

## SYRIA TODAY

Syria is today in the grip of a catastrophic civil war with Government forces engaging a variety of rebel and terrorist groups. All sides are receiving various forms of international military support. There is destruction on a massive scale and civilian casualty and refugee numbers are enormous.

## THE WAR TO DATE

In 2016, the UN special envoy reported that the war in Syria had likely claimed 400,000 lives.

## REFUGEE SITUATION

According to the UNHCR over 5 million Syrians are registered refugees and this number is rising as the conflict continues.

These refugees are based in:

- Turkey
- Lebanon
- Jordan
- Egypt
- Iraq
- North Africa

In addition, there are 6.5 million Syrians including 2.8 million children displaced within Syria.



Crosscare Refugee Service  
Crosscare Refugee Service is a support service for refugees, asylum seekers and non-EU immigrants.

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COUNTRY PROFILE:

# SYRIA



# Refugee Service

## BASIC FACTS AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Syria has a coastline in the eastern Mediterranean and is bordered by Turkey to the north, Iraq to the east, Jordan and Israel to the south and Lebanon to the west.

## SYRIA PHYSICAL MAP

The west (towards Lebanon) and the north west (towards Turkey) of the country are mountainous. The south east of the country is largely a desert area.

## CLIMATE

Syria has a mixed climate. The west, north and eastern areas are part of the Middle East's "Fertile Crescent". The area is watered by the Euphrates river, but is adversely affected by drought and by Turkish dams on the river. A major drought from 2003-2010 led to significant migration to the cities.

## SYRIAN CITIES

Government investment has been primarily urban with growth of large cities and their catchment areas, including Damascus, Aleppo, Hama and Homs.

Syria is a unitary state divided, for administrative purposes, into 14 Governorates (muhafazat)



## FOOD AND HOSPITALITY

For Syrians inviting others to share one's food is an essential courtesy. The person invited is expected to decline at first, as a gesture of politeness. Men (normally the oldest male) will generally pay for meals in restaurants. It is considered bad manners to divide the bill. Coffee and tea with lots of sugar are drunk throughout the day and smoking is commonplace.

## RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

- Muslim (Sunni) 74%
- Muslim (Alawite & Others) 14%
- Druze & Yazidi 2%
- Christian (Orthodox & Catholic) 10%

Religion and the state are separate and religious observance is not especially strict.

## RELIGIOUS PRACTICE FOR MUSLIMS

Dietary rules are strict. Muslims will not eat pork or consume alcohol. Religious dress for women (e.g. headscarves for women) is becoming more commonplace. The fast of Ramadan is recognised as a period of charity and introspection.

## ISLAMIC CALENDAR

Feast of Eid al Fetir at the end of Ramadan

Feast of Eid al Adha celebrates the sacrifice of Abraham

Feast of Mewlid al Nebi celebrates the birth of Mohammed

## BUSINESS CULTURE

Syrians are generally hard working and entrepreneurial. Thanks to their education system many Syrians are also technologically adept.. Areas of particular skill include construction, hospitality services, small business, arts and the professions.

## SUMMARY

Historically a highly civilised country with a rich culture and heritage, Syria has been overwhelmed by the catastrophe of the civil war. The brutal response of an oppressive regime to pro-democracy protests has precipitated a ruinous conflict. The outcome of the ongoing struggle is uncertain but the damage to the country, its people, infrastructure, environment and social institutions is already immense.

## WOMEN IN SYRIA

Syrian women generally cook, clean and care for children while men work and provide financial support for the family. Girls are expected to help at home while boys do odd jobs to contribute to family finances. This division of roles varies to some extent according to economic class and between urban and rural communities e.g. in wealthier families, women frequently work in professional occupations. Approximately 13% of Syrian women are in employment outside the home. Only the more educated socialise with men outside their families.

Sexual violence (or the threat of) is an issue for Syrian women in areas affected by the current conflict and in refugee situations. This is considered a socially unacceptable matter to discuss. Early marriage is used as a coping strategy e.g., 25% of marriages in refugee camps in Lebanon involved young women in the age range 15-17.

## CHILDREN

A Syrian child normally has three names:  
Their own given name  
Their father's first name  
Their family name (or the first name of their father's father)

Syrians are very affectionate with children but corporal punishment of children is common and accepted. Children are expected to shake hands with their elders and show them respect.

## EDUCATION AND HEALTH

Education in Syria is free and highly valued. 72% of students progress to second level education. The drop-out rate is high among girls and third level education is not attuned to labour market needs. Adult basic literacy is 90% for men and 77% for women. The impact of the current conflict is that the school system is in disarray with attendance falling to as low as 10%. Syrians highly value Western medicine and place great trust in doctors. The presence and emotional support of family and friends is considered very important during illness.

## CAPITAL

Damascus

## MAJOR CITIES

Aleppo, Hama, Homs

## POPULATION

22 million (pre-war figure)

## LAND AREA

185,000 sq km (71,500 sq miles)

## MAIN LANGUAGES

Arabic, English, Kurdish

## MAIN RELIGIONS

Islam, Christianity

## LIFE EXPECTANCY

Before Crisis: 75.9 Years  
Currently: 55.7 Years  
Median Age: 22 years

## CURRENCY

Syrian pound

## ETHNICITY

90% of Syria's population is Arab. The majority of the remainder are Kurds but there are also small numbers of Assyrians, Circassians, Armenians and Bedouin.

# HISTORY

## **16th - 19th C**

Part of the Ottoman Empire (until their defeat at the end of the First World War)

## **1918 - 1946**

French Occupation and Mandate defined by the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916)

## **1946 - 1963**

Independence, series of coups, temporary unity with Egypt (1958-61)

## **1963**

Ba'ath Party government (secular and socialist, emergency laws, arabised education)

## **1970**

Coup by Hafez Al-Assad (defence minister)

## **1971**

Assad becomes President (new constitution, Ba'ath Party dominant). Aligned with USSR. Industrial / commercial growth, education, employment & health at high levels. Alawite sect favoured. Dissent suppressed

## **2000**

Bashar Al-Assad succeeds his father. Continues Alawite political / social elite and suppression of dissent

## **2011**

Arab Spring inspired protests (initially peaceful). Repressive government response. By June 2011, 1400 deaths and 10,000 arrests. Free Syrian Army formed. Joined by Islamist fighters and Syrian military defectors

## **2013**

Dozens of military factions (diverse origins and motivations) active, fighting the regime and each other

## **2014**

ISIS establishes base in Eastern Syria and launches takeover of Western Iraq

# CULTURAL HISTORY

Historical sites of Roman, Christian, Byzantine and Crusader origin are common across the country. Syria is home to six designated World Heritage Sites (five of these, including Palmyra, are now seriously damaged)

# GREETINGS AND CONVERSATION

Syrians are affectionate when greeting relatives and friends of the same gender; kissing and handholding is commonplace. For the opposite gender a handshake is the normal greeting for men, while women will nod and place a hand on their heart. Syrians communicate in a more expressive way than is the norm in Western societies, e.g. standing closer to one another, speaking louder, using more gestures etc. Conversations typically begin with niceties such as enquiring about health and family.

# MARRIAGE

Children normally live with their parents until they reach adulthood and most remain at home until they marry. The legal age for marriage is 18 for men and 17 for women but this can be lower with a guardian's approval. Marriages are generally arranged between families. It is not unusual to have a 10-15 year age gap between husband and wife. A husband is expected to be able to support himself and his wife. Up to c. 16% of men are polygamous and divorce is rare. (Custody in divorce cases is arbitrated by religious courts and children generally stay with their mother until age 14 but go to their father if their mother remarries). Syrian women do not take their husband's name on after marriage and they also (in line with Sharia law) preserve their own property within marriage.

# FAMILY LIFE

Syrian families are large and extended. Family structure is patriarchal. The oldest male is the head of the family and the prime decision-maker. There is a duty of care to family members including the protection of female family members but also the exercise of discipline and supervision. Syrian men and women consider it their responsibility to take care of elderly or ill relatives or members of the community.

# FAMILY REPUTATION

Family honour is considered very important and is strongly related to issues like female behaviour and men's honesty and generosity. Syrians parent closely, monitoring their children's activities and helping with homework. Boys often monitor the behaviour of their sisters.