakia, as well as to carry out coastal patrols and surveillance.²⁷⁷ The port at Tartus has long hosted a maintenance center for the Russian navy, serving as Russia's only naval facility in the Mediterranean Sea. In recent years, there has been rampant speculation that Syria and Russia have agreed to develop the Tartus facility into a full-scale naval base for the Russian Black Sea Fleet, whose main facility at the Ukrainian port of Sevastopol is on a lease that runs out in 2017. Russian Navy officials, however, deny that any decisions or agreements have been reached on basing their fleet's ships in Syrian ports.²⁷⁸

U.S.–Syrian Relations

Syria has been on the U.S. list of State Sponsors of Terrorism since the inception of the list in 1979, longer than any other country.²⁷⁹ Its continuing presence on this list means that any U.S. foreign aid to Syria is severely restricted; that all arms exports and sales to Syria are banned; that sales of dual-use items that could improve Syria's military capability or its ability to assist terrorist organizations are significantly controlled; and that business or trade transactions with Syria are subject to several restrictions.²⁸⁰

In December 2003, the U.S. Government put further pressure on Syria to cease its support for terrorist groups when the Syrian



Poster against U.S. occupation

²⁷⁴ Center for Strategic and International Studies. Cordesman, Anthony H. "The Israeli and Syrian Conventional Military Balance: An Overview [p. 31]." 25 November 2008.

http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/081125_arab-israeli-syrian_conv_mil_bal.pdf

²⁷⁵ Arms Control Association. Boese, Wade. "Syria to Acquire Russian Missiles." June 2005.

http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2005_06/Syria_Russian_Missiles

²⁷⁶ Middle East Times. Petrov, Nilita. "Russia Pushing Weapon Sales in Middle East and Beyond." 27 August 2008.

http://www.metimes.com/International/2008/08/27/russia_pushing_weapons_sales_in_middle_east_and_beyond/3200/

²⁷⁷ *Arab-Israeli Military Forces in an Era of Asymmetric Wars*. Cordesman, Anthony H. "The Military Forces of Syria: Syrian Naval Readiness and Training [p. 356]." 2006. Greenwood Publishing Group.

[http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&id=3eZK7cm6pjoC&dq=Arab-](http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&id=3eZK7cm6pjoC&dq=Arab-Israeli+Military+Forces+in+an+Era+of+Asymmetric+Wars&printsec=frontcover&source=web&ots=n1SyDeZXYx&sig=p4LFxyc2YyDcVkfcdcqslMbfoXE&ei=B3GUSfeSLoGEsQODyJG_Bw&sa=X&oi=book_r)

[Israel+Military+Forces+in+an+Era+of+Asymmetric+Wars&printsec=frontcover&source=web&ots=n1SyDeZXYx&sig=p4LFxyc2YyDcVkfcdcqslMbfoXE&ei=B3GUSfeSLoGEsQODyJG_Bw&sa=X&oi=book_r](http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&id=3eZK7cm6pjoC&dq=Arab-Israeli+Military+Forces+in+an+Era+of+Asymmetric+Wars&printsec=frontcover&source=web&ots=n1SyDeZXYx&sig=p4LFxyc2YyDcVkfcdcqslMbfoXE&ei=B3GUSfeSLoGEsQODyJG_Bw&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=6&ct=result#PPA356,M1)

²⁷⁸ RIA Novosti. "Russian Navy Denies Plans for Bases in Mediterranean Countries." 19 January 2009.

http://rusnavy.com/news/navy/index.php?ELEMENT_ID=6026

²⁷⁹ Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State. "State Sponsors of Terrorism." 2 February 2009. <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/c14151.htm>

²⁸⁰ Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State. Country Reports on Terrorism 2007. "Chapter 3. State Sponsors of Terrorism Overview." 30 April 2008.

<http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2007/103711.htm>

Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSRA) was signed into law. SALSRA's main sanctions were placed on U.S.–Syrian trade. Three years later, additional sanctions were placed on the Commercial Bank of Syria, which was accused of facilitating money-laundering operations.

For the U.S., difficulties with Syria have, over the years, focused on several issues. The most fundamental of which is Syria's support, either directly or indirectly, of what are considered terrorist groups, such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and Islamic Jihad. Another source of U.S. displeasure with Syria has been the continuing presence of Syrian forces in Lebanon, although these troops were pulled from the country in 2005 in the wake of the furor over the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. The U.S. ambassador to Syria has been recalled from Damascus since Hariri's death.²⁸¹ More recently, during the height of the counterinsurgency in the Iraq War, U.S. government and military officials frequently accused Syria of allowing Islamist fighters from other countries to freely cross its borders into Iraq. Syria's tight suppression of internal dissent and its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction have also been ongoing concerns of the U.S. government.²⁸²

Nonetheless, there has been continuing debate among analysts of the U.S. Middle East policy as to whether selective engagement with Syria using a "carrot" approach might produce more favorable results than continuing to ratchet up the pressure on Syria via increased sanctions and calls for international isolation.²⁸³

Relations With Neighboring Countries

Turkey

Relations between Syria and Turkey, its northern neighbor, were strained throughout the 1980s and 1990s.²⁸⁴ A particular source of friction between the two nations was the Turkish claim that Syria was actively supporting the Kurdistan Workers' Party (known by the Kurdish language acronym PKK). Syria's support of the PKK was thought to be a lever against Turkey in the ongoing water dispute between the two countries. Syria was critical of the Turkish Southeastern Anatolia Project, a huge rural development



© -RS- / flickr.com
Looking towards Syria from Turkey

²⁸¹ YNetNews.com. Associated Press. "Carter on Mission to Improve U.S.-Syria Relations." 13 December 2008. <http://www.ynet.co.il/english/articles/0,7340,L-3637854,00.html>

²⁸² Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "Background Notes: Syria." May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm>

²⁸³ Council on Foreign Relations. Pan, Esther. "Syria: U.S. Policy Options." 15 September 2006. http://www.cfr.org/publication/8551/syria.html?breadcrumb=%2Fbios%2F11392%2Feben_kaplan%3Fgroupby%3D3%26hide%3D1%26id%3D11392%26filter%3D2005

²⁸⁴ Council on Foreign Relations. *Foreign Affairs*. Larrabee, F. Stephen. "Turkey Rediscovered the Middle East." July/August 2007. <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20070701faessay86408-p0/f-stephen-larrabee/turkey-rediscovered-the-middle-east.html>

initiative whose centerpiece was a series of immense hydroelectric dams along the Euphrates River that would reduce both Syria's and Iraq's downstream allotment of water. Syria was also concerned about the quality of the Euphrates water—of higher salinity because of its use in irrigation—that was entering the country.²⁸⁵ In April 1996, as PKK guerrillas training in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley in Lebanon continued to launch terrorist strikes against military and civilian targets in southeastern Turkey, Turkey temporarily shut off the Euphrates water supply to Syria “for technical reasons,” resulting in water rationing in Syria.^{286, 287}

A crisis point was reached in 1998, when Turkish forces massed along the Syrian border. They threatened to invade, if Syria did not cease its support of the PKK, and expel PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, who was reported to be living in Damascus at the time.^{288, 289, 290} Syria ultimately backed down from this confrontational stand-off. In a subsequent agreement signed in the Turkish city of Adana, Syria agreed to sever all connections to the PKK and its leadership. From that point forward, the two countries slowly began to develop a better relationship, although Turkish charges of Syrian support of the PKK would periodically be raised for several years afterward.²⁹¹ In January 2005, Bashar al-Assad made a state visit to the Turkish capital of Ankara; it was the first time that a Syrian president had visited Turkey since Syria had become independent almost 60 years earlier. In this same time period, Syria quietly relinquished its territorial claims to Turkey's Hatay Province (referred to as Alexandretta by Syrians), and the two nations signed a free-trade agreement.

²⁸⁵ MidEast News. Darwish, Adel. “Water Is Behind Turkey Syria Border Tension.” 6 October 1998.

<http://www.mideastnews.com/water001.html>

²⁸⁶ *The New Turkish Republic: Turkey as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World*. Fuller, Graham. “Turkey and Syria [p. 95].” December 2007. Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press.

http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&id=O9Hz8NIjj2MC&dq=The+New+Turkish+Republic:+Turkey+as+a+Pivotal+State+in+the+Muslim+World&printsec=frontcover&source=web&ots=DmexUpEw36&sig=04VM4G1LvR6N3nGCD6rfvaVkdUs&ei=sHiUScLwKIHAsAPi0di3Bw&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=5&ct=result

²⁸⁷ *The Middle East and North Africa 2003*, 49th Ed. Europa Publications Staff. “Syria [p. 1016].” 2002. Oxford, England: Routledge.

http://books.google.com/books?id=4CfBKvsiWeQC&dq=The+Middle+East+and+North+Africa+2003&printsec=frontcover&source=bl&ots=Sd4D3wJBfT&sig=uVq3JxGp4L6zSiwZqFixU3zEZlg&hl=en&ei=I3mUSefrDIrisAPH--W-Bw&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=2&ct=result#PPR10,M1

²⁸⁸ Turks.US Daily World EU News. MiddleEastNewsline. “Turkey Still Sees Syria As PKK Supporter.” 30 January 2003. <http://www.turks.us/article.php?story=20030130174627643>

²⁸⁹ *The Estimate*, Vol. 10, No. 21. “The Syria-Turkey Confrontation.” 9 October 1998.

<http://www.theestimate.com/public/100998.html>

²⁹⁰ MidEast News. Darwish, Adel. “Water Is Behind Turkey Syria Border Tension.” 6 October 1998.

<http://www.mideastnews.com/water001.html>

²⁹¹ Turks.US Daily World EU News. MiddleEastNewsline. “Turkey Still Sees Syria As PKK Supporter.” 30 January 2003. <http://www.turks.us/article.php?story=20030130174627643>

Lebanon

On 13 October 2008, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad signed a decree instituting diplomatic relations between Syria and Lebanon. This action constituted the first formal acknowledgment of Lebanese sovereignty by Syria since the two nations had emerged from the French Mandate in the 1940s.²⁹² For much of this time, especially since the beginning of the Lebanese Civil War in the 1970s, Syria has held a dominant position in Lebanese politics, a situation reinforced by the presence of Syrian troops. After the end of the Civil War, Syria's domination of Lebanon was solidified under the terms of the 1991 Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation, and Coordination, a document that was widely criticized at the time by some Lebanese Maronite Christians.^{293, 294}



© E. Zarwan
Near the Lebanese border

Syria assisted the Lebanese government and military in disarming the nation's militias in the early 1990s after the end of fighting; but a few militias—most notably, Hezbollah—were allowed to keep their weapons. Hezbollah forces in southern Lebanon, in effect, gave Syria a proxy force to pressure Israel to the south, and to counter anti-Syrian opposition parties within Lebanon.²⁹⁵ Towards the latter end, Hezbollah evolved a political wing that has increasingly become a significant force in Lebanese politics. In May 2008, after Hezbollah armed supporters gained control of western Beirut, a governmental power-sharing agreement was reached, in which Hezbollah was given 11 out of 30 ministerial posts, and given veto power over the newly installed unity government.^{296, 297}

Now that formal relations between Syria and Lebanon have been established, Syria has pledged to restart the process of delineating and demarcating the border between the two countries. One particularly contentious area in this process will be the Shebaa Farms, a small parcel of land in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. While Israel and the United

²⁹² Haaretz.com. Associated Press. "Syria Formally Establishes Diplomatic Ties With Lebanon." 14 October 2008. <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1028635.html>

²⁹³ *Lebanon's Renaissance: The Political Economy of Reconstruction*. "Syria's Growing Dominance of the Lebanese." Najem, Tom Pierre. Garnet & Ithaca Press. http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&id=eJ681XR0wKkC&dq=Lebanon%E2%80%99s+Renaissance:+The+Political+Economy+of+Reconstruction&printsec=frontcover&source=web&ots=vQ1Zvk-0-O&sig=6Njog7aZ4KVjlyHmBaWnG_5YeGA&ei=wXuUSeHdBZqWsAOlg4mcBw&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=4&ct=result

²⁹⁴ New York Times. Hijazi, Ihsan. "Syria-Lebanon Cooperation Pact Signed." 23 May 1991. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D0CE3D7173EF930A15756C0A967958260>

²⁹⁵ Middle East Quarterly. Rabil, Robert G. "Has Hezbollah's Rise Come at Syria's Expense?" http://www.meforum.org/article/1755#_ftn5

²⁹⁶ New York Times. Worth, Robert F. and Nada Bakri. "Hezbollah Begins to Withdraw Gunmen in Beirut." 11 May 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/11/world/middleeast/11lebanon.html>

²⁹⁷ InTheNews.uk. "Breakthrough Reached in Lebanon Talks." 21 May 2008. [http://www.inthenews.co.uk/news/autocodes/countries/qatar/breakthrough-reached-in-lebanon-talks-\\$1223788.htm](http://www.inthenews.co.uk/news/autocodes/countries/qatar/breakthrough-reached-in-lebanon-talks-$1223788.htm)

Nations agree that this strip of land should be considered part of Syria, Lebanon and, ironically, Syria have claimed that it is actually Lebanese territory. Hezbollah uses Israel's continued occupation of Shebaa as a basis for their argument that Israeli forces have not yet completely left Lebanon, which, they argue, justifies their continued militarization and provides a rationale for continued attacks against Israeli targets.^{298, 299}

Israel

Israel and Syria have no formal diplomatic relations, and technically they have been at war since 1948.³⁰⁰ Peace talks between the two nations, both direct and indirect, have taken place several times since 1991, most recently in 2008.³⁰¹ Central to these talks is the status of the Golan Heights, which Syria has long insisted must be returned to them, according to the pre-1967 borders. Israel, in return, has been looking for assurances that Syria will no longer sponsor or support "rejectionist" groups (i.e., groups such as Hamas or Hezbollah who do not recognize Israel's right to exist as a nation), and that security and water-access issues related to the Golan Heights be agreed upon.³⁰² The most recent negotiations, indirect talks mediated by Turkey, were halted in December 2008, when Israeli forces entered Gaza on a mission to cripple Hamas' ability to launch missiles into Israeli territory.³⁰³



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Israel border crossing

In 1981, Israel unilaterally annexed the Golan Heights and offered the primarily Druze Muslim population the option of Israeli citizenship, an offer that was mostly declined.³⁰⁴ There are presently over 30 Jewish settlements in the Golan Heights, with a total estimated population of 20,000, comparable to the number of native Syrians.³⁰⁵

Since 1974, the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) has maintained a buffer zone between Syria and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. During this time, there have been no serious military incursions by either side across the

²⁹⁸ *Palestine-Israel Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1. Kaufman, Asher. "Understanding the Shebaa Farms Dispute: Roots of the [sic] Anomaly and Prospects for Resolution." 2004. <http://www.pij.org/details.php?id=9>

²⁹⁹ Christian Science Monitor. Mitnick, Joshua. "Behind the Dispute Over Shebaa Farms." 22 August 2006. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0822/p10s01-wome.html>

³⁰⁰ Google.com Agence France-Presse. "Turkey Ends Syria-Israel Peace Effort Over Gaza." 29 December 2008. <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gFsDh9eI8JBmm-qZKrVJEAmIi5w>

³⁰¹ Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress. Migdalovitz, Carol. "The Middle East Peace Talks." 1 February 2009. <http://www.fas.org/man/crs/IB91137.pdf>

³⁰² Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress. Migdalovitz, Carol. "The Middle East Peace Talks." 1 February 2009. <http://www.fas.org/man/crs/IB91137.pdf>

³⁰³ Google.com Agence France-Presse. "Turkey Ends Syria-Israel Peace Effort Over Gaza." 29 December 2008. <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gFsDh9eI8JBmm-qZKrVJEAmIi5w>

³⁰⁴ Reuters.com. "Chronology of Israeli-Syrian Relations." 2 October 2007. <http://www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSL02900277>

³⁰⁵ BBC News. "Regions and Territories: The Golan Heights." 11 December 2008. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/country_profiles/3393813.stm

separation zone.³⁰⁶ However, Israel has, on two occasions since 2000, launched air attacks on Syria. The first, in 2003, targeted what Israel described to be an Islamic Jihad training camp. Syria denied the charge, claiming that the Israelis bombed a civilian site.³⁰⁷ Four years later, Israeli jets bombed a suspected nuclear site in northern Syria. Unlike 2003, Israel made no announcement about this raid, and the Syrian protest was very mild.³⁰⁸

Jordan

Historically, relations between Syria and Jordan have been difficult at times. In part, the friction has been based on the two countries' frequent opposite alignments in regional geopolitical affairs. Syria has long been a champion for pan-Arab nationalism and has generally opposed the intervention of Western nations in the region, whereas Jordan has traditionally had strong relations with both the United States and Great Britain.³⁰⁹ Paradoxically, Jordan stood on the sidelines during the first Gulf War in 1991, whereas Syria joined the U.S.-led coalition forces that opposed Iraq. In 2003, the roles were somewhat reversed, with Syria opposing the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, and Jordan, while not publically supporting the operation, quietly offering "operational assistance" during and after the invasion.³¹⁰ Nevertheless, despite this history of the two countries being on opposite sides of the fence, there has been a steady improvement in Syrian-Jordanian relations in recent years, as indicated by more frequent meetings between high-level officials, increased trade activity, and a higher number of border crossings between the two nations.³¹¹



© Giorgio Montersino
Jordan border crossing

Syria's continued support of Hamas, however, has caused strains in its relations with Jordan. Since 1999, when current Jordanian King Abdullah ascended to the crown, Jordan has followed a course of supporting the Palestinian cause while keeping Hamas at a distance.³¹² Over half of Jordan's population is of Palestinian origin, a situation that has made its relationships with Palestinian organizations highly sensitive and subject to complex political considerations. In addition, unlike Syria, Jordan has signed a peace

³⁰⁶ United Nations. "Golan Heights - UNDOF –Background." 2005.

<http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/undof/background.html>

³⁰⁷ CNN.com. "Security Council Meets on Israeli Attack in Syria." 5 October 2003.

<http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/10/05/mideast/index.html>

³⁰⁸ Washington Post. Kessler, Glenn and Robin Wright. "Israel, U.S. Shared Data on Suspected Nuclear Site." 21 September 2007. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/20/AR2007092002701.html>

³⁰⁹ Public Broadcasting System. "Syria's Role in the Middle East: Syria's Regional Relationships." 2005. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/indepth_coverage/middle_east/syria/map_flash.html

³¹⁰ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. "Country Profile: Jordan." September 2006.

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Jordan.pdf>

³¹¹ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. "Country Profile: Jordan." September 2006.

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Jordan.pdf>

³¹² Power and Interest News Report. Kumraswamy, P. R. "Tension Returns Between Jordan and Hamas." 13 July 2006. http://www.pinr.com/report.php?ac=view_report&report_id=525&language_id=1

treaty with Israel, although that agreement became a source of public protest after the January 2009 Israeli offensive into Gaza to root out Hamas militia forces.³¹³ In mid 2008, Jordan reopened communications with Hamas, although the January 2009 events in Gaza and the resulting street support of Hamas in Amman may have forced the King's hand; he must now define Jordan's position in the web of Middle East alliances supporting the two main Palestinian political factions. Several analysts have interpreted recent Jordanian political actions as signaling Jordan's move to once again distance itself from the Hamas-Syria bloc toward the Egypt-Saudi Arabia-Palestinian Authority axis.^{314, 315, 316}

Iraq

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 to overthrow the government of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was opposed by Syrian President Assad's government. While Syria had severed relations with the Hussein government during the 1980s, when it supported Iran in its war against Iraq, political hostilities began to lessen in 2000 shortly after Bashar al-Assad became president. Around this time, Syria began receiving illegal shipments of below-market-price Iraqi oil, circumventing the UN "oil-for-food" program. In return, Syrian firms smuggled various goods, including arms, into Iraq, further subverting UN sanctions.³¹⁷



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Nearing the Iraq border

After fighting began in Iraq, Syria, and Damascus in particular, became a favored destination for Iraqi refugees. While no one knows for certain how many Iraqis are now living in Syria, the most recent estimate by the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees placed the total at 1.5 million refugees at the end of 2007.³¹⁸ The massive influx has overburdened Syria's social services and economic infrastructure

³¹³ Jerusalem Post. Media Line News Agency. "Jordan Under Pressure as Israel Presses on in Gaza." 11 January 2009.

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost%2FJPostArticle%2FShowFull&cid=1231424924214>

³¹⁴ UPI.com. Barari, Hassan. "Outside View: Jordan's New Hamas Policy?" 27 January 2009.

http://www.upi.com/Emerging_Threats/2009/01/27/Outside_View_Jordans_new_Hamas_policy/UPI-36241233066532/

³¹⁵ Haaretz.com. Bar'el, Zvi. "Analysis: Jordan's King Is Torn Between U.S.-Egypt and Syria-Hamas Axes." 21 January 2009. <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1057385.html>

³¹⁶ The Guardian. Black, Ian. "Gaza Split Prompts Arab Countries to Boycott Emergency Summit: Egypt and Saudi Arabia Refuse to Attend Qatar Meeting." 15 January 2009.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jan/15/gaza-egypt-saudi-qatar-summit>

³¹⁷ Los Angeles Times. Fleishman, Jeffrey and Bob Drogin. "Banned Arms Flow Into Iraq Through Syrian Firm." 30 December 2003. <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/dec/30/world/fg-iraqarms30>

³¹⁸ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "2007 Statistical Yearbook. Table 5." 2008.

<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendoc.pdf?id=4981c3dc2&tbl=STATISTICS>

and has contributed to the high rates of inflation in Syria, pushing up demand for housing, food, and other essential items.³¹⁹

During the height of the counter-insurgency in Iraq, a key point of division between Syria and the Iraqi government was the continued influx of foreign fighters into Iraq across the Syrian border. Despite these tensions, however, Syria and Iraq established formal diplomatic ties in November 2006, after 25 years of broken-off relations. Although it opposed the Iraq war, the Assad government seemingly saw greater value in working with the fragile Iraqi democracy, than in having Iraq disintegrate completely into sectarian chaos that could spill across its border. Syria has long-standing connections to many of the current political leaders in Iraq, including Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who lived in Syria for over 20 years before the fall of the Hussein regime. Iraqi Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani, President of Iraq, also lived in Syria for several years. Although Syria has in the past supported Kurdish independence groups—most notably, the PKK—it now speaks out against Kurdish autonomy in Iraq, fearing that such autonomy fuels discontent among Syria’s own population of 1.7 million Kurds.³²⁰

Terrorist Groups

Syria is one of only four nations that the United States currently designates as a State Sponsor of Terrorism. (The other three are Iran, Sudan, and Cuba.) The annual U.S. State Department report on terrorism notes, in particular, four Palestinian groups for which Syria provides political support and that are considered terrorist organizations by the U.S. government: the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and another called the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command (PFLP-GC). Hezbollah is also singled out in the report; it is stated to have received both material and political support from the Syrian government.³²¹ Syria itself has not been directly implicated in a terrorist action since 1986. However, interim reports on an ongoing UN investigation into the Hariri assassination in Lebanon have generated much speculation, but no final conclusions, that Syrian governmental and intelligence officials may have been involved in some way.³²²



© Nicholas Macgowan
Posters of Fatah

³¹⁹ Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford Department of International Development. *Forced Migration Review*. Al-Miqdad, Faisal. “Iraqi Refugees in Syria.” June 2007. <http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/Iraq/08.pdf>

³²⁰ United States Institute of Peace. Yacoubian, Mona. “USIPeace Briefing: Syria’s Relations With Iraq.” April 2007. http://www.usip.org/pubs/usipeace_briefings/2007/syria_iraq.pdf

³²¹ Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State. *Country Reports on Terrorism 2007*. “Chapter 3. State Sponsors of Terrorism Overview.” 30 April 2008. <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2007/103711.htm>

³²² Mideast Monitor. Gambill, Gary C. “The Hariri Investigation and the Politics of Perception.” August 2008. http://www.mideastmonitor.org/issues/0808/0808_1.htm

Despite Syria's checkered record in providing support for organizations that carry out terrorist actions, Syria itself has been generally immune from such actions on its own soil. For many years, Damascus was considered among the most secure Middle East capitals, with assassinations or bombings seldom occurring. This relative calm was shattered in September 2008, however, when a car bomb on a crowded Damascus street killed 17 people. No group took credit for the attack in its immediate aftermath, but Damascus television two months later broadcast the purported confessions of 11 members of Fatah al-Islam, a radical Sunni Islamist group. One of the confessors alleged that funding had come to the group from the Future Movement, a Lebanese Sunni political group led by the son of assassinated Lebanese leader Bafik Hariri and the largest party in Lebanon's anti-Syrian "March 14" parliamentary coalition.³²³ The Fatah al-Islam funding charge was later denied by March 14 officials.^{324, 325}

Other Security Issues

Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)

There has long been speculation that Syria has a stockpile of chemical weapons and is pursuing biological and nuclear weapons as well. There is supporting evidence for Syrian chemical weapons while apparently only surmise about capabilities for biological weapons.^{326, 327} The September 2008 Israeli bombing of a suspected nuclear reactor under construction in northeastern Syria furthered rumors that Syria was using North Korean assistance to advance its nuclear weapons program, although there is no evidence that Syria has the ability to provide fuel for the reactor.³²⁸



© Ihsan Altar
The two lines separate Syria and Israel

Certainly Syrian President Assad has done little to lessen concerns that Syria already has and is further pursuing weapons of mass destruction. In a 2003 interview, Assad stated that "the Americans are demanding that Syria be free of Weapons of Mass

³²³ Al Arabiya. "Bombers Say March 14 Funded Deadly Blast: Syria TV." 7 November 2008. <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/11/07/59659.html>

³²⁴ The Daily Star. Wander, Andrew. "March 14 Denies Charges of Funding Fatah al-Islam." 8 November 2009. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=2&article_id=97518

³²⁵ Mideast Monitor. Starr, Stephen. "The Threat on Syria's Doorstep." December 2008. http://www.mideastmonitor.org/issues/0812/0812_3.htm#_ftnref11

³²⁶ Center for Strategic and International Studies. Cordesman, Anthony. "Israeli and Syrian Weapons of Mass Destruction." 3 June 2008. http://www.csis.org/component/option,com_csis_pubs/task,view/id,4505/

³²⁷ *Chemical and Biological Warfare: A Comprehensive Survey for the Concerned Citizen*. Croddy, Eric and Clarisa Perez-Armendariz, John Hart. "Gas, Bugs, and Common Sense: Who Has These Weapons? [p. 45]" 2002. New York: Springer. http://books.google.com/books?id=MQMGhInCvlgC&dq=Chemical+and+Biological+Warfare:+A+Comprehensive+Survey+for+the+Concerned+Citizen&printsec=frontcover&source=bn&hl=en&ei=e5qUSfm5No nOsAOwu6GjBw&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=5&ct=result#PPP11,M1

³²⁸ Center for Strategic and International Studies. Cordesman, Anthony. "Israeli and Syrian Weapons of Mass Destruction." 3 June 2008. http://www.csis.org/component/option,com_csis_pubs/task,view/id,4505/

Destruction, yet when we demand that the entire region be cleared of these weapons, they oppose us. They place many demands, but what concerns us here is whether the Americans' demands can be reconciled with Syria's interests."³²⁹

Sunni Islamist Groups



© Jane Houle
Protest rally in Damascus, December 2008

While Syria remains a State Sponsor of Terrorism, it does not provide indiscriminate support to all terrorist organizations. Most of the terrorist groups with members operating in Syria are Palestinian "rejectionist" groups (i.e., organizations that focus their violent activities toward Israel and do not acknowledge Israel's right to exist as a national entity). Some of these groups, such as Hamas and PIJ, have charters with goals that include transforming all of the Palestine region (including modern-day Israel) into an Islamic state.^{330, 331} Such groups either draw inspiration from (PIJ) or are Palestinian wings (Hamas) of the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamist organization that operates in several countries in the Middle East and is the ultimate source of the ideology of most modern Sunni jihadist groups.³³²

It is somewhat ironic, then, that the Muslim Brotherhood is a banned organization in Syria. This ban has been in place since the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the Muslim Brotherhood organized strikes, demonstrations, and terrorist actions against the Hafez al-Assad regime. As a secular nation with a leader from a Shi'a sect considered heretical by hard-line Sunnis, the Syrian government has taken a somewhat risky approach in its support of radical Sunni Islamist groups whose jihadist philosophy, in theory, would seem irreconcilable with the Baathist Assad government.

During the Iraq War, Lebanon and Syria have been transit countries for many of the foreign jihadists entering into Iraq to support Al Qaeda in their Iraq counterinsurgency. Several observers have recently questioned whether Syria, as well as Lebanon, is now experiencing a "blowback problem" resulting from this policy.^{333, 334} As some of the Sunni jihadists retreated from Iraq, where the Sunni tribes have turned against Al Qaeda, both Damascus and the coastal Lebanese city of Tripoli were racked by bomb attacks in

³²⁹ Wordpress.org. *Al-Hayat*. Semaan, George and Ghassan Sharbal. "Interview: Syrian President Bashar al-Assad." 7 October 2003. <http://www.worldpress.org/Mideast/1601.cfm>

³³⁰ About.com. Tristam, Pierre. "Middle East Issues: Hamas Charter, Unabridged (1988), Part 1." 2009. <http://middleeast.about.com/od/palestinepalestinians/a/me080106b.htm>

³³¹ About.com. Zalman, Amy. "Terrorism Issues: A Profile of Palestinian Islamic Jihad." 2009. <http://terrorism.about.com/od/groupsleader1/p/IslamicJihad.htm>

³³² Public Broadcasting System. *Frontline*. Livesey, Bruce. "Al Qaeda's New Front: The Salafist Movement." 25 January 2005. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/front/special/sala.html>

³³³ International Herald Tribune. The Boston Globe. "Syria's Blowback Problem." 17 October 2008. <http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/10/17/opinion/edsyria.php>

³³⁴ TheEconomist.com. "Syria and Lebanon: Jihadist Blowback?" 2 October 2008. http://www.economist.com/world/mideast-africa/displaystory.cfm?story_id=12342146

late 2008. In November 2008, the Lebanese and Syrian interior ministers met in Damascus for the first time since diplomatic relations between the two countries were established and agreed to form a joint commission to coordinate their efforts to fight terrorism and other crimes.³³⁵

³³⁵ France24.com. Agence France-Presse. "Neighbours Agree to Boost Border Controls." 11 November 2008. <http://www.france24.com/en/20081111-terrorism-border-controls-syria-lebanon>