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CHAPTER 1: PROFILE

Introduction

Syria—an important and influential country in the Middle East—sits at the juncture of Africa, Asia, and Europe. Syria’s history dates back many centuries and covers the avenues and crossroads of commerce and religion. Both the ancient Silk Road between the Mediterranean and China and the Pilgrim’s Road to Mecca pass through Syria. Although the country’s population is 86% Muslim, the ancient Semitic language of Aramaic—in which parts of the Hebrew Bible are written—is still spoken.¹



© James Gordon
Roman Temple of Jupiter

The old Roman road where the Apostle Paul was converted to Christianity, the ruins of the Roman Temple of Jupiter, and one of the most revered religious structures in Islam dating back to 9th century B.C.E. (the Umayyad Mosque) are all located in Damascus, which is one of the world’s oldest continuously inhabited cities. Saladin, the great medieval commander who led the Muslim armies against the Crusaders, is buried in Damascus, an ancient city that today is also modern and crowded with tourists.²

Although Damascus is a peaceful city, it has been the site of some incidents of unrest in recent years. In September 2006, 4 people were killed and 13 wounded in an attack on the American Embassy.

The relationship between the United States and Syria has been tense in recent years. Syria helped the U.S. by providing information about al-Qaeda terrorists after the attacks on 11 September 2001. Syria had been tracking terrorist organizations since 1982 for its own purposes and shared its intelligence. Also, Syria joined the U.S.-led coalition against Saddam Hussein in 1990–1991.

Syria opposed the U.S. war in Iraq in 2003 and has remained on an international list of countries that support terrorist groups such as Hezbollah. The U.S. imposed economic sanctions against Syria in May 2004 and has accused Syria of allowing terrorists, weapons, and military supplies to cross its border with Iraq. Furthermore, since the 1967 war with Israel, there has been tension between Israel and Syria over the territory of the Golan Heights, which Syria wants back.³

¹ Aramaic is an ancient Semitic language that dominated the Middle East 2,000 years ago. It was the language of governments and was the major Semitic language for the spread of intellectual and spiritual ideas as early as 975 B.C.E. See Rocco A. Errico and Michael J. Bazzi, “The History of the Aramaic Language,” *Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Church*, 1978, <http://members.aol.com/assyrianme/aramaic/history.html>

² U.S. Department of State, “Background Note: Syria,” 18 March 2011, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm>

³ U.S. Department of State, “Background Note: Syria,” 18 March 2011, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm>

Geography

Area

Syria's geography includes deserts, plains, a rich coastal region, and mountains. The country's northwestern corner runs along the Mediterranean Sea for about 180 km (100 miles). Two-thirds of the population live within 121 km (75 miles) of the Mediterranean Sea in this intensely cultivated coastal plain region. Syria covers an area of 185,180 square km (71,504 square miles). Most of southeastern Syria is rocky desert, and the few people who live there are predominantly Bedouin.

Separating the coastal plain from the interior is the Jebel al-Nusiriyya Mountain range, running north to south. Near the Syria-Lebanon border is the Anti-Lebanon Range (Jebel Libnan al-Sharqiyya). Farther south is the highest mountain in this range, Jebel al-Sheikh (known as Mount Hermon in the Bible), which rises to 2,814 m (9,232 ft).⁴



Turkey borders Syria to the north, Jordan to the south, and Lebanon and Israel (including the disputed Golan Heights) to the southwest. Iraq lies to the east and southeast.

Climate

Syria's climate is dry, and temperatures range from extremely hot to freezing cold. During the summer (June to August or mid-September), the interior is hot and dry and coastal areas may be humid, with moderately warm temperatures. In the desert, summer temperatures rise to 43°C (110°F). Visitors to this area should take precautions to avoid heat exhaustion. In the mountains, summer temperatures are usually mild. Spring and autumn are considered the best times to travel. Flowers are in bloom and temperatures are mild. Occasional rain in the coastal areas and in the mountains during the spring tends to keep the air clear.⁵



© Josh Hough
Cold Syrian Landscape

In winter (November through February), temperatures are cold; rain is frequent on the coast and in the mountains, less so in the interior. Annual rainfall on the coast and on the mountain range facing it varies from 51 to 127 cm (20 to 40 or 50 inches) and more. Winter temperatures along the coast range from 9°C (48°F) to 20°C (68°F). The mountains are often snow-covered. Because the mountains block the rainfall from entering the interior, the rest of the country remains relatively dry in winter. The high plains just east of the mountains receive about 25 cm (10 inches) of rain annually, and the desert receives minimum rainfall, from 0 to 7.6 cm

⁴ Thomas Collelo, ed., *Syria: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1987), <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/sytoc.html>

⁵ Encyclopædia Britannica Online, "Syria: Climate," 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578856/Syria/29938/Climate>

(3 inches) annually.^{6, 7} Temperatures in the plains and the desert can reach freezing levels in the winter.

Rivers and Water Systems

Three main rivers in Syria provide major water resources. The Euphrates River begins in Turkey, cuts through the northwest of Syria for a distance of 483 km (300 miles), and then flows on into Iraq. Since ancient times, the Euphrates (3,379 km, or 2,100 miles in length) has supported civilizations, and today it meets 80% of Syria's water needs.⁸



© Paul Engler
Lake Assad

At Tabaqa, the huge Euphrates Dam supplies hydropower and irrigation for land cultivation. The dam feeds a 48-km-long (30-mile) reservoir known as Lake al-Assad.

The Orontes River begins in the hills of north Lebanon, passes through northwestern Syria into Turkey, and empties into the Mediterranean Sea. The river has been rechanneled for irrigation. The Orontes is also a source of water for the cities of Homs and Hamah. Syria and Turkey are working to build a joint dam on their shared border. The dam would prevent seasonal flooding, generate electricity, and provide water for much-needed irrigation.⁹

The Barada River is small, but it has provided water for the Syrian capital of Damascus through the Al-Ghuta Oasis since the 4th century B.C.E. An ancient Roman aqueduct still carries water to Damascus.¹⁰

The Fertile Crescent

Since ancient times, Syria's main agricultural region has been part of the Fertile Crescent. This arc of land stretches from Iraq through western Syria and into Egypt. It is where settled farming (agriculture) began 10,000 years ago. Major Syrian cities, such as Damascus, Hamah, Homs, and Aleppo, are found within the crescent. Its rich soil leads some to believe that it is the "Garden of Eden, the biblical home of Adam and Eve."¹¹ Some of the earliest of the Middle Eastern civilizations—including the Sumerians, the Babylonians, the Hebrews,



© Hovic / flickr.com
Aleppo, northern Syria

⁶ Alison Behnke, *Syria in Pictures* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 2005),

⁷ Global Security.org, Syria: Climate," 27 April 2005, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/syria/climate.htm>

⁸ Terri Dougherty, *Syria: Modern Nations of the World* (Farmington Hills, MI: Lucent Books, 2004).

⁹ Lina Ibrahim and Nayla Razzouk, "Syria, Turkey to Build Dam on Border Running Along Orontes River," 26 January 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-01-27/syria-turkey-to-build-dam-on-border-running-along-orontes-river.html>

¹⁰ Encyclopædia Britannica Online, "Barada River," 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/52541/Barada-River>

¹¹ Terri Dougherty, *Syria: Modern Nations of the World* (Farmington Hills, MI: Lucent Books, 2004).

and the Phoenicians—were located in this fertile region. This area, the cradle of civilizations, is not as lush as it once was. According to a study of satellite images, only 10% of the main ecosystem still remains.¹² Over recent decades, damage to this region has resulted from damming the Tigris and the Euphrates and draining the river basin.

Natural Hazards

Natural hazards of Syria's desert region include dust storms and earthquakes. Fierce sandstorms called *shammal*¹³ usually occur during February and May.¹⁴ They can make driving difficult if not impossible, because they reduce visibility and can be so powerful that they rearrange sand dunes. Earthquakes are another hazard. They result from ongoing geologic activity that originally formed Syria's mountain ranges. Earthquakes have devastated the region for centuries. The last major earthquake hit Aleppo in 1922 and killed 20,000 people. Centuries earlier, in 1138 C.E., a huge earthquake killed an estimated 230,000 people in the same area.¹⁵

Biodiversity and Environmental Issues

Plant and animal life in Syria has greatly changed over the years. Forests were once plentiful along the coast, but most have been heavily cleared.¹⁶ In some areas, lime, yew, and the *zinober* (fir trees) predominate. Elsewhere, the natural landscape has been transformed by agriculture. In ancient Syria, elephants and lions roamed the plains, but most wild animals were hunted nearly to extinction by the early 1900s. Some remote areas of Syria may harbor small numbers of wolves, wild boar, jackals, badgers, deer, and bears. Snakes and lizards can be found in the desert. Pelicans and flamingos live in marshy coastal areas.¹⁷



© Copepodo / flickr.com
Spotted fan-footed gecko

Syria's environmental concerns include deforestation, overgrazing, soil erosion, desertification, and air pollution. In urban areas such as Damascus, water pollution from raw sewage and petroleum-refining wastes is a big problem that contributes to an inadequate supply of potable water. Along the coast, habitat destruction and pollution have degraded marine biodiversity.^{18, 19}

¹² National Geographic News, "Ancient Fertile Crescent Almost Gone, Satellite Images Show," 18 May 2001, http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2001/05/0518_crescent_2.html

¹³ From the Arabic word meaning "north"; the sandstorms come in with the north winds.

¹⁴ Terri Dougherty, *Syria: Modern Nations of the World* (Farmington Hills, MI: Lucent Books, 2004).

¹⁵ Alison Behnke, *Syria in Pictures* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 2005).

¹⁶ Mongabay.com, "Syria," 2009, <http://rainforests.mongabay.com/deforestation/2000/Syria.htm>

¹⁷ Encyclopædia Britannica Online, "Syria: Plant and Animal Life," 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578856/Syria/29941/Plant-and-animal-life>

¹⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, "Syria: Geography," in *The World Factbook*, 18 March 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

¹⁹ INECO, "Syria," n.d., <http://environ.chemeng.ntua.gr/ineco/Default.aspx?t=207>

Damage to human populations has resulted from overuse of common resources. For example, the Bedouin pastoralists' nomadic lifestyle and cultural heritage are threatened by degraded ecosystems. Their livestock do not have enough grazing areas, and rangelands are diminishing.²⁰

In cooperation with United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), Syria has been working to set up a national strategy for biodiversity. In coming years, urbanization, industrialization, and population growth will increase pressures on the region's ecosystem. Although the number is small, some protected ecological areas have been established; for example, the Cedar and Fir Reserve in Syria. A significant wetland, the Sabkhat al-Jabbul Nature Reserve, has also been designated a protected area.²¹

Major Cities

Damascus

Damascus—the capital of Syria and a former Roman military base—was inhabited as early as the 4th millennium B.C.E. Located east of the Anti-Lebanon Mountains on the edge of the Syrian Desert, Damascus was a main crossroads for caravans and a center of trade.



© RabunWarna / flickr.com
Damascus

Aleppo

Aleppo (Haleb), with a population of 1.6 million, is the second-largest city in Syria.²² Archaeological and other evidence here points to settlements as early as 8000 B.C.E. Written records from Mari, an ancient kingdom on the Euphrates River, refer to Aleppo as the center of a powerful state in the 18th century B.C.E. Today Aleppo is one of Syria's most industrialized cities, and produces silk, machinery, and cotton.²³

Located in northwestern Syria, Aleppo has a mixed population of Armenians, Arabs, and Kurds, who have traded and lived together for centuries. Its culture has been made even more diverse by its long connections to Europe and immigration from the former Soviet republics.²⁴

Hamah

South of Aleppo is Hamah, a peaceful and attractive city on the banks of the Orontes River.²⁵ Hamah is yet another Syrian city that traces its roots back to the earliest pages of history. It is

²⁰ INECO, "Syria," n.d., <http://environ.chemeng.ntua.gr/ineco/Default.aspx?t=207>

²¹ United Nations, "Biodiversity Conservation in Syria," 2011, <http://www.un.org.sy/forms/stories/viewStories.php?id=50>

²² Mongabay.com, "Population of Aleppo, Syria," 8 September 2010, <http://population.mongabay.com/population/syria/170063/aleppo>

²³ AtlasTours.net, "Aleppo, Syria," 2008, <http://www.atlastours.net/syria/aleppo.html>

²⁴ Footprint Travel Guides, "Ethnic Minorities," 2011, <http://www.footprinttravelguides.com/c/6791/ethnic-minorities/>

²⁵ Neos Guide, *Syria, Jordan*, 2000, Michelin Travel Publications.

perhaps the most traditional and conservative of Syrian cities. Hamah's population of mostly Sunni Muslims follow an orthodox lifestyle. Many women wear traditional black veils. There are also various Christian groups living in the city.²⁶ Hamah is only 80 km (50 miles) east of the Mediterranean Sea and is surrounded by rich agricultural land.²⁷



© james.gordon6108 / flickr.com
Hamah

Latakia

Latakia was once a picturesque fishing port. Now, the harbor consists mostly of industrial docks, and the town itself reflects little of its ancient history. Tourists can be found at the modern beach resort north of town where they swim or walk along the seafront and explore the hotel shops.²⁸

Latakia was founded in 1000 B.C.E. by Phoenician fishermen who settled here. Today, the area is home to Christians and Muslims. Latakia is considered less conservative than other cities in the country and more modern in attitude.²⁹ Women in Latakia reflect contemporary trends by tending to dress in Western styles of clothing.³⁰

History

Introduction

Syria's history includes ongoing reconfiguration of the country's territory and alliances. In antiquity, Syrian territory was much larger than today and included modern Lebanon, most of present-day Israel and Jordan, and part of Saudi Arabia and Iraq, which were created by the Treaty of Versailles following World War I.

In 1500 B.C.E., the region was conquered by Egyptians and then by Hebrews and Persians. Alexander the Great (of Macedonia) swept through in 330 B.C.E. Syria was part of the Roman Empire from 64 B.C.E. until the Arab Conquest in 636 C.E., when Islam was introduced. The 12th century brought the Christian Crusaders to Greater Syria. The Kurdish warrior Salah al-Din al-Ayubi, known in the West as Saladin, led the Muslims to defeat the Crusaders and take back their cities. Then, in 1260, Mongols invaded Syria, weakening the country.³¹



Courtesy of Wikimedia
19th century Syrian clothing

²⁶ Judith Fein, "Syria Pleased to Show Itself and Its Rich History," Boston.com, 9 November 2008, http://articles.boston.com/2008-11-09/travel/29271103_1_damascus-palmyra-foreign-visitors

²⁷ Encyclopædia Britannica Online, "Hamah," 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/253154/Hamah>

²⁸ Syria Gate, "Syria: About Latakia," 2002, <http://www.syriagate.com/Syria/about/cities/Latakia/index.htm>

²⁹ iGuide, "Latakia: Overview of Latakia," n.d., <http://iguide.travel/Latakia/Overview>

³⁰ Encyclopædia Britannica Online, "Latakia," 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/331236/Latakia>

³¹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online, "Syria: History," 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/150420/Damascus/25657/History>

Syria later flourished as a province of the Ottoman Turkish Empire from 1516 until World War I, when the Ottoman Empire broke up. Political stability prevailed during this period as trade and agriculture expanded and education became more widespread. Christians and Jews also held positions of authority and responsibility in the government.³²

After World War I ended (1918), Syria prepared for an independence that was not to be. Through secret agreement between France and Britain, the territory that is now Syria and Lebanon became a French mandate in 1920.³³ Syria finally became independent in 1946.³⁴

In 1958, Syria joined with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic.³⁵ The union ended rather quickly and Syria became independent again in 1961. Another concern for Syria has been Lebanon, which Syria occupied in 1975.³⁶ International pressure forced Syria to pull its troops out of Lebanon in 2004. Today, often at odds with U.S. policy, Syria continues to extend its influence throughout the region.³⁷

The Golan Heights

The disputed Golan Heights territory has been a major source of conflict between Syria and Israel, the roots of which stretch back to 1948, when the Jewish state of Israel was created from an area of British-controlled Palestine. Syria and other Arab countries in that same year tried to regain Arab territory by attacking Israel. This effort failed. When war came again in 1967, Israel captured territory in Syria's Golan Heights region and built settlements. In a fourth war, Syria lost even more of its Golan Heights territory to Israel. Although Syria has recovered some of its territory, there were an estimated 42 Israeli settlements in the Golan Heights as of 2005.³⁸



© Will Grady
Golan Heights

³² Encyclopædia Britannica Online, "Syria: History," 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/150420/Damascus/25657/History>

³³ In the Sykes-Picot Agreement, representatives of the French and British governments agreed that Syria and Lebanon would be ruled by France, while Palestine, Iraq, and Transjordan would be ruled by Britain.

³⁴ GlobalSecurity.org, "Syria: History," 27 April 2005, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/syria/history.htm>

³⁵ Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser was a supporter of Pan-Arabism, a movement to create a single Arab state.

³⁶ In 1976, shortly after civil war broke out in Lebanon, Syria was asked to provide Lebanon military aid by Maronite Christian President Suleiman Franjeh. In the Lebanese civil war, the ruling Christians were trying to maintain power and also to evict a large Palestinian population who had been expelled from Jordan. The Syrians helped to defeat Soviet-backed Muslim militias and Palestinian forces. See Daniel Engber, "How Come Syria Controls Lebanon?" Slate.com, 15 February 2005, <http://www.slate.com/id/2113567/>

³⁷ GlobalSecurity.org, "Syria: History," 27 April 2005, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/syria/history.htm>

³⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, "Syria, 2006," in *The World Factbook*, <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/sy.html>

President Hafez al-Assad

President Hafez al-Assad ruled Syria forcefully from 1971 until his death in 2000. The stage for his rise to power began to take shape in 1967, during a period of instability. The Alawis, a religious and political Syrian minority group to which al-Assad belonged, were traditionally poor farmers. After they gained power through military service, the Alawis formed their own branch of the Baath Party.³⁹ Alawi General Hafez al-Assad took advantage of his government's weakness and took control of the Baath Party. In a 1971 national election, Hafez al-Assad ran as the only candidate and became president of Syria.⁴⁰

President al-Assad strengthened his position in the Middle East by supporting and funding some Palestinian groups who had lost their land. He also allowed groups who used terror tactics to set up bases in Syria, on the condition that he retain some control over them.⁴¹

Al-Assad's government dominated Lebanon for almost three decades. After civil war erupted in Lebanon in 1975 between Palestinians and the Lebanese Army, President al-Assad sent approximately 20,000 troops to intervene on the side of the Lebanese Christians. In 1978, Syria switched its support to the Muslim and Palestinian factions. After Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, Syria kept its forces there and occupied much of Lebanon for 29 years. During this time, Syria exerted control over Lebanon's government mostly through its intelligence services.⁴²

President al-Assad threw his support behind militant Islamist groups. His government provided funding and training for the Shi'a militia Hezbollah in southern Lebanon.⁴³ Hezbollah has participated in Lebanon's political system since 1982, influenced by Syria and Iran. The group is responsible for repeated attacks on Israel and suicide bombings (including the 1983 truck bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut).⁴⁴ Also, in Palestine, al-Assad supported the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Formed in the 1970s, this group has sought to destroy Israel through holy war.⁴⁵ President al-Assad's backing of Islamic Jihad indirectly served the Syrian government's struggle against Israel.

After his death in 2000, Hafez al-Assad was succeeded by his son, Bashar al-Assad, who has continued the tradition of autocratic rule.

³⁹ The Baath Party in Syria consolidated in the mid-1950s. It was organized by Michel Aflaq (Christian) and Salah al-Din al-Bitar (Sunni Muslim) to promote pan-Arabism and government control of resources.

⁴⁰ GlobalSecurity.org, "Syria: History," 27 April 2005, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/syria/history.htm>

⁴¹ Terri Dougherty, *Syria: Modern Nations of the World* (Farmington Hills, MI: Lucent Books, 2004).

⁴² Daniel Engber, "How Come Syria Controls Lebanon?" Slate.com, 15 February 2005, <http://www.slate.com/toolbar.aspx?>

⁴³ *Hezbollah*, meaning Party of God, was formed in response to the Israeli seizure of Lebanon in 1982. The resulting Islamic resistance sought to eject Israeli forces and free the occupied territories. See Global Security.org Military, "Hizballah," 16 July 2006, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/hizballah.htm>

⁴⁴ Global Security.org Military, "Hizballah," 16 July 2006, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/hizballah.htm>

⁴⁵ Michael Donovan, Ph.D., "In the Spotlight: Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)," Center for Defense Information (CDI) Terrorism Project, 19 April 2002, <http://www.cdi.org/terrorism/pij.cfm>

Recent History

In 2001, Syria withdrew most of its 25,000 troops from Beirut but kept them in rural areas. However, after former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated on 14 February 2004, the UN ordered all foreign troops to withdraw from Lebanon. By the end of April 2005, Syria's 29-year occupation of Lebanon ended.⁴⁶



© Maryatexitzero / flickr.com
Pierre Gemayel

Hariri had been an independent and popular leader who opposed Syria's presence in Lebanon, and questions were raised about Syria's involvement in the assassination. Although Syria has denied the charges, in 2005 the UN released a report concluding that Syria had been involved.⁴⁷ Later, on 21 November 2006, the anti-Syrian Lebanese Minister of Industry Pierre Gemayel was killed by an unknown gunman—only hours after Syria had announced the restoration of diplomatic relations with Iraq after almost 25 years. Then, in early December 2006, thousands of Hezbollah and pro-Syrian protesters in Beirut continued a sit-in to topple the government of Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora.

In 2005, Abd al-Halim Khaddam, vice-president at the time, was fired and moved to Europe, where he started an opposition movement. Although his group has demanded regime change in Syria, their external influence is considered weak.⁴⁸

Waves of unrest and government turmoil cascaded across the Middle East in 2011. The government of Syria was thought to be immune under the autocratic rule of Bashar al-Assad. However, after the fall of Egyptian President Mubarak, there were demonstrations in Syria. These initial protests were put down but larger protests followed. By early 2012, thousands of protesters were killed. The violence was condemned not only by international observers such as the United States and European Union, but also by regional powers including the Arab League and Saudi Arabia. At the time of this writing, the demonstrations and government backlash continue.^{49, 50}

⁴⁶ Esther Pan, "Syria: Has Assad Dodged a Bullet?" Council on Foreign Relations, 26 April 2006, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/10546/syria.html>

⁴⁷ United Nations, Report of the International Independent Investigation Commission Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1595, 2005, <http://www.un.org/news/dh/docs/mehlisreport/>

⁴⁸ Esther Pan, "Syria: Has Assad Dodged a Bullet?" Council on Foreign Relations, 26 April 2006, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/10546/syria.html>

⁴⁹ *The New York Times*, "Syria—Protests (2011)," 29 February 2012, <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/syria/index.html>

⁵⁰ *Syria Today*, "Amid Protests, Government Promises Reform," April 2011, <http://www.syria-today.com/index.php/news/14846-amid-protests-government-promises-reform>

Government

Syria is a centralized republic in which the president has broad powers and citizens have limited rights. The constitution, adopted in 1973, establishes government control over the national economy. Voters must be 18 years of age or older, and citizens of voting age can elect the president. Their choice is narrow, however, for presidential candidates must be Muslim and nominated by the Baath Party. The president—elected for a seven-year term—commands the army and appoints the vice-president, the prime minister, and high-ranking government ministers. Most high-level decisions in Syria are made by the president and his appointees. For instance, the president has the power to declare war, change the constitution, issue laws, and appoint people to military positions.^{51, 52}



Courtesy of Wikimedia
President Hafez al-Assad

Besides the executive branch, the government includes the less-powerful legislative and judicial branches. The People's Council (legislative branch) ratifies laws, yet in practice lacks the power to oppose the president. In fact, it can be very dangerous to do so. In 2001, two members of the body were arrested after they suggested political reform.

The third branch, the judicial system, consists of secular and religious courts. These courts follow practices that date from earlier traditions. For instance, matters pertaining to Muslims are judged according to Muslim legal code. Concerns of people from other religions are settled in courts that vary according to religious background. This practice of religious tolerance can be traced back to the Ottoman Empire, when non-Muslims were exempted from following Muslim law. Supreme Court judges are appointed by the president.

Although the Baath Party has controlled Syria since 1963, other political parties do exist.⁵³ It is through membership in the Baath Party, however, that people can advance in the military or get government jobs.

Opposition to the government is strongly repressed. The Syrian government holds unknown numbers of prisoners from the Muslim Brotherhood and others who politicize the Islam.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Alison Behnke, *Syria: Modern Nations of the World* (Farmington Hills, MI: Lucent Books, 2004).

⁵² Café-Syria, "Syrian Government," 2005, <http://www.cafe-syria.com/Government.htm>

⁵³ Terri Dougherty, *Syria: Modern Nations of the World* (Farmington Hills, MI: Lucent Books, 2004).

⁵⁴ GlobalEdge, "Syria: Government," 2009, <http://globaledge.msu.edu/countries/syria/government/>

Media

Freedom of speech in Syria is limited. All publications are controlled by the government. The people are sheltered from outside influences that would make them question the regime. In 1999, Syria began providing internet service, but e-mail was available only to people in certain occupations. Although internet cafes are now springing up in the cities, content is greatly filtered.⁵⁵



© james.gordon6108 / flickr.com
Satellite dishes

After Bashar al-Assad took power, press censorship loosened slightly. Syrians, for example, were allowed to install satellite dishes that could receive international news. Publication of new newspapers was allowed. To avoid being shut down, however, newspapers still had to avoid offending those in government. Citizens who criticize the government may be arrested, and censorship remains part of daily life. The government's justification for censorship is its fear of political discord between the country's many ethnic groups.⁵⁶

Economy

Introduction

Syria's economy is based on oil, mining, textile manufacturing, and agriculture. Syria's economy has been socialist since 1958. Following the discovery of large oil fields in the 1980s, the Syrian government formed partnerships with foreign companies—including ConocoPhillips and Shell Oil—to build and operate oil refineries. In addition to allowing some economic privatization, a new investment law issued in January 2007 reduces administrative procedures, allows foreign investors to export more of their profits, and otherwise provides incentives for investment in Syria.⁵⁷



© Alessandra Kocman
Ancient Loom, Hamah

Unlike most Syrian businesses, the majority of Syrian farms (about 95%) are privately owned, although marketing and transportation remain state-operated. Syria's main crops include cotton, grains, lentils, olives, sugar beets, and chickpeas. Production of cotton has grown to the point that Syria is able to export parts of its harvest.^{58, 59}

⁵⁵ Budde.com, "Syria—Telecoms, Mobile, Broadband and Forecasts," 2010, <http://www.budde.com.au/Research/Syria-Telecoms-Mobile-Broadband-and-Forecasts.html>

⁵⁶ Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom* (London: Zed Books, 2003).

⁵⁷ U.S. State Department, "Background Note: Syria," 18 March 2011, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm>

⁵⁸ Nimrod Raphaeli, "Syria's Fragile Economy," *The Middle East Review of International Affairs* 11, no. 2 (2007), <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2007/issue2/jv11no2a4.html>

⁵⁹ DLIFLC, "Syria in Perspective: An Orientation Guide," 20 October 2005, http://www.nh-tcms.com/documents/Cultural_Awareness/syria_orientation.pdf

In 2010, 17.6% of Syria's GDP and nearly one-fourth of its work force were dependent on agriculture, a sector that remains challenged.⁶⁰ Lack of water is a problem. Most of Syria's crops are dependent on rain-fed sources. Lack of modern equipment for irrigation is another challenge facing Syria's agriculture.⁶¹ Finally, water resources, such as the Orontes and the Euphrates rivers, do not originate in Syria, which has led to water-sharing disputes with neighboring countries.⁶²

In 2001, private banks, which are closely monitored by the Syrian Central Bank, were given permission to operate within the country. There are currently 14 private banks operating in Syria and 6 state-owned banks.⁶³ As a safeguard against corrupt financial transactions, the government has taken steps to ensure against money laundering.⁶⁴

By 2010, the economy showed solid progress. Inflationary pressures are easing, and the GDP is expected to grow around 5%. The trade deficit is declining. Oil continues to be a major source of revenue for the government. In addition, the banking industry is showing strong growth. Continued droughts plague the agricultural sector, and production is down. Overall, the economy appears to be on the upswing, though it's not without problems that must clearly be addressed.⁶⁵ Internet, cellular, and credit card services remain limited in Syria.^{66, 67}

Trade

The Syrian Securities and Exchange Commission (SSEC) has been a legal entity since June 2005. In March 2009, the Damascus Securities Exchange was launched. It continues to try to attract foreign investors, but investments are lagging because of heavy constraints on trading. Nevertheless, the future looks promising. A continued appetite for investing in the country exists.^{68, 69}

⁶⁰ Central Intelligence Agency, "Syria: Economy," in *The World Factbook*, 8 March 2011.
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

⁶¹ Firas Yassin, "Sustainable Water Use in Syrian Agriculture," April 2005, National Agricultural Policy Center,
http://www.napcsyr.org/dwnld-files/divisions/rdd/pubs/pol_brf/en/12_sustainable_water.pdf

⁶² MidEastWeb, "Water in the Middle East Conflict," 2002, <http://www.mideastweb.org/water.htm>

⁶³ Samar Ezmechli, "The Banking Sector Shifting Gear in Syria," *Al Hayat*, 2 May 2010,
<http://www.eurojar.org/en/euromed-articles/banking-sector-shifting-gear-syria/7995>

⁶⁴ Anima Investment Network, "Country Perspectives—Syria: Finance and Banking System," 2007,
http://www.animaweb.org/en/pays_syrie_financesbanques_en.php

⁶⁵ Oxford Business Group, "Syria: A Year in Review 2010," 11 April 2011,
http://www.oxfordbusinessgroup.com/economic_updates/syria-year-review-2010

⁶⁶ BusinessWire, "Research and Markets: Syria Telecoms, Mobile, Broadband and Forecasts Report 2011," 21 March 2011, <http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20110321005785/en/Research-Markets-Syria-Telecoms-Mobile-Broadband-Forecasts>

⁶⁷ BusinessWire, "Research and Markets: Syria Telecoms, Mobile, Broadband and Forecasts Report 2011," 21 March 2011, <http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20110321005785/en/Research-Markets-Syria-Telecoms-Mobile-Broadband-Forecasts>

⁶⁸ Oxford Business Group, "Syria: A Year in Review 2010," 11 April 2011,
http://www.oxfordbusinessgroup.com/economic_updates/syria-year-review-2010

Syria's largest export partners are Iraq (30%), Lebanon (12%), Germany (9%), Egypt (7%), Saudi Arabia (5%), and Italy (4.5%). Syria's major exports include petroleum, fruits and vegetables, wheat, cotton, textiles, clothing, meat, and live animals.⁷⁰



© Joe Mabel / wikimedia.org
Syrian apricot paste

Saudi Arabia, China, Turkey, and Egypt provide most of Syria's imported goods. Other significant import partners are the UAE, Italy, Russia, Germany, and Lebanon. Syria's main imports are machinery and transport equipment, electric power machinery, metal and metal products, chemicals and chemical products, plastics, yarn, and paper.⁷¹

U.S. Trade with Syria

Although small compared with that of other countries in the region, the amount of USD in trade has been steadily increasing since 2005, with the exception of a small decline in 2009.⁷² The value of trade between the two countries increased more than 50% in 2010.

In December 2003, President Bush signed into law HR 1828, the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Act. This legislation allowed the president to issue sanctions against Syria to discourage support for international terrorist groups and the occupation of Lebanon. In May 2004, the U.S. imposed economic sanctions against Syria. In 2010 President Obama ordered a one-year extension of economic sanctions against Syria. These sanctions were aimed at suppressing foreign fighter networks believed to be sending suicide bombers to Iraq. The U.S. believes that Syria's support of terrorist organizations and its missile programs are a continuing threat to national security.⁷³

Ethnic Groups

Syria's population includes various religious and ethnic communities. Their separate identities take precedence over a sense of unified nationhood. Although Sunnis are the majority, they are a "silent majority" who tend to identify in different ways, such as by locality or by religious

⁶⁹ University of Pennsylvania, "The Damascus Securities Exchange: An Emblem for Syria's Economic Reform," 18 May 2010, <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/arabic/article.cfm?articleid=2459>

⁷⁰ Central Intelligence Agency, "Syria: Economy," in *The World Factbook*, 8 March 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

⁷¹ Central Intelligence Agency, "Syria: Economy," in *The World Factbook*, 8 March 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

⁷² U.S. Foreign Trade Statistics, "Trade in Goods (Imports, Exports and Trade Balance) with Syria," 10 March 2011, <http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5020.html#2011>

⁷³ EN.RIAN.RU, "U.S. Extends Economic Sanctions Against Syria," 4 May 2010, <http://en.rian.ru/world/20100504/158860036.html>

affiliation.⁷⁴ The largest ethnic group in Syria is composed of Arabs, who represent about 90% of the population.^{75, 76}

Bedouins, about 5 to 10% of the population, seldom follow their previously nomadic existence.^{77, 78} By the 1950s, they largely stopped guiding desert caravans because of decreased demand for such services. When the Assad Dam was built on the Euphrates River in the 1960s, many Bedouins worked on the dam and were thus introduced to a cash economy.⁷⁹ After that, they were less likely to return to a pastoral or nomadic life.^{80, 81}



© Marc Veraart
Woman in hijab

Kurds, approximately 10% of the population, form the majority in northeast Syria and the largest ethnic minority in Syria.⁸² They speak a Kurdish language (Kurmanji), and they are mostly Sunni Muslims but not Arabs. The Kurdish culture is also found throughout parts of Iraq, Iran, and Turkey, and Kurds have tried, without success, to create a unified state. In Syria, the Kurds lack political freedom. Their culture is not recognized, their language is illegal in schools, and they cannot publish newspapers in their language. However, President Assad granted nationality to the Hasaka Kurds in April 2011. This decree will affect between 150,000 and 300,000 of the 2.25 million Kurds in the country.⁸³

Various other ethnic groups live in Syria: Turks (1–5% of the population), Assyrians (less than 1%), and Armenians (about 1%).^{84, 85} Circassians (non-Arab Sunni Muslims) migrated to Syria

⁷⁴ Scott C. Davis, *The Road from Damascus: A Journey Through Syria* (Seattle: Cune Press, 2002).

⁷⁵ In Syria, the Syrian Arabic dialect is spoken. Classical Arabic is the language of the Qur'an, and the formal written language used in the media is Modern Standard Arabic. Although they are unified by language, the customs and lifestyle of the Arabic people vary widely. See Terri Dougherty, *Syria: Modern Nations of the World* (Farmington Hills, MI: Lucent Books, 2004).

⁷⁶ PBS, "Global Connection: The Middle East," 2002, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/maps/demotext.html>

⁷⁷ In the *sunna* (acts and saying of Muhammad), Bedouins are called *a'arab*, which is the origin of the modern word Arab. See Scott C. Davis., *The Road from Damascus: A Journey Through Syria* (Seattle: Cune Press, 2002).

⁷⁸ Dawn Chatty, "The Bedouin in Contemporary Syria: The Persistence of Tribal Authority and Control," *The Middle East Journal* (Winter, 2010), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_7664/is_201001/ai_n49420553/pg_13/?tag=content:coll

⁷⁹ Scott C. Davis, *The Road from Damascus: A Journey Through Syria* (Seattle: Cune Press, 2002).

⁸⁰ Encyclopedia of the Orient, "Syria: Peoples, Languages, Religions," http://i-cias.com/e.o/syria_4.htm

⁸¹ Dawn Chatty, "The Bedouin in Contemporary Syria: The Persistence of Tribal Authority and Control," *The Middle East Journal* (Winter, 2010), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_7664/is_201001/ai_n49420553/pg_13/?tag=content:coll

⁸² Terri Dougherty, *Syria: Modern Nations of the World* (Farmington Hills, MI: Lucent Books, 2004).

⁸³ BBC, "Syria's Assad Grants Nationality to Hasaka Kurds," 7 April 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12995174>

⁸⁴ Al-bab.com, "The Assyrians of Iraq," 18 June 2009, <http://www.al-bab.com/arab/background/assyrian.htm>

⁸⁵ Ray J. Mouawad, "Syria and Iraq—Repression," *The Middle East Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 51–60. <http://www.meforum.org/17/syria-and-iraq-repression>

from Russia in the 19th and 20th centuries. Most lived in the Golan Heights until the 1967 war, at which point they moved farther into Syria. Many work in the government, civil service, or in the military.⁸⁶

Political Refugees

The 2003 Iraq war has caused Iraqis and Palestinians fleeing violence to seek refuge in Syria. The country accommodates nearly 14% of the world's refugees.⁸⁷ Nearly 2,000 refugees pour into Syria monthly. Most come from Iraq and Palestine. Additional refugees from Somalia, Afghanistan, and other countries also arrive. The refugee population puts increasing strain on the economy of the country and creates social problems as well. Finding proper food, shelter, education, and medical help is difficult.⁸⁸



© Anobel Odisho
Jaramana Refugee Camp

Syria's refugee problem is likely to persist for some years. According to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, the situation in Iraq is not currently conducive to Iraqi refugees returning from Syria. Until the Iraq can improve its public services, offer better security, and increase its job opportunities, refugees are not likely to return in large numbers.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Kafkas.org, "The Circassians of Syria," n.d., <http://www.kafkas.org.tr/english/diaspora/suriye.html>

⁸⁷ Joughina Portal News, "Two-Thirds of the World Refugees Are in Syria and Jordan!" 26 April 2010, <http://www.jpnews-sy.com/en/news.php?id=707>

⁸⁸ UNHCR, "Syrian Arab Republic," January 2010, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486a76.html>

⁸⁹ UNHCR, "2010 Regional Response Plan for Iraqi Refugees Launched in Syria," 2011, <http://www.un.org.sy/forms/spotlight/viewSpotlight.php?id=109&pageLang=en>

Chapter 1 Assessment

1. Syria supported the U.S. war against Iraq in 2003.
FALSE
Although Syria joined the U.S.-led coalition against Saddam Hussein in 1990–1991, Syria opposed the U.S. war against Iraq in 2003.
2. Most Syrians live in the northwestern part of the country near the Mediterranean Sea.
TRUE
Two-thirds of the population of Syria live within 121 km (75 miles) of the Mediterranean Sea, which borders the northwestern corner of Syria.
3. The Euphrates River provides 80% of Syria’s water needs.
TRUE
Since ancient times, the Euphrates River has supported civilizations in the region. Today, the dam at Tabaga in Syria feeds a reservoir known as Lake al-Assad and provides hydropower and irrigation for the cultivation of dry land.
4. The Golan Heights is an area of Syria now occupied by Israel.
TRUE
During war with Syria in 1967, Israel captured territory in Syria’s Golan Heights region and built settlements there that remain a source of international tension between the two nations.
5. Most Syrian farms are owned by the government.
FALSE
Unlike most Syrian businesses, the majority of Syrian farms are privately owned, although marketing and transportation remain state-operated.

CHAPTER 2: RELIGION

Introduction

Syria has no official state religion, although the constitution states that the president must be Muslim and that shari'a (Islamic Law) is a principal source of legislation. Syrians are predominantly Muslim. The Islamic religion in Syria is divided into different sects. There are also non-Islamic religious groups, including Christian sects. Although there are minor tensions between groups, ethnicity probably plays a bigger role than religion in the tension. Religious freedom, which the government is increasingly striving for, is thought to contribute to the peaceful relationships among the diverse populations of Syria.⁹⁰



© Travel Aficionado / flickr.com
Umayyad Mosque, Damascus

Even though the constitution of Syria allows religious freedom, it also places restrictions on freedom of choice in religious matters. The government does not, for example, recognize the status of Muslims who convert to Christianity, although it will recognize the status of Christians who convert to Islam. Muslim women may not marry Christian men, but Christian women may marry Muslim men. Some religious groups are outlawed, including the Jehovah's Witnesses.⁹¹

Of the majority of people in Syria who practice Islam, 74% are Sunni. The remaining Muslim sects—the Alawis, Ismailis, and Shi'a—account for 13%.⁹² The Druze represent about 3%. The remaining 10% are Christian.⁹³

Religious Groups

The Alawis, originally a branch of Shi'a Islam, practice some rituals that are unusual within Islam.⁹⁴ For instance, they celebrate certain Christian holidays, such as Christmas and Easter. Alawis have no religious buildings, preferring to meet in private residences. Members of the al-Assad regime belong to the Alawi Muslim sect, and thus this sect has been disproportionately powerful in Syria since 1971, when the country first came under Alawi leadership.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ UNCHR, "2010 Report on International Religious Freedom—Syria," 30 June 2010, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/topic.464db4f52.46a70a722.4cf2d06298.0.html>

⁹¹ U.S. State Department, "International Religious Freedom Report 2010," 17 November 2010, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148845.htm>

⁹² The term "Seveners" arrives from a ninth-century split in Shi'a Islam about the number of *imams* (holy men) that should be recognized. Those who came to believe that Ismail was the seventh *imam* were called Ismailis (Seveners).

⁹³ UNCHR, "2010 Report on International Religious Freedom—Syria," 30 June 2010, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/topic.464db4f52.46a70a722.4cf2d06298.0.html>

⁹⁴ GlobalSecurity.org, "Alawi Islam," 2011, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/intro/islam-alawi.htm>

⁹⁵ Daniel Pipes, "The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria," 1989, <http://www.danielpipes.org/191/the-alawi-capture-of-power-in-syria>

The religion of the Druze originated from Shi'a Islam but is not recognized by many Muslims, as the Druze have a view of Islamic structure and practice that is contrary to the mainstream.⁹⁶ They worship al-Hakim, who disappeared in 1021, as their religious leader. The Druze believe that al-Hakim was the earthly presence of God, and that he will return to bring about a future golden age. They are known to be fiercely independent and secretive about their religious practices. They neither marry outside their faith nor admit new members. The Druze mostly live in the southwestern district of Jabal al-Arab.⁹⁷



Courtesy Wikimedia.org
Druze woman 1870

Christians make up about 10% of the population and belong to various sects, including the Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, Chaldean, Maronite, Protestant, and Roman Catholic churches. There are very small Jewish communities in Damascus, al-Qamishli, and Aleppo. Some Kurds living near the Iraqi border follow a religion known as Yezidism, which includes elements of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.⁹⁸

History of Religion

Early Islam

Islam is a religion practiced through living one's life in accordance with the laws of Allah (God) as set forth in the Quran. Islam was founded by the Arab prophet Muhammad in the 7th century C.E. Muhammad, it is believed, received revelations from Allah while meditating in the desert over a 23-year period. Soon after Muhammad died, Muslims split into two sects. The Shi'a preferred naming religious leaders from descendants of Muhammad's family. They believe that Ali, the prophet's cousin and son-in-law, was the Muslim community's rightful leader. The Sunnis, however, favored electing religious leaders. Sunnis eventually became the dominant Islamic group in Syria.



© zz77 / flickr.com
Men praying, Ruqayya tomb

In 636 C.E., Damascus was conquered by Islamic forces, and Syria slowly adopted Islam. A Sunni became caliph (ruler) of the land. During the 7th century, Syria prospered. Trade flourished, water systems were engineered, hospitals were built, and medicine and philosophy were studied in Damascus. By the 11th century, however, Syria split into small Muslim states, which were easier for the Turks (also Muslim) to conquer. Under Turkish control, travel was

⁹⁶ Encyclopædia Britannica Online, "Druze," 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/172195/Druze>

⁹⁷ Encyclopædia Britannica Online, "Druze," 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/172195/Druze>

⁹⁸ UNCHR, "2010 Report on International Religious Freedom—Syria," 30 June 2010, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/topic,464db4f52,46a70a722,4cf2d06298,0.html>

restricted in areas considered holy by Christians, such as Bethlehem and Jerusalem. These restrictions and other tensions led to the Crusades.⁹⁹

The Crusades

When the right to travel to holy sites was restricted by Turkish conquerors, Christian armies invaded from the West. The first Crusade (religious military campaign) was launched in 1095 by Pope Urban II, and the crusaders occupied Syria in 1098. The Syrians fought back. Resistance and resentment against the invading crusaders was strong throughout Muslim lands for centuries to follow. The powerful leader Saladin fought the crusaders and united Syria and Egypt. After his death, however, unity was fractured and Syria became vulnerable to other conquerors. It was not until 1302 that the last crusaders left Syria.^{100, 101}

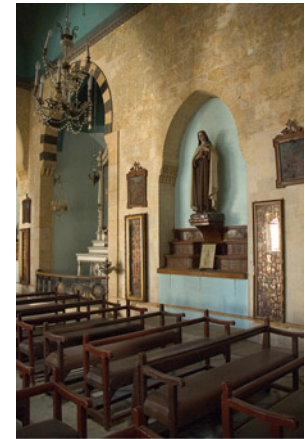


© Nick Leonard / flickr.com
Ruins, Syria

Religion Under the Ottomans

The Ottoman period followed the Crusades and later Mongol invasions of Syria. The Ottomans were Muslim Turks who invaded Syria in 1516. Under their rule, Islam and other religions were tolerated in Syria, as long as Ottoman power was not threatened. Christians, for instance, followed their own religious laws.¹⁰²

The Ottoman Empire weakened under poor leadership, and Europeans began to see strategic possibilities in Syria, which led to conflict. France, Britain, and Russia insisted that they be given oversight over Christians who lived in Syria. Then, in the 1800s, a Christian sect in Syria and a splinter Islamic group (the Druze) began fighting. Following a period of economic and social tension, the Druze attacked the Maronites (part of the Eastern Catholic Church) and killed more than 10,000 people. The French intervened with troops and forced the Ottomans to give the Maronites their own semi-independent province. This Christian-governed region established in Greater Syria would eventually become modern-day Lebanon.^{103, 104}



© Chris Hill
Syrian Catholic Church
Aleppo

⁹⁹ Linda Komaroff, "Early Islamic Period: History," Los Angeles County Museum of Art, http://www.lacma.org/islamic_art/eip.htm

¹⁰⁰ Middle-ages.org, "The Crusades," <http://www.middle-ages.org.uk/the-crusades.htm>

¹⁰¹ Middle-ages.org, "The First Crusade," <http://www.middle-ages.org.uk/the-first-crusade.htm>

¹⁰² Globaled.org, "Turkish Toleration," 2000, <http://www.globaled.org/nyworld/materials/ottoman/turkish.html>

¹⁰³ Rit Nosotro, "The Decline of the Ottoman Empire," 2010, <http://www.hyperhistory.net/apwh/essays/cot/t1w26ottomandecline.htm>

¹⁰⁴ Alison Behnke, "Syria in Pictures," 2005 (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company).

Religion and Government

Religion and government have been separate since the Baath Party's rise to power in 1963, even though the government reserves the right to appoint moderate Muslims to religious leadership positions.¹⁰⁵ However, a Muslim cleric was permitted to address the officers at a military academy in April of 2006, and in the following month, a state-owned newspaper began running a new regular column on religion in daily life.¹⁰⁶ President al-Assad reversed laws adopted by his father, and allowed soldiers to pray in mosques.^{107, 108}

In Syria today, the Christian, Druze, and Jewish minorities follow their own laws for personal matters such as marriage and divorce. Other religious groups must follow the Muslim code called shari'a, which forms the basis of law for Syrian citizens, regardless of their religious affiliation.^{109, 110}

Recognized religious groups, including Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities, receive free utilities once they have completed the mandatory registration with the government. They are also exempt from real estate taxes and personal property taxes on official vehicles.¹¹¹ However, they are closely monitored by the government. Public preaching is not allowed, and permits are required for all group meetings except those that are for worship. Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood have long been forbidden to operate in Syria.¹¹²

In 2010, a new office of religious affairs was created in the Syrian Prime Ministry. The office banned veiled women from entering the country's universities. The office also banned religious



© Charles Roffey
Syrian soldiers in mosque

¹⁰⁵ Embassy of the United States, Damascus, Syria, "Syria: Background Notes 2006," <http://damascus.usembassy.gov/syr-bknote.html>

¹⁰⁶ U.S. Department of State, "International Religious Freedom Report 2010," 17 November 2010, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148845.htm>

¹⁰⁷ U.S. Department of State, "International Religious Freedom Report 210," 17 November 2010, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148845.htm>

¹⁰⁸ Katherine Zoepf, "Islamic Revival in Syria Is Led by Women," *New York Times*, 29 August 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/29/world/middleeast/29syria.html>

¹⁰⁹ Susie Steiner, "Sharia Law," 20 August 2002, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/aug/20/qanda.islam>

¹¹⁰ UNCHR, "2010 Report on International Religious Freedom—Syria," 30 June 2010, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/topic,464db4f52,46a70a722,4cf2d06298,0.html>

¹¹¹ U.S. Department of State, "International Religious Freedom Report 210," 17 November 2010, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148845.htm>

¹¹² U.S. Department of State, "International Religious Freedom Report 210," 17 November 2010, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148845.htm>

symbols on public transportation.¹¹³ Crackdowns on Christians, including the closing of eight churches for not being properly sanctioned buildings, have also raised concerns.¹¹⁴

Religion in Daily Life

Religion is prominent in the daily lives of Syrians. There are mosques throughout the country, and they are well attended. When Hafez al-Assad was in power, he had hundreds of mosques built. On Fridays, the Muslim holy day, shops are usually closed, and crowds of people attend the mosques. The Muslim call to prayer is chanted five times a day from the minarets (towers) of mosques, and people pray facing in the direction of Mecca in Saudi Arabia. Non-Islamic churches, including Protestant, Catholic, and Anglican, are also well attended. In the Syrian Orthodox Church, members often celebrate mass in the ancient Aramaic language.



© Alessandra Kocman
Women dressed to enter mosque

Besides following organized religion, many Syrians follow other spiritual practices. Saints are honored for their power to intercede and bring favorable results to people's lives. Many villages contain the shrine of a saint, who may simply have been a local person who led a moral life. Members of different faiths may pray at the same shrine. They may pray for cures, solutions to life's problems, or fulfillment of desires.¹¹⁵

Among the Bedouin and rural people, charms, amulets and incantations are used for protection against evil spirits known as *jinn*s. The *jinn*s may determine the fate of humans, or simply create mischief. Within Western culture, they are known as "genies." Protection is also widely sought against the "evil eye," a belief that can be traced possibly to Egypt. The evil eye is seen as dangerous to children. Many people—including Bedouins and people in both rural and urban areas—wear jewelry or amulets designed to ward it off.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Yasin Al-Haj Saleh, "The Policy of Restricting Religious Manifestations and Symbols in Syria," 17 November 2010, <http://www.strescom.org/research/religious-symbols>

¹¹⁴ YaLibnan, "Syria: Crackdown on Christians Is Causing Jitters," 18 November 2010, <http://www.yalibnan.com/2010/11/18/syria-crackdown-on-christians-is-causing-jitters/>

¹¹⁵ Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, *Islamic Societies in Practice*, 2nd ed. (Gainesville, FL: Univ. Press of Florida, 2004).

¹¹⁶ Thomas Collelo, ed., *Syria: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1987), <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/sytoc.html>

Religion and Gender

The majority of visitors who pray at the shrines of saints are women, especially in rural areas. One reason for this may lie in the exclusion women experience in the formal practice of religion. For example, women must worship in separate areas of mosques. Many women will visit a mosque only when in bad health or in times of great need. Deeply traditional practices such as praying at shrines of saints are passed on from one generation to the next.¹¹⁷



© Doug Anderson
Umayyad Mosque, Aleppo

In Syria, women are pushing for an Islamic revival to counter the secular nature of the state. Operating partly through a secret Islamic women's society known as the Qubaisiate, women seek to promote Islam in Syrian public life. In studying and teaching the Quran, they are following a centuries-old tradition of female religious scholars, known as *sheikhas*. This tradition is known to be alive today only in Syria. At private meetings, women study Islam to better understand it, and then coax their husbands and other family members to strive for placing more value on Islamic principles in everyday life. Outwardly too, women are taking on a more active role where religious scholarship is concerned. By some estimates, the growth rate of madrassas (religious schools) for girls has overtaken that for boys.¹¹⁸

Although the government has banned other Islamist groups, it does not seem to want to risk a tremendous public outcry stemming from the arrest and imprisonment of Muslim wives and daughters. Yet the women remain cautious and meet secretly to avoid being monitored by government agents.

Women are not required by law to adhere to strict Islamic dress requirements. Syrian women wear varying styles of clothing in public. Some may choose to wear the hijab, or head scarf, while others will not. Such decisions are a matter of personal choice, but social pressure may play a role in these decisions.¹¹⁹ Syria has just taken the controversial step of banning full Islamic veils at both private and public universities.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Thomas Collelo, ed., *Syria: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1987), <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/sytoc.html>

¹¹⁸ Katherine Zoepf, "Islamic Revival in Syria Is Led by Women," *New York Times*, 29 August 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/29/world/middleeast/29syria.html>

¹¹⁹ Dana Kassab, "The Reasons Why," *Syria Today*, March 2011, <http://www.syria-today.com/index.php/focus/12267-the-reasons-why>

¹²⁰ Mail and Guardian Online, "Syria Bans Full Islamic Veil at Universities," 20 July 2010, <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2010-07-20-syria-bans-full-islamic-veil-at-universities>

Religious Holidays

Most of Syria's religious holidays and festivals revolve around Islamic holidays. Minority groups also celebrate their special occasions with enthusiasm. Many Muslim celebrations center on the five Islamic pillars of faith, which are the testament of faith (*shahadah*), praying five times daily (*salat*), the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*), fasting during Ramadan (*sawm*), and giving alms to the poor (*zakat*).



© Upyernoz / flickr.com
Ramadan flags

Ramadan

One of the most important religious holidays is the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, which commemorates Muhammad receiving his first revelation while meditating in the desert. The actual date changes each year because Islamic holidays are observed according to the lunar calendar rather than the Western solar calendar. The lunar calendar, 354 days, is shorter than the solar year. Under the solar calendar, Ramadan begins 11 days earlier each year. Ramadan is held the ninth month of the Muslim lunar calendar.

During Ramadan, Muslims fast every day from sunrise to sunset. This process of fasting is seen as a physical and spiritual cleansing process, and it is thought to strengthen self-discipline. During Ramadan, the devout abstain from eating, drinking, and other pleasures such as smoking during daylight hours. Only the elderly, the sick, and young children are exempt from the fast. Foreigners and non-Muslims should not eat, drink, or smoke in public during this time. Such behavior would be construed as rude and inconsiderate.¹²¹

Each evening after the first stars are visible in the night sky, the fast is broken with a lavish meal called *iftar*. The extended family gathers to pray, socialize, and eat late into the night, not only nourishing their bodies, but strengthening familial ties as well.¹²²

Because of these late-night social events, shops stay open late during Ramadan, and streets remain relatively calm until the shopping rush before the *iftar*. In the evenings, Syrian cities are abuzz with people who try to get seats in overflowing restaurants and cafes. In some cases, Syrians will not get to sleep until the *musaher* starts to walk around with his drum in the early hours of the morning to announce the start of a new day of fasting.¹²³

Eid al-Fitr

Muslims celebrate the end of Ramadan with a great feast, *Eid al-Fitr*, which lasts three days. People decorate their houses with ribbons, wear new clothing, exchange gifts such as sweets and toys, and visit friends. Local fairs are also held during this feast, replete with carnival rides and

¹²¹ MidEastweb.org, "The Muslim Holiday of Ramadan," 2001, <http://www.mideastweb.org/ramadan.htm>

¹²² ReligionFacts.org, "Eid Al-Fitr," 2011, <http://www.religionfacts.com/islam/holidays/fitr.htm>

¹²³ Travel Document Systems, "Syria: Culture," <http://www.traveldocs.com/sy/culture.htm>

fireworks. Music can be heard late into the night as Syrian Muslims take this opportunity to celebrate the good things in life.¹²⁴

Eid al-Adha

Eid al-Adha, the Feast of the Sacrifice, also falls after Ramadan and marks the end of the *hajj*. This celebration commemorates the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son Ishmael to God. The *Eid al-Adha* is held on the day when Muslims ideally should make their pilgrimage. During Ramadan and its concluding celebrations, the faithful are called on to renew their devotion to Allah.^{125, 126}

During this celebration, Muslims dress in their best clothing and perform the obligatory Eid prayers. Those who can afford to do so sacrifice domestic animals such as sheep and goats. The meat of these animals is then shared with those in need, as well as with family and friends.

Christmas and Easter

Syrian Christians celebrate Christmas and Easter with church services, family get-togethers, and special dinners. No large community festivals mark these celebrations, but food is always an important part of the events. Alawis also celebrate Christmas and Easter.^{127, 128}

Buildings of Worship

Of the many mosques and churches throughout Syria, one of the most notable is the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. This mosque was built where a 4th-century Christian church dedicated to John the Baptist was once located. The Umayyad Mosque still contains a shrine dedicated to him. The community Mosque of Mohi al-Din in Damascus is a popular pilgrimage site. The great Sufi mystic Sheikh Mohi al-Din al-Arabi is buried here. His writings supposedly influenced Dante when he wrote his visions of hell.¹²⁹

Churches in the Christian quarter of Damascus represent the various Christian denominations of Syria. One church, St. Paul's Chapel, is



© varunshiv / flickr.com
Tomb of John the Baptist

¹²⁴TravelMax, "Syria: Eid al-Fitr," http://www.istc.org/sisp/index.htm?fx=event&event_id=98599

¹²⁵ Encyclopædia Britannica Online, "Īd al-Adhā," 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/281649/Id-al-Adha>

¹²⁶ ReligionFacts.org, "Eid Al-Adha: Festival of Sacrifice," 2011, <http://www.religionfacts.com/islam/holidays/adha.htm>

¹²⁷ Taylor Middle School, "Christmas Customs Around the World: Syria," <http://library.taylor.k12.in.us/tms/pg2ab1.htm>

¹²⁸ Jennifer Mackenzie, "Celebrating Christmas the Syrian Way," Forward Magazine, 2 December 2010, <http://www.forwardsyria.com/story/359/Celebrating%20Christmas%20the%20Syrian%20way>

¹²⁹ Sacred-destinations.com, "Great Mosque of Damascus (Umayyad Mosque)," 30 June 2010, <http://www.sacred-destinations.com/syria/damascus-umayyad-mosque>

dedicated to the saint (St. Paul, formerly Saul of Tarsus) who preached in Damascus in the first century.¹³⁰

All religions must register with the government and get approval for their buildings of worship. In March 2011, the government closed down eight churches in the country for meeting in what they referred to as “house churches.” Generally, places of worship must be built as a separate facility. Converting an apartment and turning it into a place of worship may not be allowed under current regulations.¹³¹



© james_gordon / flickr.com
Man praying,
Umayyad Mosque

Behavior in Places of Worship

If you wish to visit a mosque, it is a good idea to request permission. Some mosques are out of bounds to tourists. Conservative clothing should always be worn in a mosque.

Exchange 1: May I enter the mosque?

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

When visiting an Eastern Orthodox church, it is also appropriate to dress conservatively, with arms and legs covered, and to speak softly. In these churches, it is forbidden to go behind the decorated screen that separates the sanctuary and the nave. Also, while in a church, men may have to remove any head coverings; women should cover their heads with a scarf while in a church.

Exchange 2: Do I need to cover my head?

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

When in a mosque, the face, hands, and feet are cleansed according to preordained rituals. Shoes should be removed before entering a mosque or even a shrine.

Exchange 3: Must I take off my shoes inside the mosque?

| | | |
|----------|---|--|
| Soldier: | Must I take off my shoes inside the mosque? | laazem ishlaH SubaaTee jowaat il jaame'? |
|----------|---|--|

¹³⁰ Sacred-destinations.com, “Chapel of St. Paul (Bab Kisan), Damascus,” 2010, <http://www.sacred-destinations.com/syria/damascus-chapel-of-paul-bab-kisan.htm>

¹³¹ George Whitten, “Eight Churches Shut Down in Syria,” 20 March 2011, <http://infidelsarecool.com/2011/03/syria-cracking-down-closes-8-churches/>

| | | |
|--------|------|----|
| Local: | Yes. | eh |
|--------|------|----|

One should not touch any books or banners while in a mosque. It is also not acceptable to talk to those who are praying or to ask them questions while they are praying. Similarly, do not walk in front of someone praying; this is thought to invalidate their prayers.¹³²

Exchange 4: When do you pray?

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

¹³² Gregory Rodgers, "Mosque Etiquette: When Visiting Mosques," 2011, <http://goseasia.about.com/od/travelplanning/a/mosque-dos-and-donts.htm>

Chapter 2 Assessment

1. Religion plays a central role in the government of Syria.
FALSE
Syria is a secular state that has no recognized state religion. Most Syrians are Muslim, but other religious groups exist.
2. Women in Syria enjoy relative equality with men.
TRUE
Women are guaranteed full and equal participation in society by the constitution. Although inequalities do exist, women are free to participate in all aspects of social, economic, and political life.
3. The majority of Muslims in Syria belong to the Sunni sect.
TRUE
Sunni Muslims represent 74% of the Muslim population. Druze, Shi'a, and Alawi Muslims represent about 13% of the population.
4. The Druze religion is based on Christianity.
FALSE
The Druze religion originated from Shi'a Islam. However, because of Druze religious practices, most Muslims do not recognize the Druze as practicing Islam.
5. It is never legal for Christians and Muslims to intermarry.
FALSE
A Muslim woman is forbidden to marry a Christian man. However, it is permissible for a Christian woman to marry a Muslim man.

CHAPTER 3: TRADITIONS

Introduction

Syria has a long cultural tradition. In general, Syrians place a high value on family, religion, education, self-discipline, and respect. Although Syrians tend to value identification with their religion, because the majority of the country are Sunni Muslims, strong feelings toward cultural unity also exist.^{133, 134}



© Charles Roffey
Sheppard watching his flock

Because of their language and bonds to the history of the region, Syrians are often referred to as Arabs. However, Syrians are a blend of the Syriac groups and ethnic Greeks who lived in the region. Non-Arabic groups, such as Kurds, also make up part of the population.¹³⁵

Syrians have a well-deserved reputation for being friendly and hospitable people. They are very sociable and often go out together in groups. Syrians tend to like highly decorated houses, bright clothing, and trappings such as fancy cars. Syrian homes are lively with noise, music, and conversation, and food is a central part of interaction.¹³⁶

Religion plays a major role in the lives of Syrians, whose basic values and traditions tend to follow traditional Islamic beliefs. Men are most likely to be the authority figures in a family setting, particularly in rural areas. Women are more likely to be responsible for taking care of the family. Elderly people are highly valued and respected in most Syrian households.¹³⁷

Traditional Economy

The jobs that people hold depend on where they live, the influence of their families, their educational backgrounds, and their family customs. Traditionally, many Syrians have farmed, but by 2010, agriculture accounted for only 17.6% of Syria's GDP.¹³⁸ In rural areas, however, agriculture and herding are still primary occupations. In the cities, people often work in the petroleum or textile industries, as well as in small businesses or the service industry.¹³⁹

¹³³ Café-syria, "Syria Culture," 2006 <http://www.cafe-syria.com/Culture.htm>

¹³⁴ Countries and Their Cultures, "Syria," 2011, <http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Syria.html>

¹³⁵ Imninalu.net, "Myths, Hypotheses and Facts Concerning the Origin of Peoples: Origin and Identity of the Arabs," n.d., <http://www.imninalu.net/myths-Arabs.htm>

¹³⁶ Coleman South, *Culture Shock! Syria: A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish, 2011).

¹³⁷ SpainExchange, "Syrian Arab Republic," 2010, <http://www.spainexchange.com/guide/SY-culture.htm>

¹³⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, "Syria: Economy 2011," in *The World Factbook*, 12 January 2011. http://www.theodora.com/wfbcurren/syria/syria_economy.html

¹³⁹ Thomas Collelo, ed., "The Economy," in *Syria: A Country Study*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1987, <http://countrystudies.us/syria/39.htm>

These days, most men work in the service sector (21%) with construction (18.2%) and industry (17.7) not far behind. Women, on the other hand, work primarily in the service sector (56%) followed by agriculture (23%). Only 8.7% of women are employed in the manufacturing sector.¹⁴⁰ Although women have traditionally been underrepresented in the business sector, this is beginning to change. More and more women are taking a leading role in family companies compared with even 25 years ago.¹⁴¹



© Kaptan Jungteerapanich
Syrian women at market

Many Syrians also still sell crafts and foods, in addition to their regular jobs. Salaries are not high, and people must often work two or three jobs to survive. Numerous Syrians have earned professional degrees and work as doctors, teachers, or engineers. Between 24 to 45% of women holding jobs work in the agricultural sector.¹⁴² Currently, Syrian women make up between one-fourth to one-third of the entire labor force.¹⁴³

Besides agriculture and farming, crafts are a mainstay of the Syrian economy. Today, however, craftsmanship is not practiced with the same dedication as in the past, and craftwork is often manufactured. For centuries, ceramic articles and pottery for storage of olive oil, water, or food were made from natural clay deposits. These pots were traditionally sun-cured and baked in pits. However, many of the ceramic goods sold today are manufactured, rather than handcrafted.^{144,}
¹⁴⁵

Textile manufacturing remains an important part of the Syrian economy. Embroidery and jewelry crafts have long flourished in Syria and are still widely practiced. Silver and gold jewelry from Roman times have been unearthed, and jewelry remains popular with locals and tourists. Bedouin women still maintain their tradition of weaving brightly colored rugs and cushions. Bedouins also craft knives, jewelry, and textiles.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁰ Syria Today, “Syria’s Average Monthly Salary at SYP 11,133,” May 2010, <http://www.syria-today.com/index.php/may-2010/558-business-news/7746-syrias-average-monthly-salary-at-syp-11133>

¹⁴¹ Nadia Muhanna, “A Woman’s Touch,” Syria Today, February 2010, <http://syria-today.com/index.php/focus/6390-a-womans-touch>

¹⁴² Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Sustainable Development Department, “Women, Agriculture, and Rural Development,” 1994, <http://www.fao.org/docrep/x0176e/x0176e04.htm>

¹⁴³ UN Development Programme, “The Economic Status of Syria: A Focus on Women’s Economic Participation,” 2007, http://www.undp.org.sy/files/rebort%20english_1%20pdf.pdf

¹⁴⁴ Jessica Sarhan, “Following the Craft Route,” Syria Today, 3 Feb 2010, <http://www.syriagate.com/syria-news-10/2/syria-Following-the-Craft-Route>

¹⁴⁵ Obaida Hamad, “A Tradition Forged in Steel,” Syria Today, 10 February 2010, <http://www.syriagate.com/syria-news-10/2/Syria-traditional-metal-handicraft-industry.htm>

¹⁴⁶ Café-syria, “Syria Culture,” 2006, <http://www.cafe-syria.com/Culture.htm>

Formulaic Codes of Politeness

Syrians are very friendly and hospitable to visitors. Interactions between people almost always begin with polite greetings and inquiries into each other’s health or their family’s health.¹⁴⁷



© Charles Roffey
Syrian Men

Exchange 5: Good morning.

| | | |
|----------|---------------|--------------------|
| Soldier: | Good morning. | SabaaH il Khayr |
| Local: | Good morning. | SabaaH il Kheyraat |

A greeting will often be accompanied by a handshake or a bow with the right hand placed over the heart, which conveys respect. U.S. soldiers should limit their physical contact to a simple handshake.¹⁴⁸

Exchange 6: Good afternoon.

| | | |
|----------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Soldier: | Good afternoon. | masaa il Khayr |
| Local: | Good afternoon. | masaa il Khayraat |

If you enter a shop, you should greet the shopkeepers and say a few words, even if in English. The Syrians will appreciate the courtesy and goodwill.

Exchange 7: Good evening.

| | | |
|----------|---------------|-------------------|
| Soldier: | Good evening. | masaa il Khayr |
| Local: | Good evening. | masaa il Khayraat |

Greetings in Arabic are more formal than in English, and each has a reciprocal response. Foreigners are not expected to know all the usual responses. But if you know one or two, it will be greatly appreciated. Good-byes, along with initial greetings, may be quite drawn out.

Exchange 8: Good night.

| | | |
|----------|-------------|-------------------|
| Soldier: | Good night. | tuSbaH ’ala Khayr |
| Local: | Good night. | wo inte min ahluk |

Syrian men and women often relax by simply enjoying animated conversation in groups. They may gather in parks or other common areas to chat while children are playing. Usually groups of friends walking or sitting together will be of the same sex. They may greet each other and hold

¹⁴⁷ Manitoba’s Office of Rural and Northern Health, “Multicultural Reference Guide: Etiquette and Religion,” October 2006, http://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/multi_sec/pdf/multicultural_guide_web.pdf

¹⁴⁸ U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, “Arab Cultural Awareness: 58 Factsheets,” January 2006, <http://www.fas.org/irp/agency/army/arabculture.pdf>

hands or walk arm-in-arm, whether men or women; these gestures imply friendship.¹⁴⁹ Widely used greetings among Syrians include “my brother,” “my sister,” or “my dearest.”

Exchange 9: How are you?

| | | |
|----------|------------------|-------------|
| Soldier: | How are you? | shlonak? |
| Local: | Fine, very well. | 'aal ikteer |

Do not shake hands or make physical contact in public with a member of the opposite sex. Kissing or holding hands in public is only acceptable between members of the same sex.¹⁵⁰

When meeting someone for the first time, use formal manners. Address people by their professional titles. With those who are close to your own age, it is appropriate to be less formal than with elders. However, in all situations, be sensitive and polite.



© Kaptan Jungteerapanich
Syrian Family

Exchange 10: Are you doing well? (informal)

| | | |
|----------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Soldier: | Hi, Mr. Shaamee. | marHabaa sayed shaamee |
| Local: | Hello! | ahlayn |
| Soldier: | Are you doing well? | shlon aHwaalak, imneeH? |
| Local: | Yes. | eh |

Always ask about family and health. Men should avoid asking specifically about the women in the family, but it is appropriate to ask about the family in general.

Exchange 11: How is your family?

| | | |
|----------|---------------------------------|-----------------|
| Soldier: | How is your family? | shlon ahlak? |
| Local: | They are doing fine, thank you. | imnaaH, shukran |

Syrians greatly enjoy the art of conversation as a way to relax and establish or maintain social ties. Visitors, however, should avoid sensitive conversation topics, such as religion or politics. Tactfully avoid discussing Israel or the president of Syria. Also, it is not appropriate to joke about death, illness, or poverty.

¹⁴⁹ Culture Crossing, “Syria: Personal Space and Touching,” n.d., http://www.culturecrossing.net/basics_business_student_details.php?Id=9&CID=199

¹⁵⁰ Culture Crossing, “Syria: Greetings,” n.d., http://www.culturecrossing.net/basics_business_student_details.php?Id=7&CID=199

Dress

Syrians tend to dress modestly. Women, especially, wear conservative attire. Skimpy clothing is considered offensive to many local people. Foreign women should wear clothing that covers them well. When entering a mosque, both men and women be dressed modestly, with arms and shoulders covered. Women should wear a head scarf.^{151, 152}



© Charles Roffey
Common dress

Exchange 12: How should I dress?

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

Clothing styles for Syrian people vary according to region or ethnic background. Women in rural areas may wear decorations on their dresses, and men may wear long robes and head wraps. In the cities, clothing styles are more modern. Women typically wear modest dresses in a variety of colors. Many urban women wear heavy makeup and jewelry, and they may dress in jeans or pants. However, they tend to avoid clothing that exposes the upper arms or bare legs. Syrian women generally do not wear shorts or sleeveless shirts. Fabrics may be brightly colored, with elaborate embroidery. Men in urban areas may dress in robes, or they may wear Western-style clothing, including jackets, sweaters, or pants.¹⁵³

Exchange 13: Is this acceptable to wear?

| | | |
|----------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Soldier: | Is this acceptable to wear? | hadaa imnaaseb la ilebsoh? |
| Local: | Yes. | eh |

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

Hospitality

If you are invited to someone's home, you should observe the traditional patterns of behavior. In most homes, Muslim or Christian, it is common social practice that men and women gather separately. They will then meet at the table, and the host will welcome guests with a toast, typically accompanied by a nonalcoholic drink. The guest should reciprocate with a toast, wishing good health to the host and his family. The guest could also, if appropriate, congratulate the host and family on a birth or marriage.

¹⁵¹ eGuide Travel, "Syria Travel," 2009, <http://www.traveleguides.com/syria.php>

¹⁵² Hounslow Jamia Masjid and Islamic Center, "Etiquettes of Visiting a Mosque," 2009, <http://www.hounslowmasjid.co.uk/page2/page10/page30/page30.html>

¹⁵³ Tripod, "Syrian Clothing," n.d., <http://aplummerz.tripod.com/id20.html>

Exchange 14: I appreciate your hospitality.

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

Another courtesy is to graciously acknowledge the food offered by the host.

Exchange 15: What is the name of this dish?

| | | |
|----------|--------------------------------|---------------------|
| Soldier: | What is the name of this dish? | sho isim hal akleh? |
| Local: | This is shawarma. | shaawormaa |

When the meal begins, guests should accept as much food as possible. Saying “no thanks” can be seen as offensive to the host.¹⁵⁴ Food should be eaten with the right hand, never the left, which is considered unclean. Soft food may be scooped up with flatbread, or food may be grabbed with the hand, rather than a spoon or fork. People may also eat while seated on the ground or the floor.



© الشرايعلا شرا لايند / flickr.com
Syrian Breakfast

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 with the knowledge that the host is honored to have him there.

Exchange 16: The food is very good.

| | | |
|----------|------------------------|----------------------|
| Soldier: | The food is very good. | il akel Tayeb ikteer |
| Local: | It's <i>Taseeyeh</i> . | hay tas-eyeh |

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



© Imrishale / flicker.com
Baklava

When you are invited to dinner or into a family’s home, it is not expected but it is appropriate to take a gift. Do not, however, offer food or alcohol. Similarly, avoid offering money to children. Do not expect profuse thanks for gifts you bring. The host may not open the present until after you have left, because doing so might be construed as a sign of impatience or greed.

¹⁵⁴ Terry Carter, Lara Dunston, and Andrew Humphreys, *Lonely Planet: Syria & Lebanon* (Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 2004).

Cuisine

Syria's multicultural past is evident in its cuisine. Syrian cuisine is tasty and often combines European dishes with Eastern spices or adapts foods from other cultures. For example, a traditional pastry called *batlawā*, similar to the Greek *baklava*, has a French influence.¹⁵⁵



© Mohammad Badi Fattah

Exchange 17: The food tastes so good.

| | | |
|----------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Soldier: | The food tastes so good. | il akel Ta'moh Tayeb ikteer |
| Local: | Thank you. | shukran |

A typical Syrian meal begins with appetizers, and proceeds to other courses. There may be a wide range of foods, including pickled vegetables, dips (hummus and *baba ghanoug*, or smoky eggplant), and meats prepared in different ways. *Tabbouleh*, a popular salad, is made with bulgur wheat, tomato, parsley, lemon, and onion. Appetizers are often followed by lamb, chicken, or fish prepared in different ways and served with salad and rice. Baked trout with almonds is served in regions where there are trout farms; other fish, such as sea bass, comes from the Mediterranean. A dish called *farooj mishwee* consists of barbecued chicken served with a garlic sauce that has been whipped to a mayonnaise-like consistency. A popular Bedouin specialty is a whole-cooked lamb served over pine nuts and rice. This dish is reserved for special occasions such as the birth of a son or the arrival of an honored guest.¹⁵⁶

Desserts may consist of fresh fruit, pastries soaked in honey and baked with nuts, or other creations. *Halawat al-Jibna* is a doughy pastry, topped with syrup and filled with cream cheese. Dates are often used to sweeten other desserts or eaten alone. Puddings made with farina or rice and flavored with rose water, orange flower water, cinnamon, and aniseed are often enjoyed as a snack between meals.¹⁵⁷

There are a variety of drinks to choose from. Turkish coffee—a rich, sweet, syrupy drink—is often enjoyed after a meal. Tea is also popular, not only after meals but at any time of the day or evening.¹⁵⁸ Although alcohol is not widely consumed, it is available at tourist hotels and certain restaurants.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ A Taste of Syria, "Syrian Cuisine," 2009, <http://aplummerz.tripod.com/id20.html>

¹⁵⁶ A Taste of Syria, "Syrian Cuisine," 2009, <http://aplummerz.tripod.com/id20.html>

¹⁵⁷ Sonia Uvezian, *Recipes and Remembrances from an Eastern Mediterranean Kitchen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999).

¹⁵⁸ Erika Linden Green-Rafeh, "Syrian Drinks: Repast in a Teacup," Pilot Guides, http://www.pilotguides.com/destination_guide/middle-east-north-africa/syria-jordan-lebanon/syrian_drink.php

¹⁵⁹ Erika Linden Green-Rafeh, "Syrian Drinks: Repast in a Teacup," Pilot Guides, http://www.pilotguides.com/destination_guide/middle-east-north-africa/syria-jordan-lebanon/syrian_drink.php

Nonreligious Ceremonies, Holidays, and Festivals

Political holidays celebrate the nation’s independence and accomplishments. These holidays include Revolution Day (8 March), which marks the Baath Party’s ascension to power in 1963; Independence Day (17 April), which marks the end of French rule in Syria in 1946; Martyrs’ Day (6 May), which honors Syrians who fought the Ottomans in World War I; Correctionist Movement Day (16 November), which celebrates the government overthrow that resulted in Hafez al-Assad’s rise to power is celebrated; and New Year’s Day (1 January), which is an official holiday.¹⁶⁰



© Charles Roffey
Men dressed in traditional dress

While Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr are Muslim religious celebrations, non-Muslims enjoy the festive atmosphere and carnivals that spring up. Well-wishing is always appreciated.¹⁶¹

Exchange 18: Happy Eid!

| | | |
|----------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Soldier: | Happy Eid! | kul seneh wo inte saalem! |
| Local: | Happy Eid to you too. | wo inte saalem |

Various festivals are held throughout the year in Syria. Palmyra’s Desert Festival is held in the spring. This festival includes exhibits and performances as well as music, folk dancing, crafts, and horse and camel races. Later in August, the annual Mahabba Festival in Latakia is held. This festival features cultural activities such as art shows and sports competitions and draws huge crowds of tourists.¹⁶²

Social Events

Marriage and Engagement

Family is the core of life in Syria, and marriage is a major social event that cements family ties. It is a bond between families more than individuals. Women are pressured to marry young, and may not be able to choose whom to marry. Parents often choose or approve partners for their children, especially among rural families.^{163, 164} Even men or women who choose their own partner will almost always marry within their social class and religious or ethnic group.

¹⁶⁰ Ivan Mannheim, *Syria and Lebanon Handbook* (Bath, England: Footprint Handbooks, 2001), 64–65.

¹⁶¹ Hoteltravel.com, “Syria: Events and Festivals,” 1999, <http://www.hoteltravel.com/syria/guides/festivals.htm>

¹⁶² Frommers, “Palmyra Traditional Festival,” Whatsonwhen, 2011, http://www.whatsonwhen.com/sisp/index.htm?fx=event&event_id=168600

¹⁶³ Alia Turki Al-Rabeao, “Arranged Marriages a Thriving Business,” World Pulse, 22 October 2010, <http://www.worldpulse.com/node/29978>

¹⁶⁴ Women Worldwide Advancing Freedom and Equality, “Syria—Arranged Marriages a Thriving Business—Cautions,” 31 March 2009, http://www.wafe-women.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=439&Itemid=36

Once a couple has agreed that they want to marry, the two fathers meet to discuss all aspects of the marriage, including the dowry and the *maraseem al-zawaj*, the rituals of the marriage. The time, date, and location of the wedding are also decided on. The parents of the groom are responsible for all wedding expenses.¹⁶⁵



© Charles Roffey
Syrians

The engagement officially begins at the moment the couple agrees to marry. While engaged, the couple may meet with each other's families in order to get to know them better. The extended families also meet and exchange gifts and hospitality.¹⁶⁶

Engaged couples often meet under supervision of a male member of the woman's family. Women are expected to uphold the family's honor, and being alone with a fiancé could be compromising. Unlike in Western countries, it is very rare for a couple in Syria to live together before marriage.

Muslim and Christian Weddings

For Muslims and Christians, some traditions vary and some are similar. Syrians are identified by their family ties and not by their religion. Whether Christian or Muslim, family associations run deep. A person is always the father of "someone" or the daughter of "someone." However, marriage customs within the religions do differ.¹⁶⁷

The Christian Wedding

It is common for Christians to marry in a church. Friends and relatives are invited to the wedding ceremony. After the wedding ceremony, friends and family gather, along with the bride and groom, at a reception.¹⁶⁸



© Hovic / flickr.com
Wedding, Aleppo

¹⁶⁵ DLIFLC, "Syria in Perspective: An Orientation Guide," 20 October 2005, http://www.nh-tems.com/documents/Cultural_Awareness/syria_orientation.pdf

¹⁶⁶ DLIFLC, "Syria in Perspective: An Orientation Guide," 20 October 2005, http://www.nh-tems.com/documents/Cultural_Awareness/syria_orientation.pdf

¹⁶⁷ DLIFLC, "Syria in Perspective: An Orientation Guide," 20 October 2005, http://www.nh-tems.com/documents/Cultural_Awareness/syria_orientation.pdf

¹⁶⁸ DLIFLC, "Syria in Perspective: An Orientation Guide," 20 October 2005, http://www.nh-tems.com/documents/Cultural_Awareness/syria_orientation.pdf

Exchange 19: Congratulations on your wedding!

| | | |
|----------|----------------------------------|------------------|
| Soldier: | Congratulations on your wedding! | mabrook il 'ers! |
| Local: | Thank you. | shukran |

The Muslim Wedding

Muslims do not marry in a mosque. Instead, an *imam* meets with all parties, including the parents.¹⁶⁹ This meeting usually takes place in the imam's office or at the home of the prospective groom, and at this time the marriage contracts are reviewed to make sure they are valid. Particular *suras* (chapters) or *ayat* (verses) from the Quran are recited. The documents legalizing the marriage are signed. The prospective bride and groom return separately to their respective homes. The next day there are separate parties for the men and the women.^{170, 171}

Exchange 20: I wish you both happiness.

| | | |
|----------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Soldier: | I wish you both happiness. | betmanaalkum il sa'aadeh |
| Local: | We are honored. | ilnaa il sharaf |

Polygamy is permitted among Muslims, and men may have as many as four wives. However, shari'a requires the husband to be financially secure enough to take care of each wife equally well. Although polygamy fell out of favor in the 1960s the practice is becoming more popular, especially among young people. It should be noted that in Syria, a man wishing to take more than one wife must receive court permission.^{172, 173}

Funerals

Funerals include parting rites that accompany the moment of death and mourning for the deceased. In the parting rites, a prayer leader or holy man attends to the dying person and reads scriptures. The death is followed with rituals to express mourning and respect for the dead. These rituals include a vigil, funeral procession and services, burial, condolences, and a funeral meal. The funeral banquet is held after burial in Christian communities, and one week after a death in Muslim communities.



© james_gordon_los_angeles / flickr.com
Cemetery, Damascus

¹⁶⁹ An *imam* is a Muslim prayer leader.

¹⁷⁰ Confetti, "Muslim Weddings: Your Essential Guide to the Muslim Wedding Ceremony," n.d., http://www.confetti.co.uk/article/view/5056-8180-0-Muslim_weddings_Religious_Wedding.do

¹⁷¹ DLIFLC, "Syria in Perspective: An Orientation Guide," 20 October 2005, http://www.nh-tems.com/documents/Cultural_Awareness/syria_orientation.pdf

¹⁷² M. Houthout, U. Jamil, and N. Ali, "A Quranic Perspective on Polygamy," IslamiCity, 10 April 2007, <http://www.islamicity.com/articles/Articles.asp?ref=IC0704-3263>

¹⁷³ DP News, "Polygamy Made in Syria," 9 August 2010, <http://www.dp-news.com/pages/detail.aspx?l=2&articleid=53337>

Exchange 21: I would like to give my condolences.

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

For a Muslim who is near death, a *mullah* is invited. He reads from the Quran. Upon death, family and friends recite prayers in the mosque for the soul of the deceased.¹⁷⁴

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

Exchange 22: Please be strong.

| | | |
|----------|-------------------|--------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Please be strong. | min faDhlkum konoo aawaayaa |
| Local: | We will try. | HanHaawel |

Muslim burial takes place, if possible, before sundown on the same day as death. The body is washed and prepared for burial by members of the family, according to rules of gender and kinship. After the burial, there are 40 days of mourning.¹⁷⁵

In the period following the death of a loved one, visits are made to support the grieving family. Out of neighborliness, friendship, or kinship, people express their condolences and lend their support to each other to restore the social fabric.

Gestures

Certain gestures carry a lot of meaning. Some of the gestures described below will help you understand the full message being communicated.^{176, 177}

- An outstretched hand and click of the wrist means “What do you want?”
- Raised eyebrows and a slight sudden tilt back of the head means “no.” Making the same gesture with a click of the tongue means “no” as well.
- A circular motion to the right with an open right hand may indicate a question.

¹⁷⁴ Mohamed Ebrahim Siala, “Authentic Step by Step Illustrated Janazah Guide,” Mission Islam, n.d., <http://www.missionislam.com/knowledge/janazahstepbystep.htm>

¹⁷⁵ Bilal Abu Aisha, “Funeral Rites and Regulations in Islam,” Mission Islam, n.d., <http://www.missionislam.com/knowledge/funeral.htm>

¹⁷⁶ U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, “Arab Cultural Awareness: 58 Factsheets,” January 2006, <http://www.fas.org/irp/agency/army/arabculture.pdf>

¹⁷⁷ Carol Fleming, “Understanding and Interpreting Correctly the Non-Verbal Gestures,” 17 September 2010, teachmideast.com. <http://www.teachmideast.com/article/understanding-and-interpreting-correctly-the-non-verbal-gestures/20/>

- When a shopkeeper sketches a comma in the air with his right hand, he is indicating “half.”
- All five fingers pointing upward means you should wait.
- If an official motions as if to draw a line on his left palm, he wants to examine your documents.
- Placing the right palm on the chest with a slight bow of the head and closing the eyes means “Thank you, in the name of Allah.”

Dos and Don'ts

Do use your entire *right* hand only to summon a person. Keep your palm down and wave downward.

Do keep your feet down and your soles on the ground.

Do, if you are a man, stand when a woman enters the room.

Do stand when new guests arrive at a social gathering or when an elderly or high-ranking official enters the room.

Don't summon women if you are a male soldier! Let a female soldier do that.

Don't use the Western way of beckoning with one finger. It is very offensive.

Don't point to anybody with a finger; use the entire *right* hand instead.

Don't make the “A-OK” signal (circle with index finger and thumb of one hand); this gesture may be misinterpreted as obscene.

Don't point upward with the middle finger. It is obscene in the U.S. and equally so in Syria.

Don't use obscene or indecent language within earshot of Syrian citizens. Many are familiar with American slang.

Don't cross your legs when sitting in a chair or show the bottom of your feet to someone.

Don't lean against a wall when speaking with another person.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ Margaret K. (Omar) Nydell, *Understanding Arabs: A Guide for Westerners*, 3rd ed. (Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 2002), 56–57, 80–83.

Chapter 3 Assessment

1. Polygamy is legal in Syria.
TRUE
Although it is legal, men must get permission from a court before taking more than one wife. In recent years, polygamy has become more popular.
2. Honor killings are legal in Syria.
FALSE
A man convicted of an honor killing must spend a minimum of 5 to 7 years in prison under new judicial guidelines.
3. Young Syrians may choose spouses completely free from family pressures.
FALSE
Although not as common as in the past, arranged marriages are not unusual, especially among rural families.
4. Agriculture is the main industry in Syria.
FALSE
Agriculture constitutes only about 17% of the economic sector.
5. Syrians are generally very hospitable.
TRUE
Syrians are a friendly people who welcome visitors. Syrians will frequently welcome guests into their home and offer them something to eat or drink.

CHAPTER 4: URBAN LIFE

Urban Economy

Almost 56% of Syrians live in cities, and the urban economy is in transition.¹⁷⁹ City dwellers earn their living through both modern and traditional commerce.

Most Syrian cities still have an old (or ancient) part of town that includes businesses and residences. *Souks* (markets) offer food, crafts, and other goods for sale, just as in the past. Many people participate in the preparation, manufacture, or sale of this merchandise. Modern-day craftsmen may come to *souks* to sell their handicrafts such as clothing, jewelry, decorative items, blown glass artifacts, and leather products. This economy, however, is changing with the advent of technology.



© Riyaad Minty
Urban streets, Damascus

The modern economy in Syrian cities is still developing, and the infrastructure and society that support it are not yet cohesive. The modern economy, for instance, is very centralized, regulated, and sluggish. A professional middle class is forming but very slowly. The people of this new class are from varying social backgrounds and do not necessarily share similar class values. Many favor modernity, science, and technology more than traditional beliefs. At the other end of the spectrum, people are trying to stay connected to older traditions that are less connected to modern, changing values.¹⁸⁰

The urban lower class is also very mixed and includes both skilled and unskilled workers. Industrial workers have been employed mostly in Damascus and Aleppo. Because of more recent industrialization, increasing numbers of rural people are moving to these and other cities to find jobs in business and industry.^{181, 182}

Wages and salaries vary greatly in the cities. Public sector employees earn more than private-sector employees. The highest wages are in the service sector.¹⁸³ Unemployment is high

¹⁷⁹ Central Intelligence Agency, "Syria: People," in *The World Factbook*, 11 March 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

¹⁸⁰ Thomas Collelo, ed., "Towns," in *Syria: A Country Study*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1987, <http://countrystudies.us/syria/26.htm>

¹⁸¹ All Headline News, "Go-Slow Reforms, Repression Keep Lid on Potential Turmoil in Syria," 17 February 2011, <http://www.allheadlinenews.com/briefs/articles/90034758?Go-slow%20reforms%2C%20repression%20keep%20lid%20on%20potential%20turmoil%20in%20Syria>

¹⁸² Thomas Collelo, ed., "Towns," in *Syria: A Country Study*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1987, <http://countrystudies.us/syria/26.htm>

¹⁸³ Syria Today, "Syria's Average Monthly Salary at SYP 11,133," May 2010, <http://www.syria-today.com/index.php/may-2010/558-business-news/7746-syrias-average-monthly-salary-at-syp-11133>

especially among the young.¹⁸⁴ Some people work two or three jobs in order to survive. Others are fortunate enough to get good jobs in the oil or textile industries. People with these jobs may earn enough to be part of Syria's urban middle class.¹⁸⁵

Housing

Cities are often made up of architecturally distinct sections that reflect different ways of life from different periods of history going back to Roman, Greek, and Ottoman times. Modern sections of a city contrast with the older areas. Many houses in these newer sections have been built by French architectural firms, and some have a modern, European look.¹⁸⁶



© Jon Martin
Detailed architecture

In cities, neighborhoods have traditionally been populated according to the background of residents, which is determined by religion, ethnicity, nationality, economic status, or way of life (such as nomadic). This traditional pattern has changed somewhat with the growth of suburbs. As new sections of a city are built, many wealthy families from the older parts move to these areas. Thus, these newer areas are segregated by economic class rather than ethnicity or religion.¹⁸⁷

Perhaps the most common type of housing is the traditional courtyard house. Such houses have a small number of openings on the outside and a large number of openings to an inner courtyard. Though the size and luxury of the house varies, all share a common feature. The courtyard provides privacy, which allows for the building of strong family ties and strong ties to the house itself. The inner courtyard is the center of family life, and all other rooms give onto this central gathering space. Traditional houses are usually no more than two stories tall, and bedrooms are on the upper level.¹⁸⁸

A number of modern architectural styles are found in the cities. This may be especially obvious in some of the new office buildings.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, "Syria: Economy," in *The World Factbook*, 11 March 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

¹⁸⁵ All Headline News, "Go-Slow Reforms, Repression Keep Lid on Potential Turmoil in Syria," 17 February 2011, <http://www.allheadlinenews.com/briefs/articles/90034758?Go-slow%20reforms%2C%20repression%20keep%20lid%20on%20potential%20turmoil%20in%20Syria>

¹⁸⁶ Thomas Collelo, ed., "Towns," in *Syria: A Country Study*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1987, <http://countrystudies.us/syria/26.htm>

¹⁸⁷ Thomas Collelo, ed., "Towns," in *Syria: A Country Study*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1987, <http://countrystudies.us/syria/26.htm>

¹⁸⁸ Meda-corporus.net, "Typologies of Traditional Buildings in Syria," n.d., http://www.meda-corporus.net/libros/pdf_manuel/syria_eng/ats_eng_2.pdf

¹⁸⁹ Modern Architecture Design, "Syria Modern Design," January 2011, <http://www.architecturemodernidea.com/syria+modern+design.html>

Because of the rapid influx of people into the cities, more than half of all urban growth is found in “informal settlements.” However, in contrast to many other countries, these settlements are populated by both the urban poor and middle-class families. The rise of such settlements has meant a loss of control over the shape and organization of cities in Syria.¹⁹⁰

Banking and Credit

The banking system in Syria has long been state-owned. Although state ownership is changing gradually, banks are still highly centralized and subject to government controls. The Commercial Bank of Syria (CBS), for instance, is the only bank allowed to exchange money. Branches of the CBS are present in all major towns. Regulations for transactions vary at different branches of the CBS. Some charge a commission for changing money and others don't.



© Martijn Munneke
Central Bank of Syria

Exchange 23: Do you accept U.S. currency?

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

Banks (along with government offices and many businesses) are usually closed on Fridays. On other weekdays, they usually close early, by 12:30 or 2:00 p.m. ATMs are becoming more prevalent in the cities, especially Damascus. However, a number of towns still have no ATMs, including Palmyra, Hama, Homs, and Bosra. Machines are not Cirrus- or Maestro-enabled at this time, but visitors can get an advance on a Visa or MasterCard.¹⁹¹

It is becoming difficult to cash traveler's checks in Syria. Some banks will cash them, provided you have the bank receipt with the check numbers detailed on it. Exchange offices do not cash traveler's checks. Major credit cards are increasingly accepted by travel agencies and hotels, but they are not accepted at most restaurants. There is a surcharge of 10% on all transactions because they must be processed in Jordan until Visa and MasterCard receive permission to operate directly in Syria. Day-to-day expenses should be paid in Syrian pounds (the official currency).¹⁹²

Exchange 24: Can you give me change for this?

| | | |
|----------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Soldier: | Can you give me change for this? | bete-der teSruflee hay? |
|----------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|

¹⁹⁰ Peter Ross, “Urban Planners Unite: Planning a New Living Space,” Syria Today, June 2009, <http://www.syria-today.com/index.php/june-2009/342-other/1711-urban-planners-unite-planning-a-new-living-space->

¹⁹¹ Terry Carter, Lara Dunstan, and Amelia Thomas, *Syria & Lebanon* (Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 2008).

¹⁹² Terry Carter, Lara Dunstan, and Amelia Thomas, *Syria & Lebanon* (Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 2008).

| | | |
|--------|-----|-----|
| Local: | No. | laa |
|--------|-----|-----|

Refugees

Syria has one of the largest urban refugee populations in the world.¹⁹³ Refugees are mainly from Palestine (approximately 557,000) and Iraq (1.2 million).¹⁹⁴ The Iraqi refugees have been entering Syria more than any other country in the region since the beginning of military operations in Iraq in 2003.¹⁹⁵ Syria has traditionally allowed other Arab nationals visa-free entry into the country. However, in 2007 Syria required Iraqis to obtain visas before entering. Since 2008, the Syrians have strictly enforced entry visa requirements and have rejected record numbers of applicants.¹⁹⁶



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Iraqi refugees, Damascus

Palestinian refugees in Syria are allowed to hold jobs, but they may not vote. They have access to government services (hospitals, universities, schools). The UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) provides services that complement those of the Syrian government, such as environmental health and sewage services. In most refugee camps, shelter and sanitation services need improvement.

Iraqi refugees, nearly 8% of the Syrian population, are from various economic, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. Most live in Damascus.¹⁹⁷ If poor, they must immediately find ways to survive. Those who have no money are forced to live in low-rent housing or slum areas. They cannot legally work. They are often unable to find jobs even in the underground economy, and they have no legal protection. Because prostitution has become a problem, young Iraqi women between the ages of 15 and 40 have difficulty entering Syria unless a male relative accompanies them.¹⁹⁸

The refugee problem in Syria is causing rents to soar, schools to become overcrowded, and real estate values to rise. 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 because of the influx.¹⁹⁹ Crime and health problems are also increasing in slum areas where refugees have

¹⁹³ UN High Commissioner for Refugees, "Syrian Arab Republic: 2011 UNHCR Country Operations Profile," 2011, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486a76.html>

¹⁹⁴ U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, "World Refugee Survey 2009: Syria," 2009, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/publisher,USCRI,,SYR,4a40d2b3a,0.html>

¹⁹⁵ Scott Wilson, "Iraqi Refugees Overwhelm Syria," *Washington Post*, 3 February 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A58648-2005Feb2?>

¹⁹⁶ U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, "World Refugee Survey 2009: Syria," 2009, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/publisher,USCRI,,SYR,4a40d2b3a,0.html>

¹⁹⁷ Julien Barnes-Dacey, "Iraqi Refugees Strain Syrian Economy," *Financial Times*, 17 January 2008, <http://www.globalexchange.org/countries/mideast/iraq/5369.html>

¹⁹⁸ Refugees International, "Iraqi Refugees in Syria: Silent Exodus Leaves 500,000 in Need of Protection and Aid," 15 November 2005, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/47a6eeca27.html>

¹⁹⁹ Scott Wilson, "Iraqi Refugees Overwhelm Syria," *Washington Post*, 3 February 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A58648-2005Feb2?>

settled, mainly around Damascus. Many refugee children cannot find a place in the public schools and are forced to live on the streets.²⁰⁰ The Ministry of Education has opened new schools in the suburbs to help reduce the 26% dropout rate among the Iraqi child refugees.²⁰¹

Healthcare

The healthcare system in Syria is run predominantly by the public sector. There is a large network of healthcare facilities. Healthcare is virtually free for all citizens, provided they use the government health centers, clinics, and hospitals. Historically, caps were placed on fees charged by private hospitals.²⁰² However, the system is costly, requiring nearly 8% of the total government budget. Current efforts are being made to overhaul the system. Changes include decentralizing the health sector and the introducing a national insurance system. It is estimated that the government can meet only about 30% to 40% of the country's healthcare needs. Private-sector healthcare providers are expected to cover the remaining 60%.²⁰³

There is a shortage of doctors in Syria, and they are not well paid. Many physicians practice medicine in both the public and private sectors. Syria has one doctor per every 672 inhabitants.²⁰⁴

Public health centers—which offer limited services at no cost—are staffed with at least one doctor and a nurse. They may also include specialists such as pediatricians, obstetricians, and dentists. Services in health centers include maternal and children's health, immunization, family planning, control and prevention of disease (communicable and non-communicable), and health education. Small or large general hospitals exist urban areas, and there are specialized hospitals in the cities. Also, at the national level, there is a network of blood banks, ambulances, and drug-distribution outlets to provide services to the public.²⁰⁵



© Bill Anderson
Hospital, Aleppo

²⁰⁰ Julien Barnes-Dacey, "Iraqi Refugees Strain Syrian Economy," *Financial Times*, 17 January 2008, <http://www.globalexchange.org/countries/mideast/iraq/5369.html>

²⁰¹ United Nations in Syria, "Opening of New School Extensions Helps New Iraqi Refugee Children to Enroll in the Suburbs of Damascus," 18 January 2011, <http://www.un.org.sy/forms/spotlight/viewSpotlight.php?id=159&pageLang=en>

²⁰² Anna Galdo, "Welfare in the Mediterranean Countries: The Syrian Arab Republic," United Nations Public Administration Network, 2004, <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/CAIMED/UNPAN018931.pdf>

²⁰³ Obaida Hamad, "Health System Reforms: Better Services at What Cost?" *Forward Magazine*, 12 February 2011, <http://www.forwardsyria.com/story/396/Health%20system%20reforms>

²⁰⁴ Obaida Hamad, "Health System Reforms: Better Services at What Cost?" 6 April 2011, <http://www.forwardsyria.com/story/396/Health%20system%20reforms>

²⁰⁵ Anna Galdo, "Welfare in the Mediterranean Countries: The Syrian Arab Republic," United Nations Public Administration Network, 2004, <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/CAIMED/UNPAN018931.pdf>

National vaccination programs have been largely effective against infectious diseases. More than 90% of all children in Syria have been immunized against most major childhood diseases. Some diseases, such as tuberculosis, have been brought under control. The infection rate of diphtheria, which is highly contagious, has fallen in the last decade.^{206, 207}



© ORBIS International
Doctor examining patient

Exchange 25: Is there a hospital nearby?

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

Private healthcare, which requires a fee, is also available. Private care is considered to be of better quality than public healthcare. Both are easily available to government workers, who have an advantage. They can choose public health services or be reimbursed for visits to private doctors.^{208, 209}

Exchange 26: Is Dr. Said in, sir?

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

The healthcare system has been strained by Syria's refugee problem. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi and Palestinian refugees have settled in Syria. Many have ended up in crowded camps with poor housing and healthcare. These camps have a high incidence of disease and malnourishment. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and other health agencies are trying to alleviate this worsening problem.²¹⁰

²⁰⁶ World Health Organization, "WHP Vaccine-Preventable Disease Monitoring System: 2010 Global Summary," 2010, http://whqlibdoc.who.int/hq/2010/WHO_IVB_2010_eng_p32-R242.pdf

²⁰⁷ UN Development Programme, "UNDP Helps Syria Achieve Tuberculosis Breakthrough," 10 March 2011, <http://www.undp.org.sy/index.php/stories/58/563>

²⁰⁸ Anna Galdo, "Welfare in the Mediterranean Countries: The Syrian Arab Republic," United Nations Public Administration Network, 2004, <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/CAIMED/UNPAN018931.pdf>

²⁰⁹ Obaida Hamad, "Health System Reforms: Better Services at What Cost?" Forward Magazine, 12 February 2011, <http://www.forwardsyria.com/story/396/Health%20system%20reforms>

²¹⁰ UN High Commissioner for Refugees, "Public Health Equity in Refugee and Other Displaced Persons Settings," April 2010, [http://reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900sis/ASAZ-855H46/\\$file/UNHCR_Apr2010.pdf?openelement](http://reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900sis/ASAZ-855H46/$file/UNHCR_Apr2010.pdf?openelement)

Telecommunications

Syria's telecom system is the least developed and most regulated in the Middle East. Many sites are restricted by the government, and some internet access is censored. Sites critical of the Syrian government, including YouTube, and Facebook, are currently blocked. In an effort to control the spread of information, Syria shut down the internet several times in early 2011.^{211, 212} Broadband access is extremely expensive. No restrictions exist with respect to DTH satellite TV channels.²¹³

There is an increasing number of Wi-Fi enabled internet cafes, especially in Damascus. People can also go to internet shops and pay for internet use by the hour. The lack of available broadband connections leads to slow connections and lengthy downtimes. Promises of broadband services suggest such service may be available in the near future.²¹⁴



© Patrick M / flickr.com
Woman using cell phone

Exchange 27: May I use your phone?

| | | |
|----------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| Soldier: | May I use your phone? | mumken asta'mel telefonak? |
| Local: | Sure. | itfaDhal |

Telephone systems are adequate in Syria because of a push in technology. Syria Telecommunications Establishment is a state-owned monopoly. The company is upgrading and extending its current network, and the aim is to have 100% coverage by 2013.²¹⁵ Phone, fax, and telegram service is widely available in the country.

Exchange 28: What is your telephone number?

| | | |
|----------|--------------------------------|--|
| Soldier: | What is your telephone number? | sho raqam telefonak? |
| Local: | My phone number is 1325477. | raqam telefonee, waaHed itlaateh itneyn Khamseh arba'a sab'a sab'a |

²¹¹ Salem Muhammod, "Syria Shuts Down Internet as Fear of Internal Unrest Rises," Middle East Newswire, 31 January 2011, <http://www.mideastnewswire.com/syria-shuts-down-internet-as-fear-of-internal-unrest-rises>

²¹² The Telegraph, "Syrian Mobile Phones, Internet Down After Wave of Arrests," 3 April 2011, <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/world/syrian-mobile-phones-internet-down-after-wave-of-arrests/story-e6frev00-1226032875280>

²¹³ Business Wire, "Research and Markets: Syria Telecoms, Mobile, Broadband and Forecasts Report 2011," 21 March 2011, <http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20110321005785/en/Research-Markets-Syria-Telecoms-Mobile-Broadband-Forecasts>

²¹⁴ Syria News Wire, "Internet Access in Syria (updated)," 9 May 2009, <http://newsfromsyria.com/2009/05/09/internet-access-in-syria/>

²¹⁵ BusinessWire, "Research and Markets: Syria Telecoms, Mobile, Broadband and Forecasts Report 2011," 21 March 2011, <http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20110321005785/en/Research-Markets-Syria-Telecoms-Mobile-Broadband-Forecasts>

Mobile phone service in the country is provided by two companies. About 40% of the population have mobile phones. Costs for services are very high. Network connectivity is good in most large cities, but because the two providers have little incentive to invest in their networks, service may be sporadic in smaller towns and rural areas.^{216, 217} After antigovernment protests in April 2011, the cell phone networks were shut down. The government claimed it was a technical problem, but others allege that the government forced the shutdown of the lines along with the internet.²¹⁸

Restaurants and Cafés

Different kinds of restaurants and cafés with a wide range of foods can be found in Syria’s cities. Cuisines from all over the world are available. Fast-food chains are also increasingly popular throughout the country.²¹⁹



© Stijn Nieuwendijk
Restaurant, Damascus

Exchange 29: Are you still serving breakfast?

| | | |
|----------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Are you still serving breakfast? | lesaatkum ’am it-admoo ifToor? |
| Local: | Yes. | eh |

Exchange 30: I’d like some hot soup.

| | | |
|----------|-------------------------|-----------------|
| Soldier: | I’d like some hot soup. | bedee shoorabaa |
| Local: | Sure. | Tayeb |

Some restaurants focus on regional specialties, such as grilled meat kebabs. These establishments, called *kebabji ahwa*, prepare skewers of lamb, beef, and chicken, usually well done, over a charcoal grill.

Exchange 31: What type of meat is this?

| | | |
|----------|----------------------------|--------------------|
| Soldier: | What type of meat is this? | sho no’ hal laHam? |
| Local: | Lamb. | laHam ghanam |

²¹⁶ Syria Today, “Mobile Phone Users Protest Tariff Rates,” July 2009, <http://syria-today.com/st/index.php/july-2009/361-business-news/2008-mobile-phone-users-protest-tariff-rates>

²¹⁷ Sarah Birke, “Ringing in Change,” Syria Today, September 2009, <http://syria-today.com/st/index.php/september-2009/409-business-features/2737-ringing-in-change>

²¹⁸ The Telegraph, “Syrian Mobile Phones, Internet Down After Wave of Arrests,” 3 April 2011, <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/world/syrian-mobile-phones-internet-down-after-wave-of-arrests/story-e6frev00-1226032875280>

²¹⁹ Syria Embassy, “Syrian Food and Drink,” 2007, http://syria.embassyhomepage.com/syrian_food_syrian_drinks_restaurants_damascus_syrian_cuisine_syrian_food_recipe_book_syrian_embassy_london_uk.htm

Vegetarians will find many dishes to suit their needs, including pita bread and hummus, falafel, and a dish called *foul* (pronounced “fool”), made of fava bean paste.²²⁰

Exchange 32: Put this all in one bill?

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

Some restaurants are segregated and cater only to men or to women. At others, where gender is mixed, women who enter alone should eat in the area reserved for families. In some establishments, food is typically ordered family style, for an entire group of people, who may linger around the table for hours, enjoying conversation with their meal.

Exchange 33: May I have a glass of water?

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

At other establishments, food is generally served à la carte. Buffet dining is rare in Syria. There are bars and restaurants that serve alcohol. During the month of Ramadan drinking alcohol is not permitted in public. Punishments for violators can be severe.²²¹

Exchange 34: Do you have a dessert?

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

Tipping is appropriate for reasonable service, and it is expected in restaurants. A 10% tip is acceptable. In expensive restaurants, the service charge may be automatically added to the bill.²²²

Exchange 35: Can I have my total bill, please?

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

Many restaurants do not have menus. Instead, diners choose whatever meat they prefer, and the dish will be brought. Every meal will include some kind of flat bread. The bread is used as a

²²⁰ Tours-syria.com, “Food and Cuisine in Syria,” 2010, <http://www.tours-syria.com/syria-restaurants>

²²¹ Tours-syria.com “Food and Cuisine in Syria,” 2010, <http://www.tours-syria.com/syria-restaurants>

²²² Tripwolf, “Syria: Essentials and FAQ,” 2011, <http://www.tripwolf.com/en/syria/info/essentials-a-z-tipping>

utensil to pick up the food. Although Western cutlery is available, remember that Arabs eat only with the right hand.²²³

Exchange 36: I would like coffee / tea.

| | | |
|----------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| Soldier: | I would like coffee / tea. | bedee ahweh / shaay |
| Local: | Sure. | Tayeb |

At coffeehouses, people play card games or a variation of backgammon. Or they may listen to storytellers. Many people smoke a *narghile* (waterpipe) as they relax. The smoke from different kinds of tobacco is cooled and filtered through the water in the *narghile*.²²⁴

Exchange 37: Where is your restroom?

| | | |
|----------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Where is your restroom? | wayn il itwaaley? |
| Local: | That room to your left, over there. | il gherfeh illi 'al ishmaal ihneek |

Transportation

In cities, public transportation is widely used, and people travel by bus, train, or taxi. Although rental cars are available, people not used to driving in Syria would be well advised to pay for a cab instead.²²⁵



© Paul Engler
Bus

²²³ Tourism Syria, “Syrian Food: Four Courses of Heaven,” 2011, http://www.ecotourismsyria.com/syrian_food.php

²²⁴ Neos Guide, “Syria, Jordan” (Michelin Travel Publications, 2000).

²²⁵ Foreign and Commonwealth Office, “Syria,” 6 April 2011, http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1035.html#traffic_safety

Exchange 38: Where can I rent a car?

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

The number of traffic accidents is high. Roads are generally in varying states of disrepair, and Syrian drivers maneuver aggressively, often completely ignoring other vehicles.²²⁶

Exchange 39: Is there a gas station nearby?

| | | |
|----------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Is there a gas station nearby? | fee kaazeyt banzeen aareeb? |
| Local: | Yes. | eh |

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that Syria has the highest rate of traffic accidents in the entire eastern Mediterranean region.²²⁷ If one insists on driving oneself, care should be taken to include an emergency roadside safety kit in the car.

Exchange 40: Is there a good auto mechanic nearby?

| | | |
|----------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Is there a good auto mechanic nearby? | fee meekaaneekee sayaaraat aareeb? |
| Local: | Yes. | eh |

Main destinations can usually be reached by buses, which are often air conditioned and economical. Buses are still the best way to travel around the country.²²⁸ In Damascus, small minibuses travel all over the city. Destinations are written in Arabic. The fares are very low, but there is no set schedule. Men and women do sit separately.²²⁹



© Charles Roffey
Gas station

Exchange 41: Will the bus be here soon?

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

²²⁶ Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State, "Syria: Country Specific Information," 2011, http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1035.html#traffic_safety

²²⁷ IRIN News, "SYRIA: Government Promises to Improve Safety on Increasingly Deadly Roads," 21 June 2006, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=27041>

²²⁸ Terry Carter, Lara Dunstan, and Amelia Thomas, *Syria & Lebanon* (Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 2008).

²²⁹ Erika Linden Green-Rafah, "Travel: Syrian Taxi Cabs (an Attraction Unto Themselves)," *Pilot Destinations*, n.d., http://www.pilotguides.com/destination_guide/middle-east-north-africa/syria-jordan-lebanon/taxis.php

If traveling by taxi, it's wise to negotiate a fare before entering the vehicle because some taxis don't have meters. Before getting into a taxi that is metered, make sure the meter is reset before the ride begins. Drivers often expect a tip of about 50% of the fare. Taxis are a safe way to navigate the city, especially for women.²³⁰

Exchange 42: Where can I get a cab?

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

It's worth noting that when visitors are trying to find their way around in the city, they may be given directions that include district rather than street names.

Exchange 43: Which road leads to the airport?

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

Syrians in general know their towns by districts rather than by maps or names of streets (which may be incorrectly named).

Exchange 44: Can you take me there?

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

Travel by train is a relaxing and relatively safe way to get around in Syria. The sleeper cars are clean and well maintained. Be advised that the trains often run a few hours behind schedule.²³¹ Recent government investment has significantly improved rail travel through the country.²³² Train stations can be found in almost all the larger cities and in some of the smaller ones.

Exchange 45: Is there a train station nearby?

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

²³⁰ Erika Linden Green-Rafeh, "Travel: Syrian Taxi Cabs (an Attraction Unto Themselves)," Pilot Destinations, n.d., http://www.pilotguides.com/destination_guide/middle-east-north-africa/syria-jordan-lebanon/taxis.php

²³¹ Mark Smith "How to Travel by Train from London to Syria," seat61.com, 8 June 2011, <http://www.seat61.com/Syria.htm>

²³² Terry Carter, Lara Dunstan, and Amelia Thomas, *Syria & Lebanon* (Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 2008).

Marketplaces

Most Syrian cities contain modern malls and the traditional *souks*. These are covered markets that have been in operation for centuries. Maze-like streets are abuzz with merchants and buyers mingling until late in the evening. In many cities, *souks* specialize in certain types of merchandise, such as a spices, gold, and so on.



© james_gordon_los_angeles / flickr.com
Market, Damascus

Exchange 46: Is the *souk* nearby?

| | | |
|----------|-------------------------------|------------------------|
| Soldier: | Is the <i>souk</i> nearby? | is soo aareeb min hon? |
| Local: | Yes, over there on the right. | eh, ihneek 'al yameen |

Be aware that prices in the *souks* are not set. Rather, it is expected that the buyer and the seller will haggle over the price. This type of bargaining can be an art form in itself. Most Syrians never agree to the first price set forth by the seller, since this price will be grossly inflated.²³³

Exchange 47: Do you have any more of these?

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

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

Exchange 48: May I examine this close up?

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

Street Vendors

In the cities, food is commonly sold by vendors and at street stalls. The food available from these vendors can vary with the season. In springtime, vendors sell whole green almonds, and in summer, fresh pistachios and fruits. It is also common to see pastries stacked in intricate columns, meats, and all kinds of drinks and juices. Unlike merchants in the *souks*, street vendors may change their location from time to time.²³⁴

²³³ Ivan Mannheim, *Syria and Lebanon Handbook* (Bath, England: Footprint Handbooks, 2001).

²³⁴ Tourism Syria, "Syrian Food: Four Courses of Heaven," 2011, http://www.ecotourismsyria.com/syrian_food.php

Exchange 49: How much longer will you be here?

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

Some vendors, both on the street and in the *souks*, can be quite persistent when trying to make a sale.



© Charles Roffey
Street vendor, Hamah

Exchange 50: Please, buy something from me.

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

Beggars

Begging is relatively rare in Syria when compared with other developing nations. In some parts of the country, however, begging is common, especially among children. Beggars can be aggressive and may follow you around until you give them something. Keep money in front pockets and be alert for scams.²³⁵ Should a beggar approach you demanding money, it would be best to firmly, but politely, decline.

Exchange 51: Give me money. (Dealing with beggars)

| | | |
|----------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Local: | Give me money | 'aTeenee maSaaree |
| Soldier: | I don't have any. | maa ma'ee shee |

²³⁵ iGuide, "Syria: Safety," 2011, <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=25248>

Chapter 4 Assessment

1. Internet access is widely available throughout the country.
TRUE
Although broadband access is expensive, slower forms of internet access are available. However, some sites are heavily monitored or censored, including YouTube and Facebook.
2. Syria has one of the highest rates of traffic accidents in the region.
TRUE
Syrian drivers are aggressive and often don't pay attention to other vehicles. Poor road conditions also contribute to accidents. If possible, avoid driving in the cities.
3. Begging is common in the cities.
FALSE
The number of beggars in Syria is relatively low. Locals often give a small amount to people who are disabled or obviously unable to make a living. Giving alms to the poor is in accordance with religious teachings.
4. All refugees in Syria can work legally.
FALSE
Palestinians who have lived in Syria for 10 years can seek a work permit. However, Iraqis cannot legally work, so they must live on their savings or work in underground jobs.
5. More than half of the population in the cities live in urban slums known as "informal settlements."
FALSE
Because of the rapid influx of people into the cities, more than half of all urban growth is found in areas known as "informal settlements." However, in contrast to many other countries, these areas are populated by both the urban poor and middle-class families.

CHAPTER 5: RURAL LIFE

Rural Economy

Farming is the main livelihood in Syria's rural areas. About 95% of the farms are privately owned, although the government controls where goods can be sold and the transportation system for shipping goods to market.²³⁶



© James_gordon_los_angeles / flickr.com
Houran bedouin

Exchange 52: Do you own this land?

| | | |
|----------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Soldier: | Do you own this land? | hay il aareDh milkak? |
| Local: | Yes. | eh |

Farmers grow a variety of crops and raise livestock, including chickens, sheep, and cattle. Staple grains such as wheat and barley are grown along with lentils, sugar beets, chickpeas, olives, fruits, and vegetables. Cotton is grown for export. Livestock herding is also a basic part of the rural economy. Shepherds pass through the mountains and plains, leading their herds to food and water, though they may settle in villages for part of each year.²³⁷

Exchange 53: Where do you work, sir?

| | | |
|----------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Where do you work, sir? | wayn ibteshtughul, yaa sayed? |
| Local: | I am a farmer, sir. | anaa falaaH, yaa sayed |

Drought and lack of irrigation are major impediments to farming. About 80% of farmers depend on rain rather than irrigation systems.²³⁸ Thus, they often experience low production yields and financial stress. Droughts can be severe. The years 2009 and 2010 saw one of the biggest failures in grain crops. As a result, nearly 300,000 families were displaced and moved to the cities. Although in 2010 there was sufficient rainfall in some areas, crop failures were widespread in others, which jeopardized more than 1 million people already living in borderline poverty conditions.²³⁹

²³⁶ Nimrod Raphaeli, "Syria's Fragile Economy," *The Middle East Review of International Affairs* 11, no. 2 (2007), <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2007/issue2/jv11no2a4.html>

²³⁷ Garry Cummins, "Final Report on Livestock Sub-Sector," Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, October 2000, http://www.fao.org/world/syria/gcpita/pubs/policystudies/03-Livestock-En_1-68.pdf

²³⁸ Terri Dougherty, *Syria: Modern Nations of the World* (Farmington Hills, MI: Lucent Books, 2004).

²³⁹ Green Prophet, "Syria on Track to Becoming Irreversible Desert," 20 June 2010, <http://www.greenprophet.com/2010/06/syria-drought-2/>

Men in rural communities also may work in the construction industry. Craftsmen are hired to build homes, install plumbing and electrical lines, or lay tiles. These skilled workers often earn reasonable wages.²⁴⁰ Serving as an apprentice with a skilled craftsman can be the route to this kind of livelihood.



© Global Crop Diversity Trust / flickr.com
Crop, Halab

Exchange 54: Are you the only person in your family who has a job?

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

There is increasing reliance on nonagricultural activities in rural Syria. The non-farming sector has grown more rapidly than farm employment. The service sector and commerce are the largest alternatives to rural farming.²⁴¹

In its 11th five-year plan, the government has aimed at increasing the growth of the critical agricultural sector by providing price supports for some strategic crops, including wheat and cotton, and some animal products. Through grants the government also wants to encourage use of technology, including modern irrigation techniques.²⁴²

Gender Issues

Women in rural areas have fewer options for working outside the home than those living in urban areas. In the country, the primary role of women is usually to care for the household and the children. A woman may bear ten or more children and have little time or energy for work outside the home. Women who have menial jobs also help in the fields, Men generally take care of livestock and do the main field work, such as planting and harvesting.²⁴³



© Javier Martin Espartosa
Busy streets, Dayr az Zawr

²⁴⁰ Andrea B. Rugh, *Within the Circle: Parents and Children in an Arab Village* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

²⁴¹ Raid Hamza, "Non-Agricultural Rural Activities: Preliminary Results from Selected Area of Syria," National Agriculture Policy Center, March 2007, http://www.napcsyr.org/dwnld-files/working_papers/en/28_nara_rh_en.pdf

²⁴² Syria Downtown, "Syria Allocates SYP 197 Billion for the Agricultural Sector," 9 February 2011, <http://www.sana.sy/eng/24/2011/02/09/331038.htm>

²⁴³ Samira Soubh, "Women's Role in Agriculture and Gender Issues in Syria," National Agriculture and Agrarian Reform, March 2006, http://www.napcsyr.org/dwnld-files/divisions/rdd/pubs/pol_brf/en/10_women_role.pdf

Exchange 55: Did you grow up here?

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

Syrian cultural traditions have contributed to the poverty of women in rural areas. For instance, women in some ethnic groups are not permitted to inherit land. Because girls are often forced to leave school to help tend the fields or to look after family members, they are less likely to complete their education. It is not uncommon for girls between 12 and 15 years of age in rural areas to drop out of school and enter into arranged marriages.^{244, 245}

Rural society is generally more conservative than urban society. Wives have little, if any, power regarding family matters, such as the education or marriage of their children. Husbands in Syria continue to make most decisions about their families.²⁴⁶

Education

The Syrian school system is divided into six years of elementary school, three years of lower secondary education, and three years of upper secondary education.²⁴⁷ Children in Syria are required to attend school beginning at age 6 and continuing through age 16. In 2004, 96% of females and 100% of males were enrolled in basic education. By 2006, women represented 48% of the basic education student population. Rates tend to be somewhat lower in rural areas, where the dropout rate for boys is also high.²⁴⁸ As with girls, boys are sometimes forced to leave school to help out on the family farm.



© Haitham Alfalah
School, AL-Hasakah

Exchange 56: Do your children go to school?

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

²⁴⁴ IRIN News, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Syria: Girls' School Attendance in Rural Areas Decreasing," 4 January 2005, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=24533>

²⁴⁵ World Food Program, "Support for Food-Based Education Programming in Syria," 14 October 2010, http://192.91.247.105/operations/current_operations/project_docs/106780.pdf

²⁴⁶ Samira Soubh, "Women's Role in Agriculture and Gender Related Issues in Syria," April 2006, http://www.napcsyr.org/dwnld-files/working_papers/en/18_womenrole_ss_en.pdf

²⁴⁷ Robert Scott Mason, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Education," in *Syria: A Country Study*, ed. Thomas Coello, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1997, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstyd:@field%28DOCID+sy0054%29>

²⁴⁸ Samira Soubh, "Gender Equity and Equality in Syria," October 2008, National Agricultural Policy Center, http://www.napcsyr.org/dwnld-files/working_papers/en/42_gender_equity_ss_en.pdf

Rural dropout rates reach as high as 45%.²⁴⁹ Contributing to this problem is the fact that rural schools are often not as good as urban schools. Teachers often lack training, and the classes may be very crowded, with as many as 45 to 55 children per classroom.²⁵⁰ If parents do not see a clear advantage in sending their children to school, they will allow them to drop out and join the labor force.

Exchange 57: Is there a school nearby?

| | | |
|----------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Is there a school nearby? | fee madraseh aareebah min hon? |
| Local: | Yes. | eh |

Housing

There are differences in the design and construction of rural and urban houses.²⁵¹ The courtyard of a rural home tends to be used as a garden for the household. It is surrounded by rooms on one or more sides, and bordered by a wall. The house is split into two areas: one for the people living there, called the *mastabo*, and one for their animals, called the *zribeh*.



© Charles Roffey
Houses, rural Syria

Although in the past cupolas were built on roofs, flat roofs covered with wood, plants, and dirt have become the norm. Rather than being made of wood, some roofs are constructed from reinforced concrete, cement, or masonry blocks. Walls of newer houses are also built similarly. This change from traditional mud structures reduces the need for repairs. One disadvantage of this modern design, however, is that these homes are less well insulated than traditional mud homes, which have walls up to 70 centimeters thick and work well with the environment.

Rural Transportation

Driving in the rural areas of Syria requires the highest level of caution. Highways are often not well lit at night. Roads are frequently in varying states of disrepair, which makes driving conditions difficult, particularly during inclement weather. Vehicles are often not well maintained; broken-down vehicles are sometimes left on roadsides without emergency lights or other proper warning signs. Also, truck drivers will often start or stop without warning, and frequently change lanes without signaling their intent. This can be especially problematic on

²⁴⁹ World Food Program, “Support for Food-Based Education Programming in Syria,” 2011, http://192.91.247.105/operations/current_operations/project_docs/106780.pdf

²⁵⁰ IRIN News, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Syria: Girls’ School Attendance in Rural Areas Decreasing,” 4 January 2005, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=24533>

²⁵¹ Meda-corporus.net, “Typologies of Traditional Buildings in Syria,” n.d., http://www.meda-corporus.net/libros/pdf_manuel/syria_eng/ats_eng_2.pdf

narrow rural roads, where it is common for people and animals to walk at night. Vehicles without lights are also a hazard.²⁵²

Although reaching some rural areas can still be difficult, in recent years Syria has expanded its road network and transportation system in these regions. Many roads now have asphalt paving.²⁵³ Nevertheless, about 77,911 kilometers (48,411 miles) of roadway remain unpaved.²⁵⁴ The bus system spans most of the country and is frequently used to reach rural destinations in Syria.²⁵⁵



© Javier Martin Espartosa
Rural transportation

Healthcare

Most Syrian villages provide healthcare, although rural facilities often lack adequate staff and supplies. About 95% of the population can reach a healthcare center within 30 minutes.²⁵⁶

Exchange 58: Is there a medical clinic nearby?

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

The government has established measures to increase and improve the medical services in poorer, less-populated regions. One such project mandates that physicians, pharmacists, and dentists who do not plan to specialize must practice for two years in rural areas after they finish medical school.²⁵⁷



© ORBIS International / flickr.com
Teacher examining student eyesight

²⁵² Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State, “Syria: Country Specific Information: Traffic Safety and Road Conditions,” 2011, http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1035.html#safety

²⁵³ Firas Hyder, “Development of Infrastructure in Syria During the Past 25 Years and Its Prospects: Current Situation and Investments,” National Agriculture Policy Center, February 2007, http://www.napcsyr.org/dwnld-files/divisions/rdd/pubs/pol_brf/en/22_dev_infra_syr_fh_en.pdf

²⁵⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, “Syria: Transportation,” in *The World Factbook*, 16 March 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

²⁵⁵ Globe Dweller, “Public Transportation and Infra-Structure in Syria,” n.d., <http://globedweller.com/expatguide/middle-east/syria/public-transportation-and-infra-structure>

²⁵⁶ Anna Galdo, “Welfare in the Mediterranean Countries: The Syrian Arab Republic,” United Nations Public Administration Network, 2004, <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/CAIMED/UNPAN018931.pdf>

²⁵⁷ Anna Galdo, “Welfare in the Mediterranean Countries: The Syrian Arab Republic,” United Nations Public Administration Network, 2004, <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/CAIMED/UNPAN018931.pdf>

Exchange 59: My arm is broken, can you help me?

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

Many rural Syrians still rely on traditional rather than modern medicine. They use herbs and cures made from plants and natural ingredients. A bee sting, for instance, may be relieved with garlic. Colds may be treated with soothing drinks such as a combination of honey, lemon, and cinnamon.²⁵⁸ A cactus-like plant known as *sabbar* is used for the treatment of rheumatism.

Exchange 60: Do you know what is wrong?

| | | |
|----------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Soldier: | Do you know what is wrong? | bet'ref sho il mushkeleh? |
| Local: | No. | laa |

Who Is in Charge?

According to tradition, villages are organized around families. A lineage is a group of people who come from a given line, or common ancestor. The leaders of each of these ancestral lineages are usually middle-aged or older men who make the decisions for the village. The headman of each village is known as a *mukhtar*. He is elected from among the men of the tribe and usually possesses special talents or skills.²⁵⁹



© Charles Roffey
Druze man

Exchange 61: Does your leader live here?

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

The *mukhtar* is able to assert his influence in the tribal councils known as *majlis*. He serves primarily as a communication channel from higher administrative officials to the village.²⁶⁰ The *mukhtar* also holds meetings where tribesmen can come and express their concerns and discuss

²⁵⁸ Terri Dougherty, *Syria: Modern Nations of the World* (Farmington Hills, MI: Lucent Books, 2004).

²⁵⁹ Thomas Collelo, ed., "Tribes," in *Syria: A Country Study*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1987, <http://countrystudies.us/syria/28.htm>

²⁶⁰ Thomas Collelo, ed., "Villages," in *Syria: A Country Study*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1987, <http://countrystudies.us/syria/27.htm>

important matters. The *mukhtar* and the *majlis* attempt to reconcile all problems within the tribal unit. If they cannot, however, the matter is referred to higher authorities.²⁶¹

Exchange 62: Can you take me to your leader?

| | | |
|----------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Can you take me to your leader? | bete-der taaKhednee la qaa-dak? |
| Local: | Yes. | eh |

Most power and prestige in villages typically rests with the largest local landowners, who may live within the town or nearby. Male tribal leaders may be included when a pastoral tribe settles near a town and participates in village life. Such leaders are likely to have substantial land holdings in the area.²⁶²

Exchange 63: Respected leader, we need your help / advice / opinion.

| | | |
|----------|---|--|
| Soldier: | Respected leader, we need your help / advice / opinion. | HaDhrat il qaa-ed meHtaajeen li musaa’adtak / wa naSeeHtak / wa ra-yak |
| Local: | Yes. | eh |

Different Ways of Life

Bedouins

Bedouins are a traditionally nomadic people. There are about 1.5 million Bedouin in Syria.²⁶³ The *Shawaya* Bedouin are primarily shepherds and live mainly in the north and northeast.

While they once traveled freely throughout the country, often ignoring national borders with Iraq, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, the Bedouin have undergone significant changes in recent years. Drought and poor economic conditions have forced many of these traditional nomads to stay in one area and even to live in cities. The Syrian government has begun a series of initiatives to help the Bedouin stay in the desert and to migrate to Syria’s cities or cross the borders into other countries.²⁶⁴



© Thomas Stellmach
Bedouin family

²⁶¹ Thomas Collelo, ed., “Tribes,” in *Syria: A Country Study*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1987, <http://countrystudies.us/syria/28.htm>

²⁶² Thomas Collelo, ed., “Villages,” in *Syria: A Country Study*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1987, <http://www.country-studies.com/syria/villages.html>

²⁶³ Nouna al-Dimashqiya, “The Vanishing Nomads,” *Syria Today*, January 2011, <http://www.syria-today.com/st/index.php/january-2011/726-life/13384-the-vanishing-nomads>

²⁶⁴ Obaida Hamad, “Keeping Tradition Alive,” *Syria Today*, July 2009, <http://syria-today.com/st/index.php/july-2009/360-society/1995-keeping-tradition-alive>

Exchange 64: Do you know this area very well?

| | | |
|----------|----------------------------------|--|
| Soldier: | Do you know this area very well? | bet' ref hal manTeqa imneeH ikteer? |
| Local: | Yes. | eh |

Kurds

Most Kurds live in the northeastern parts of Syria. Current estimates are that they number about 1.5 million people. Their history in the country has been one of repression. Kurds have been denied basic social, cultural, and political rights. They have suffered at the hands of the present regime.

One reason the Kurdish people remain separate from mainstream culture is their failure to gain an ethnic homeland after World War I when Kurdish groups in the Middle East were divided among the four countries of Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria. However, unlike Kurds in other parts of the Middle East, Syrian Kurds have not sought their own separate state.²⁶⁵

The Kurdish people in Syria speak their own language, and most are Sunni Muslim. Although they have their own culture, it is not recognized by Syria's government, and the Kurds suffer widespread repression. For example, it is illegal to speak the Kurdish language in Syrian schools. Also, Kurds are barred from publishing newspapers and other print media in their language. They also are not allowed to own property, study at the universities, or work in certain professions. If Kurds protest the government's policies, they face detention, harassment, unfair trials, and possibly torture.²⁶⁶

Despite growing protests by Syrians against their government in March and April of 2011, the Kurds remained largely on the sidelines.²⁶⁷ A small, largely peaceful, demonstration in April 2011 called for the Kurds to be granted citizenship.²⁶⁸ The government promised to review the case of nearly 300,000 Kurds who have been denied Syrian citizenship for nearly 50 years.²⁶⁹ In April 2011, the Syrian president granted nationality to more than 250,000 Kurds in the Hasaka province.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁵ Radwan Ziadeh, "The Kurds in Syria: Fueling Separatist Movements in the Region?" United States Institute of Peace, 2009, <http://www.usip.org/files/resources/kurdsinsyria.pdf>

²⁶⁶ UN High Commissioner for Refugees, "Assessment for Kurds in Syria," 30 March 2005, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/publisher/MARP,,,469f3ad71e,0.html>

²⁶⁷ David Wilkinson, "Kurds in Syria 'Waiting to Take to the Streets.' Academic Says," 24 March 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/03/24/syria.kurds/index.html?hpt=T2>

²⁶⁸ Kurd Net, "Kurds in Syria Join Protests Calling for Citizenship," 1 April 2011, <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2011/4/syriakurd301.htm>

²⁶⁹ ABC News, "Syria to Tackle Kurd Citizenship Problem," 1 April 2011, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2011/04/01/3179357.htm>

²⁷⁰ Zeina Karam, "Syrian President Grants Kurds Citizenship in Overture Amid Protests, Fires Provincial Governor," 7 April 2011, <http://www.1310news.com/news/world/article/208865--syrian-president-grants-kurds-citizenship-in-overture-amid-protests-fires-provincial-governor?ref=topic&name=45.34530&title=>

Border Crossings

Border control is an issue faced by every country. Syria’s rugged terrain makes much of its borders with Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel (including Golan Heights), and Iraq difficult to oversee. Syrians’ own perceptions of national identity could affect border negotiations. Syria exists more as a geographical rather than national entity, although shared identity as Arabs does unite much of the population. But because the Syrian population is made up of groups based on ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic background, the country lacks a unified sense of nation that is typical of many democracies,



© Israel Defense Forces
Syrian / Israeli Border

Exchange 65: Did these people threaten you?

| | | |
|----------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Soldier: | Did these people threaten you? | hadadokum hadool il zelem? |
| Local: | No. | laa |

Syria-Jordan Border

The U.S. State Department announced that Jordan has completed Phase I of its new border security program, including the installation of advanced technology for monitoring and communications. These developments will help Jordan respond faster to border incidents, prevent terrorist attacks, and block passage of terrorists into Syria.²⁷¹

Syria-Lebanon Border

The border between Lebanon and Syria is about 365 kilometers (226 miles) long. It has never been fully demarcated, which has led to a series of problems between the countries, including arms smuggling and terrorist crossings. The undefined border also and has made it possible for Syrian incursions into Lebanon. A joint committee to define the common border was formed in 2006. These much-needed negotiations between Syria and Lebanon also include the demarcation of the border in Shebaa Farms. This area (where the Israeli, Syrian, and Lebanese borders meet) has seen clashes between Hezbollah (out of southern Lebanon) and Israeli forces. Officially, the UN considers this area Syrian land that Israel occupied when it occupied Golan Heights in 1967.²⁷² However, Syria and Lebanon must negotiate because it is they who have authority to demarcate the borders through bilateral agreement.²⁷³

²⁷¹ “Jordan Sealing Its Borders with Syria and Iraq in Project Financed by U.S.,” World Tribune.com, 9 September 2010, http://www.worldtribune.com/worldtribune/WTARC/2010/ss_jordan0877_09_09.asp

²⁷² “Larsen Calls for Demarcating Borders in Shabaa Farms,” Arabic News, 27 March 2006, <http://www.arabicnews.com/ansub/Daily/Day/060327/2006032708.html>

²⁷³ NOW Lebanon, “Lebanon-Syria Borders: 2009 Report,” 2009, <http://www.nowlebanon.com/Library/Files/EnglishDocumentation/Other%20Documents/Border%20Report%20NO W.pdf>

By early 2011 the border issue had still not been resolved. Reports of camps of armed Palestinians on both sides of the border were confirmed by the UN Security council.²⁷⁴ Border security appears to have been stepped up in early 2011.²⁷⁵

Syria-Iraq Border

Syria's largest border problem exists along its 724-kilometer (450-mile) stretch of boundary with Iraq, which has been called "the fastest-growing humanitarian crisis in the world," because of the Iraqis crossing into Syria to escape instability in their own country.²⁷⁶ In addition, U.S. officials claim that some of the wealthy Iraqi refugees arriving in Syria are helping to finance the insurgency against the U.S. forces in Iraq. In May 2004, the United States placed economic sanctions against Syria because it believed that Syria had failed to stop terrorists from crossing its borders and was thereby undermining efforts to stabilize Iraq. Border guards may be driving vehicles that are easily outrun by people who cross illegally.²⁷⁷



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Syrian / Iraqi Border

Iraq constructed a new security fence along its border with Syria in 2010. The new security fence is designed to reduce terrorism and smuggling between the countries.²⁷⁸ The U.S. State Department warns that U.S. nationals trying to cross to Iraq via Syria have occasionally been detained or refused entry.²⁷⁹

Checkpoints

Though controlling access to and from a country is an enormous undertaking, checkpoints are perhaps one of the most proactive and effective methods of doing so. With the conflict in Iraq, refugees are pouring across the border and into Syria.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁴ Thair Abbas, Mirsal al Tars, Hussein Darwish, and Khaled al Arabi, "Smuggling Across the Syrian-Lebanese Border," 27 April 2008, <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=3&id=12560>

²⁷⁵ Ya Libnan, "Tight Border Security Measures by the Syrians," 26 March 2011, <http://www.yalibnan.com/2011/03/26/tight-border-security-measures-by-the-syrians/>

⁴⁴ Chris Morris, "Iraq Violence Sparks Exodus to Syria," BBC News 13 December 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6172123.stm

²⁷⁷ Ann Scott Tyson, "Iraq Battles Its Leaking Borders," 6 July 2004, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0706/p01s02-woiq.html>

²⁷⁸ Edward Yeranian, "Iraq Inaugurates Span of New Border Security Fence with Syria," 31 January 2010, <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/Iraq-Inaugurates-Span-of-New-Border-Security-Fence-with-Syria-83200482.html>

²⁷⁹ Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State, "Syria: Country Specific Information," 9 September 2010, http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1035.html#entry_requirements

²⁸⁰ IRIN News, "New Rules a 'Death Sentence' for Iraqis," 1 March 2007, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=70470>

Exchange 66: Where is the nearest checkpoint?

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

When stopped at a checkpoint, showing identification is compulsory.



© delayed gratification / flickr.com
Checkpoint, Golan Heights

Exchange 67: Is this all the ID you have?

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

Guards will most likely ask about your previous whereabouts as well as your destination. If asked to step out of your vehicle, politely comply.

Exchange 69: Show us the car registration.

| | | |
|----------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Soldier: | Show us the car registration. | farjeenaa daftar is sayaara |
| Local: | OK. | eh |

You may have to hand over other documents for examination.

Exchange 68: Please get out of the car.

| | | |
|----------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Please get out of the car. | min faDhlak inzool min is sayaara |
| Local: | OK. | Tayeb |

Your car may be searched and your possessions examined, especially if you are suspected of having weapons.

Exchange 70: Are you carrying any guns?

| | | |
|----------|----------------------------|------------------|
| Soldier: | Are you carrying any guns? | ma'ak ay asleHa? |
| Local: | No. | laa |

Landmines

As of 2010, Syria had not signed on to the Mine Ban Treaty. Syrians are believed to have last used mines in 1982. As a result of Arab/Israeli wars, much of the Golan Heights are mined. There are an estimated 500,000 unexploded landmines scattered throughout the area. These mined areas are not mapped and only partially marked. Soil erosion and landslides further compound the problem by causing the landmines to shift to new areas.



© Eilam Gil
Laying and removing landmines

Beyond the Golan Heights there are reports of mines along the borders with both Turkey and Jordan. Jordan laid approximately 67,000 mines along its border prior to 1973.²⁸¹

Exchange 71: Is this area mined?

| | | |
|----------|---------------------|------------------------|
| Soldier: | Is this area mined? | hal manTeqa malghomeh? |
| Local: | Yes. | eh |

²⁸¹ Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor, "Syria," 2010, http://www.the-monitor.org/custom/index.php/region_profiles/print_profile/177

Chapter 5 Assessment

1. Syria's border with Lebanon is now fully demarcated.
FALSE
A joint commission has been formed to work on the problem. To date, the border between the two countries remains fluid, making it difficult to secure.
2. The Kurds in Syria want their own autonomous state within the country.
FALSE
Unlike Kurds in other countries, the Syrian Kurds have not yet made any demands for their own state. They have been denied Syrian citizenship for almost 50 years. In April 2011, more than 250,000 Kurds were granted nationality in the Hasaka province.
3. Current economic policies are making it difficult for the Bedouins to maintain their traditional lifestyle.
TRUE
Current land management reforms, the desertification of the country, and changes in ownership of grazing lands have increased pressures on the nomads, forcing them to settle in cities.
4. Traditional country houses include a section for keeping animals and another for people to live in.
TRUE
The basic country house is divided into two areas. One area is often used to keep animals or to raise vegetables in season.
5. Syrian farmers rely on irrigation to water their crops.
FALSE
About 80% of farmers rely on rain rather than irrigation systems. Thus, they often experience low production yields and financial stress. Accordingly, droughts have caused devastating crop failures in recent years.

CHAPTER 6: FAMILY LIFE

Family Structure

Syrians identify strongly with the community to which their family is attached and thus place a high priority on family, the core unit of Syrian society. If you ask Syrians where they are from, often they will respond in terms of family origin rather than geography.



© Charles Roffey
Family, Aleppo

The family serves as a support network for its members. The ideal Syrian household traditionally includes two or three generations: grandparents, their children (both married and single), and grandchildren. This extended family may also include uncles, aunts, and cousins. When children marry, they tend to stay close to their parents, and may even remain in the same household. Family members usually maintain extremely close and loyal ties to each other. They support each other in good and bad times. Often they work together in business and provide connections for each other in order to succeed, whether in education, politics, or finance.

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

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

Exchange 72: Does your family live here?

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

Western tradition tends to value individual initiative over family solidarity and upward mobility over stability. Syrian culture (and Arab culture in general) does the opposite. The collective and the family are valued over all else. Security is found through attachment to one's family. The blending and reshaping of families through divorce and remarriage, common in the West, may be seen in the Muslim world as evidence of social breakdown.²⁸²

²⁸² Thomas Collelo, ed., "Syria: The Family," in *Syria: A Country Study*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1987, <http://countrystudies.us/syria/>

Evolution of Family in Contemporary Society

The contemporary family in Syria, despite some changes, looks much the same as it did in generations past. Families remain connected, often living in extended households. Numerous factors—including urban migration, housing shortages, economic pressure, more women working outside the home, and higher levels of education—have reduced the size of the family.^{283, 284, 285} Still, the family remains the core of Syrian society, and traditions within the family remain strong. The extended family is seen as a stable, secure place where family members may return when necessary.



© James_gordon_los_angeles / flickr.com
Family, Damascus

Economic uncertainty, however, is impacting families in Syria. Young people may have to delay their marriage plans until they are more stable financially, which is slowing the birthrate. The family unit, for economic reasons, also is becoming smaller.²⁸⁶

Another change is that young people are having a greater say about whom they marry.²⁸⁷ Although parental advice remains important, increasing numbers of young people today are making their own decisions about marriage.²⁸⁸

Changes may also be seen in the roles of women, who are increasingly active in contemporary public life, although not on a widespread basis. Women are now a stronger presence in the Syrian media, and their roles in society are being more openly discussed. Several regional organizations have contributed to this increased media exposure for women. The General Women's Union is one such group advocating that women take a more publicly active role in Syrian society. Gains in education for women are being promoted and publicized. The government continues to push for expanded efforts in promoting education for women.^{289, 290}

²⁸³ Hoda Badran, "Major Trends Affecting Families El Mashrek El Araby," United Nations, n.d., <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/Publications/mtbadran.pdf>

²⁸⁴ Ashraf Ragab El-Ghannam, "An Examination of Factors Affecting Fertility Rate Differentials as Compared Among Women in Less and More Developed Countries," *Journal of Human Ecology* 18, no. 3. (2005):181–192.

²⁸⁵ G. Immerwahr and A. Maier, "Family Size Preferences and Contraception in Syria," Pubmed.gov. 28, June 1986, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12280551>

²⁸⁶ Hoda Badran, "Major Trends Affecting Families El Mashrek El Araby," United Nations, n.d., <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/Publications/mtbadran.pdf>

²⁸⁷ Damascusian, "Crossing the Love Line: Unmarried Couples Living Together in Syria?" 20 March 2011, <http://damascusian.wordpress.com/2011/03/20/living-together/>

²⁸⁸ Damascusian, "The Blind Proposal: Where Syrian Women Stand from Arranged Marriages?" 17 March 2011, <http://damascusian.wordpress.com/2011/03/17/blind-proposal/>

²⁸⁹ Samira Soubh, "Women Empowerment in Syria: Policies and Related Institutions," National Agricultural Policy Center, March 2008, http://www.napcsyr.org/dwnld-files/working_papers/en/34_women-empower_ss_en.pdf

²⁹⁰ European Commission, "National Situation Analysis Report: Women's Human Rights and Gender Equality—Syria," 2010,

<http://www.euromedgenderequality.org/image.php?id=293%20%20target=>

Typical Household

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



© James_gordon_los_angeles / flickr.com
Syrian Family

Exchange 73: How many people live in this house?

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

Families greatly value children, and many families, especially in rural areas, have as many as 10 to 12 children. If there is great economic need, children may work in the fields alongside their parents. Families in urban areas are smaller because of housing shortages and economic uncertainty.²⁹¹

Exchange 74: Are these people part of your family?

| | | |
|----------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Soldier: | Are these people part of your family? | hadool in naas min 'eeltak? |
| Local: | Yes. | eh |

In rural households, women tend to work at home and on the farmland. In many cases, because of their dual roles, women work longer hours than men.²⁹² Men are the wage earners and control distribution of income, while women play more a more social role.²⁹³

²⁹¹ Remco Anderson, "Less Is More," Syria Today, September 2008, <http://syria-today.com/st/index.php/september-2008/228-focus/565-less-is-more>

²⁹² Kendal Jackson, "Women Work Hard in Syria," 13 September 2010, <http://www.abc.net.au/rural/content/2010/s3009879.htm>

²⁹³ International Fund for Agricultural Development, "Syrian Arab Republic: Country Programme Evaluation," August 2001, http://www.ifad.org/evaluation/public_html/eksyst/doc/country/pn/syria/sy_1.htm

Status of the Elderly

Because many members of a family may live together, they remain connected through daily interaction. The elders are respected within this network and are usually not placed in nursing homes.²⁹⁴ Rather, the family will try to ensure that a family member can take care of them. Throughout old age, the grandparents or great-grandparents remain fully integrated members of the family and are consulted for their wisdom and experience. The ideal is for all family members to remain emotionally and physically close throughout their lives.



© Rafael Gomez
Elderly man, Syria

Exchange 75: Is this your entire family?

| | | |
|----------|-----------------------------|------------------|
| Soldier: | Is this your entire family? | hay kel 'eeltak? |
| Local: | Yes. | eh |

Children and Young Adults

Children are valued because they enlarge the family and bring increased social standing. Before the age of 5 or 6, not much is expected of children. Their behavior is generally widely indulged. However, their status in the family, as they grow older, often depends on economic circumstances. In rural areas, older children are often taken out of school to work on the family farm. In comparison, children of more stable or middle-class families are encouraged to continue their education.²⁹⁵



© Charles Roffey
Syrian mother and children

Exchange 76: Do you have any brothers?

| | | |
|----------|---------------------------|---------------|
| Soldier: | Do you have any brothers? | ilak iKhwaat? |
| Local: | Yes. | eh |

Children learn when they are very young that their families provide them with a support system, and they are expected to reciprocate. They learn that they receive moral guidance, support (both emotional and financial), shelter, clothing, and an introduction to social networks from the family. To rebel against this structure could result in being banished from it, which would be a

²⁹⁴ Nadia Muhanna, "A Family Affair," Syria Today, November 2010, <http://www.syria-today.com/index.php/focus/12268-a-family-affair>

²⁹⁵ Monica McGoldrick, Joe Giordana, and Nydia Carcia-Preto, *Ethnicity and Family Therapy* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2005).

severe punishment. All the influences in children's lives mold them and encourage them to accept their place in the family and their lifetime obligations to the family that nurtures them.

Gender Issues

Syria ranks 79th out of 123 nations in incidence of discrimination against women based on property rights, family rights, physical safety, and civil rights. Yet it would be inaccurate to think that Syrian women simply stay at home and raise families.²⁹⁶ More women have served as heads of state in Muslim countries than in the West.²⁹⁷ In Syria specifically, many women serve as government officials or are active in business.²⁹⁸ They have excelled in the education, engineering, and legal fields.²⁹⁹ Women in Syria also work as journalists and are seen unveiled on TV. Despite such gains, however, the overall rate of female participation in the labor force is relatively low. In 2001, only about 21% of the labor force was women.³⁰⁰ By 2006 that number increased to only 27%.³⁰¹ The majority of Syrian women, as in the Middle East in general, stay at home if married and are responsible for the care of the family.



© Petr Kosina
Syrian woman receiving award

By law, women in Syria have the same rights as men, but customs dictate that they be under the protection of male relatives.³⁰² They go out in public, accompanied by their husbands or their families. When out in public, women usually socialize with other women and do not mix freely with men. Their conduct is closely scrutinized to ensure that they act with modesty.

A family's honor rests on the honor and purity of its females. If a woman commits an unchaste act, it is seen as a collective offense, affecting her entire lineage. In comparison, a man's unchaste act belongs only to him.³⁰³ The consequences for women not maintaining the family's honor can be enormous, including violence and even death. Honor killings do occur in Syria at a rate of about 200 every year. They are a cultural practice within which male kin of the guilty

²⁹⁶ Samira Soubh, "Women Empowerment in Syria: Policies and Related Institutions," National Agricultural Policy Center, March 2008, http://www.napcsyr.org/dwnld-files/working_papers/en/34_women-empower_ss_en.pdf

²⁹⁷ Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, *Islamic Societies in Practice* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004).

²⁹⁸ In 2006, the position of Vice President for Cultural Affairs was a woman. Also, 19% of the country's parliament members were women. Other important positions occupied by women included the Secretary of the People's Council Bureau; 10% of all ministerial posts were held by women; 13.5 % were judges; and 11% of the diplomatic corps were women. These figures are according to the Central Bureau of Statistics 2006.

²⁹⁹ Syria Spotlight, "Family Life," 2011, <http://syriaspotlight.com/index.php/lifestyle/family-life.html>

³⁰⁰ Henrik Huitfeldt and Nader Kabbani, "Labor Force Participation, Employment, and Returns to Education in Syria," Conference of the Economic Research Forum, 14 September 2005, <http://www.erf.org.eg/CMS/getFile.php?id=479>

³⁰¹ Samira Soubh, "Women Empowerment in Syria: Policies and Related Institutions," National Agricultural Policy Center, March 2008, http://www.napcsyr.org/dwnld-files/working_papers/en/34_women-empower_ss_en.pdf

³⁰² Samira Soubh, "Women Empowerment in Syria: Policies and Related Institutions," National Agricultural Policy Center, March 2008, http://www.napcsyr.org/dwnld-files/working_papers/en/34_women-empower_ss_en.pdf

³⁰³ Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, *Islamic Societies in Practice* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004).

woman have the right to restore honor to the family by killing the offending woman. There is great opposition to this practice by many activists throughout the Arab world.^{304, 305, 306}

The Syrian government has been working to reduce the gender gap in recent years and to promote equality among men and women. The national strategic plans include increasing political participation among women, eliminating violence against women, reducing or eliminating poverty, and increasing the literacy rate. Although there are definite changes in gender roles and relations, tradition continues to shape the lives of men and women.³⁰⁷

Marriage

Marriage is an important social ritual in Syria. The country's marriage laws come mostly from shari'a law. Marriage is a religious matter in Syria. A Muslim man may marry a Christian woman, but a Christian man may not marry a Muslim woman unless he first converts to Islam.³⁰⁸ Because of the numerous religious faiths in the country, it is difficult to talk about a single "typical" marriage.



© Hannah Schafer
Traditional wedding

In traditional Muslim marriages, because marriage represents a contract between families, the actual wedding is often preceded by elaborate negotiations and social controls. Marriage almost always takes place within the couple's respective religious or ethnic group and social class. This holds true particularly in rural areas and among tribal groups such as the Bedouins.³⁰⁹

Once a decision has been made about whom the son or daughter will marry, the family arranges the marriage. Parents may choose a spouse or simply have a great influence in determining whom their child chooses. Even if parents don't make the actual choice, family custom decrees that the parents of the couple must agree to the marriage. Their agreement is based on consensus that a proposed partner is of a suitable ethnic, social, and religious background. To make these judgments, parents will investigate the background of the family their son or daughter is planning to marry into.³¹⁰

³⁰⁴ BBC, "Syria Amends Honour Killing Law," 2 July 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8130639.stm

³⁰⁵ IRIN, "Syria: Half Measures Against Honour Killings Not Enough—HRW," 29 July 2009, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=85481>

³⁰⁶ Although no official numbers are kept, it is estimated by Human Rights Watch that as many as 200 honor killings occur in Syria each year.

³⁰⁷ BBC, "Syria's Division of the Sexes," 18 January 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/8460522.stm

³⁰⁸ Dalia Haidar, "Faith and Marriage," Syria Today, March 2009, <http://www.syria-http://syria-today.com/st/index.php/march-2009/73-society/496-faith-and-marriage>

³⁰⁹ Ruth Caswell, "Marriage Customs in Arab Society," 2003, <http://www.jordanjubilee.com/meetfolk/marriage.htm>

³¹⁰ Thomas Collelo, ed., "Syria: The Family," in *Syria: A Country Study*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1987, <http://countrystudies.us/syria/29.htm>

Certain marriage customs have changed little over the years. Women are pressured to marry young. It is unusual for a woman to be over 30 and unmarried. During the engagement period, the couple is usually supervised, if possible by a male member of the woman's family. The married couple is expected to have children soon after they marry, for it is children that bring prestige to the family. The couple's affection after they marry is usually focused on the children and their upbringing.

Exchange 77: Is this your wife?

| | | |
|----------|--------------------|---------------|
| Soldier: | Is this your wife? | heyeh martak? |
| Local: | No. | laa |

The wedding is paid for by the husband's family. A Muslim wedding is a large, elaborate celebration that includes feasting, music, and dancing, and may last from 3 to 7 days. Many guests are usually invited and the expense can be quite high.³¹¹

Divorce

Men can initiate divorce more easily than women. They may, for instance, divorce on grounds of adultery, an occurrence that would be difficult for women to prove as reason for initiating a divorce. Nevertheless, there are reasons for which women are allowed to seek a judicial divorce in Syria: for example, if the marriage was not consummated, or the husband is absent for a period of time, or if there is extreme discord or abuse.^{312, 313}



© James_gordon_los_angeles / flickr.com
Houran Bedouin woman

Exchange 78: Are you married?

| | | |
|----------|------------------|----------------|
| Soldier: | Are you married? | inte metjowez? |
| Local: | No. | laa |

Syrian women have certain legal protections after a divorce. In general, in Middle Eastern Islamic societies, women usually have the right and are even expected to return to their father's household after divorce. The children remain legally in the woman's custody until they reach a certain age, and then their custody is transferred to the patrilineal group they were born into. In Syria, boys may remain with their mothers until the age of 9 and girls until the age of 11, after which their custody may be transferred from the mother to the father.³¹⁴ A woman can lose

³¹¹ Lindsay Moran, "Marrying Traditions: East Meets Middle East," 1 June 2007, <http://www.washingtonian.com/articles/weddingguide/4681.html>

³¹² Women's Aid Organisation, "Know Your Rights: Muslim Divorce," 2000, http://www.wao.org.my/news/20021001knowrights_cerai.htm

³¹³ Emory Law University, "Syria (Syrian Arab Republic): Islamic Family Law," n.d., <http://www.law.emory.edu/ifl/legal/syria.htm>

³¹⁴ Emory Law University, "Syria (Syrian Arab Republic): Islamic Family Law," n.d., <http://www.law.emory.edu/ifl/legal/syria.htm>

custody of her children earlier for certain reasons, such as working outside the home, moving to a different city of country, or remarrying.³¹⁵ Divorced women in Syria are entitled to receive child support and alimony.³¹⁶

Although divorce figures are difficult to pinpoint, divorce rates are rising and divorce is becoming more acceptable in Syria. Being divorced does carry a social stigma, however, especially for women, who still face serious obstacles, including making a living and fitting into a society where family is the main focus and descent is patrilineal.^{317, 318, 319}

Names

When naming a child, the family name is very important.³²⁰ Both sons and daughters will take the husband’s family name. The child’s first name, which is the personal name, may be followed by *bin* (meaning “son of”) or *bint* (meaning “daughter of”). So, the name Jamila bint Muhammad would translate to Jamila, daughter of Muhammad.



© James_gordon_los_angeles / flickr.com
Syrian father and daughter

Exchange 79: Are these your children?

| | | |
|----------|--------------------------|------------------|
| Soldier: | Are these your children? | hadool oolaadak? |
| Local: | Yes. | eh |

There are some other general rules for naming a child. The firstborn son is normally named for the paternal grandfather. All children, regardless of sex, take the father’s first name as their own middle name. Thus, everyone knows the familial origin of the child. Because children are seen as serving the future lineage of a family, parents may be identified by their son’s name. Moreover, when referring to their own name, parents will often place “father of” or “mother of” before the child’s name.³²¹ If a family has daughters, the mother will often add the eldest daughter’s name to her own name.

³¹⁵ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, “International Religious Freedom Report 2006: Syria,” <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71432.htm>

³¹⁶ Emory Law University, “Syria (Syrian Arab Republic): Islamic Family Law,” n.d., <http://www.law.emory.edu/ifl/legal/syria.htm>

³¹⁷ Rouba Al-Hammoud, “Increasing Divorce Rates in Syria,” Thara e-Magazine, 10 April 2010, <http://www.thara-sy.com/TharaEnglish/modules/news/article.php?storyid=236>

³¹⁸ Anna Jozwik, “Breaking the Bonds That Bind,” Syria Today, January 2009, <http://www.syria-today.com/index.php/january-2009/105-society/368-breaking-the-bonds-that-bind->

³¹⁹ Jida Malas, “Divorced! Divorced! Divorced!” Forward Magazine, 11 January 2010, <http://www.forwardsyria.com/story/191/Divorced!%20Divorced!%20Divorced!>

³²⁰ RootsWeb, “Syrian Naming Customs,” 25 November 2005, <http://archiver.rootsweb.ancestry.com/th/read/SYRIA/2003-11/1069724110>

³²¹ Terri Dougherty, *Syria: Modern Nations of the World* (Farmington Hills, MI: Lucent Books, 2004).

First names are also given to designate the child's religion. Muslims and Christians do not mix names. For instance, typical Muslim names might be Muhammad or Ali. Usual Christian names might be George or Joseph.

Chapter 6 Assessment

1. A Syrian woman may not petition or ask for a divorce.
FALSE
A woman may ask a court to grant her a divorce if the husband is absent for a long time, if she is being abused by her husband, or if there is extreme discord. Men can initiate divorce more easily than women.
2. Marriage in Syria represents a contract between families.
TRUE
Engagement is often preceded by elaborate negotiations. Marriage almost always takes place within one's own religious or ethnic group and social class.
3. Honor killings are still practiced today in Syria.
TRUE
Although there is increasing protest against this practice, about 200 honor killings take place every year in the country.
4. Syrians prefer to have large families.
TRUE
Although there are economic and social pressures leading to reduced family size, Syria still has one of the largest average family sizes in the world. It is not unusual for a Syrian couple to have 4 children—down from 8 to 10—even in the cities.
5. In Syria, women have the same legal rights as men.
TRUE
By law, Syrian women have the same rights as men, but customs dictate that they be under the protection of male relatives.

FINAL ASSESSMENT

- 1) Syria's relationship with the United States is problematic because it opposed the 2003 war in Iraq.
True or False
- 2) Syria is mainly a desert country without any coastline.
True or False
- 3) The President of Syria is a member of the majority Sunni sect.
True or False
- 4) The Druze originated from the Shi'a branch of Islam.
True or False
- 5) All religious groups in Syria must follow shari'a law in all matters.
True or False
- 6) Women in Syria do not need to follow strict Islamic dress codes.
True or False
- 7) Education is free and compulsory for all students until the age of 16.
True or False
- 8) It is customary to address a person by his or her professional title when meeting for the first time.
True or False
- 9) It is appropriate to say "no thank you" to a host when offered food.
True or False
- 10) It is appropriate to lean against a wall when having a conversation with another person.
True or False
- 11) More than half of Syria's population lives in cities.
True or False
- 12) Cashing traveler's checks in Syria is easy.
True or False
- 13) Most refugees in the country are Palestinian.
True or False

- 14) The World Health Organization reports that Syria has the highest number of traffic accidents in the region.
True or False
- 15) Healthcare is available in most Syrian villages.
True or False
- 16) All Kurdish people in Syria were granted nationality by the President in 2011.
True or False
- 17) The greatest border problem exists along the Syria-Iraq border.
True or False
- 18) The family is the most important social institution in Syria.
True or False
- 19) Most married women in Syria stay at home.
True or False
- 20) Syrian women are granted some legal protections after divorce.
True or False

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