

Syria

Brief Summary of Historical Background

Archaeologists believe the original civilization in Syria was one of the most ancient on earth. Syria is home to one of the oldest cities ever excavated - Elba- believed to exist around 3000 BCE.

Present-day Syria is only a small portion of the ancient geographical Syrian landmass, a region situated at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea from which Western powers created the contemporary states of [Syria](#), [Lebanon](#), [Jordan](#), and [Israel](#) in the early twentieth century.

Greater Syria, as historians and political scientists often refer to this area, is a region connecting three continents, simultaneously cursed and blessed as a crossroads for commerce and a battleground for the political destinies of dynasties and empires. Throughout history Syria has been conquered by the Persians, Greeks, and Romans and ruled by the Ottoman and Byzantine Empires. Beginning in 333 B.C., with the conquest of the Persian Empire, Alexander the Great and his successors brought Western ideas and institutions to Syria. In the first centuries A.D., Roman rule saw the advent of Christianity in Syria. Paul, considered to be the founder of Christianity as a distinct religion, was converted on the road to Damascus and established the first organized Christian Church at Antioch during the first century. Syria remained at the center of the new Christian religion until the seventh century, when the area came under Muslim Arab rule.

Exploited politically, Greater Syria also has benefited immeasurably from the cultural diversity of the people who came to claim parts or all of it, and who remained to contribute to the remarkable spiritual and intellectual flowering that characterized Greater Syria's cultures in the ancient and medieval periods.

Location and Geography.

Syria borders Turkey to the north, Iraq to the east, Israel and Jordan to the south, and Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea to the west. Most of the population is concentrated in the western region of the country, near the Mediterranean.

The biggest cities in the country — [Aleppo](#), in the northwest, and [Damascus](#), in the southwest — are truly ancient. Damascus, the capital and largest city, was first mentioned in an Egyptian document dating to 1500 B.C. Carbon dating from archaeological sites near Tell Ramad, just outside of Damascus, suggests that site has been occupied as far back as 6300 B.C. Aleppo may be one of the oldest continuously occupied cities in the world: There is evidence of human inhabitation of the area from

about 6000 B.C., and because the city was along the Silk Road, it saw bustling trade for centuries

The Syrians

The population of Syria is 22.85 million (2013) (not including the 35,150 people living in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, of whom 18,150 are Arabs and 17,000 are Israelis). The country is 90.3 percent Arab. Kurds are estimated to constitute between 3 and 9 percent of the population. Also represented are Turks & Armenians, most of whom fled Turkey between 1925 and 1945; and small numbers of Circassians, Assyrians, and Jews. The Bedouins are Arabs, but form a distinct group. They were originally nomadic, but many have been forced to settle in towns and villages.

Linguistic Affiliation.

Arabic is the official language, and 90 percent of the population speaks it. Kurdish, Armenian, and Circassian also are spoken. As a result of colonial influence, French and English (French in particular) are understood and used in interactions with tourists and other foreigners.

Read more: <http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Syria.html#ixzz3uxuStLYX>

Religion

Islam

A religion, founded by Muhammad, whose members worship one God, as Jews and Christians do (God is called Allah in Arabic) and follow the teachings of the Koran. **Islam** means “submission to the will of God”; adherents of **Islam** are called Muslims.

Of the approximately 23 million people who live in Syria the majority, about 74 percent, are Sunni Muslims, about 12 percent are Shia Muslims and about 10 percent are Christian. The split between sunnis & shiites originates in a dispute soon after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD over who should lead the Muslim community. The group now known as Sunnis chose Abu Bakr, the prophet's adviser, to become the first successor, or caliph, to lead the Muslim state. Shiites favored Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law. Ali and his successors are called imams not only lead the Shiites but are considered to be descendants of Muhammad.

The six most important Islamic holy days:

Al-Hijra/Muharram is the Muslim New Year, the beginning of the first lunar month.

For Sunni Muslims, *Ashura* is a day of fasting that was originally observed by Jews to recall when God saved the Children of Israel from the Pharaoh in Egypt. Muhammad made it compulsory for Muslims as well.

For Shiite Muslims, *Ashura* recalls an event circa 680-OCT-20 [CE](#) in Iraq when an army of the Umayyad regime martyred a group of 70 individuals who refused to submit to the Caliph.

Mawlid al-Nabi is a celebration of the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam in 570 CE.

Id al-Fitr (a.k.a. "*Id*" and "*Eid*") is the first day of the 10th month -- i.e. the day after the end of Ramadan. It is a time of rejoicing. Houses are decorated; Muslims buy gifts for relatives. The words "Id" and "Eid" mean festival.

Id al-Adha (a.k.a. the *Feast of Sacrifice* or *Day of Sacrifice*) occurs during the 12th month of the Islamic year. This immediately follows [the Hajj \(pilgrimage to Mecca\)](#). It recalls the day when Abraham intended to follow the instructions of God, and sacrifice his son Ishmael. (This is not a typo; Muslims believe that Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his elder son Ishmael; Judeo-Christians believe that it was Isaac who was involved in the near sacrifice)

Ramadan is the holiest period in the Islamic year; it is held during the entire 9th lunar month of the year. This was the month in which the Qura'n was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. The first day of Ramadan is listed above. It is a time at which almost all Muslims over the age of 12 are expected to fast from sunup to sundown, unless they suffer from health problems which would [make fasting dangerous](#).

Symbolism

The coat of arms displays a hawk, which is the emblem of Muhammad, the founder of the Islamic faith.

As a result of the ongoing Syrian civil war there are currently 2 flags that represent the Syrian state.

The incumbent Assad and Ba'ath led government is using the red-white-black UAR flag since 1980. The flag consists of three horizontal stripes: red on top, white in the middle, and black on the bottom. In the white section are two green stars, symbolizing Islam.

The Syrian Interim Government led by the Syrian National Coalition readopted the green-white-black Independence flag in 2012.

Classes and Castes.

Syrian society was traditionally extremely stratified. People from different classes generally do not socialize with one another, and people in the lower classes often adopt a humble attitude and an acceptance of their position. Class lines tend to coincide with racial differences, as lighter-skinned people hold higher economic and political positions and most of the people in the lower-ranked professions are darker-skinned.

The Baath government has created some shifts in that pattern. Some peasants are moving to the cities and joining the middle class; others now own land. However, there are still large numbers of indigent and landless peasants. Since the Baath takeover, the army officers who participated in the coup have succeeded the landowners as the new elite. There is also a growing middle class as a result of the spread of education.

Symbols of Social Stratification.

The wealthy and well educated have a fairly modern lifestyle with many of the trappings of Western life. Televisions and radios are common except among the extremely poor. Appliances such as air conditioners, dishwashers, and microwaves are only for the very wealthy.

Dress is another indicator of social class. Different tribes and villages have their own distinctive patterns, designs, and colors of clothing. Men traditionally wear long gowns called kaftans, and women wear long robes that leave only their hands and feet exposed. Both men and women wear head wraps. The educated upper classes, particularly the young, tend to prefer modern Western attire. Traditionally, it is a sign of wealth and status in a family for its women to dress in long robes with their faces veiled.

Gender Roles and Statuses

Division of Labor by Gender.

Traditionally, wives in towns are responsible for running the household and are restricted to the home. Rural women often work in the fields in addition to performing domestic tasks. While women are legally allowed to work outside the home, there are significant obstacles. For example, the government's Moral Intelligence Department investigates women before allowing them to hold federal jobs. Only 11 percent of women of working age are employed outside the home; among those women, 80 percent work in agriculture. Only 1 percent of employed women have administrative or managerial positions.

The Relative Status of Women and Men.

The Baath Party was one of the first in the Arab world to declare as one of its goals the emancipation and equal treatment of women; its constitution of 1964 states that all citizens have equal rights. While women are now entitled to receive the same education

as men and to seek employment, the traditional attitude that views females as inferior beings prevails. A woman is considered the possession of a man rather than her own person. She is identified as her father's daughter until marriage; after the birth of a male child, her identity is transferred from the wife of her husband to the mother of her son.

Marriage, Family, and Kinship

Marriage.

By Muslim tradition, marriage is arranged by the couple's families. While more leniency is now allowed, particularly in cities and among the upper classes, it is still extremely rare for a couple to marry against their family's wishes. According to the constitution, the state has assumed the duty of protecting and encouraging the institution of marriage. Nonetheless, the marriage rate has declined because of housing shortages, inflation, rising levels of education, bride money, and the prohibitive cost of weddings.

Although the state and the Muslim religion both oppose the current dowry system, it is deeply entrenched in the family structure. It places immense pressure on the husband and his family, who have to raise large sums of money, and on the bride, who often is forced to marry the suitor who can provide the biggest dowry. Syria was the first Arab country to pass laws concerning polygamy. In 1953, it passed the Law of Personal Status, under which a man was bound to demonstrate that he could financially support two wives before marrying the second one. Whereas divorce laws used to follow the Arabic tradition that a man had only to repeat three times "I divorce you" (in his wife's presence or not), court proceedings are now required.

Domestic Unit.

The family is the primary social unit. An older male, usually the father or grandfather, has the ultimate authority and is responsible for providing for the other family members. It is customary for several generations to live together in the same house. Particularly for women, who are not allowed to leave the home, family provides the primary or only social outlet and relationships with other people.

Inheritance.

An estate passes from the father to the oldest son in a family. Traditionally, not only property is bequeathed, but social and political position as well.

Kin Groups.

Syrians identify very strongly with their families, both immediate and extended. While kinship ties have weakened somewhat with urbanization and modernization, the clan mentality is still a strong influence in the nation's political system.

Read more: <http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Syria.html#ixzz3wHu59BB4>

Syrian War Timeline

The Syrian Civil war has been growing in intensity and scope for more than four years. More than 150,000 people have died since the uprising began in March 2011. At least two million people have left the country, fleeing fighting between government forces and opposition fighters.

Some of the key events in the conflict:

2011:

March: Protests are held in different parts of the country, inspired by other popular uprisings across the Arab world; often referred to as the Arab Spring.

April: President Bashar al-Assad vows to crush what he called "terrorists". Protests calling for the downfall of the regime spread and strengthen.

May: The US imposes sanctions on Assad and senior Syrian officials for human rights abuses.

August: After days of ferocious assault on the city of Hama, the epicenter of anti-regime protests, hundreds are left dead by Syrian security forces backed by tanks and snipers.

The US, Britain, France and Germany and the European Union demand that Assad resign, saying he is unfit to lead. The Syrian National Council is formed, the first opposition coalition of diverse groups seeking an end to Assad's rule.

October: Russia and China veto a European-backed UN Security Council resolution that threatens sanctions against Syria if it doesn't immediately halt its military crackdown against civilians. US pulls its ambassador out of Syria. The Arab League votes to suspend Syria's membership.

November: The Arab League overwhelmingly approves sanctions against Syria to pressure Damascus to end the crackdown.

2012:

February: Russia and China veto a resolution in the UN Security Council that backs an Arab League plan calling for Assad to step down.

March: Syrian troops take control of shattered Bab Amr in Homs after a government assault that raged for weeks.

July: Syria threatens to unleash chemical and biological weapons if the country faces a foreign attack, the country's first acknowledgement that it possesses weapons of mass destruction.

August: Obama says US will reconsider its opposition to military involvement in Syria if Assad's regime deploys or uses chemical or biological weapons, calling such action a "red line" for the US.

November: Syrian anti-government groups strike a deal to form the Syrian National Coalition.

2013:

May: The European Union ends its embargo on sending weapons to help Syrian rebels.

June: US has conclusive evidence Assad's government used chemical weapons on a small scale against opposition forces. Obama authorizes sending weapons to Syrian rebels.

September: A possible diplomatic solution to avoid a US military strike arose when Syria welcomed a suggestion to move all of the country's chemical weapons under international control.

October: Officials from Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) arrive in Damascus to monitor the dismantling of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal.

2014:

January: UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon convenes the first round of peace talks in Geneva involving the Syrian government and Syrian National Coalition.

The establishment of a new "caliphate" was announced by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS/ISIL), with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi named as caliph. The group formally changed its name to "Islamic State" (IS).

June:

The OPCW mission says that it has completed removal of chemical weapons in Syria and that all production equipment and munitions have also been destroyed.

September:

Forces from the United States and five Arab countries launch combined air strikes against IS in Syria.

IS launch huge assault on Kurdish border enclave of Kobani. The town's defense becomes a symbol of the fight against the group and eventually involves the Free Syrian Army (FSA rebels), coalition airstrikes and peshmerga fighters from Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government.

October:

ISIS advances into Kobani but are pounded by coalition airstrikes. Syrian government forces advance around Aleppo, cutting off main supply lines to the city.

Lebanon closes its borders to Syrian refugees after more than a million people fled there to escape the fighting.

2015:**January:**

Kurdish forces say they have pushed IS out of Kobani.

February:

The Syrian government says it will suspend aerial and artillery strikes on Aleppo as part of a UN proposal.

The US and Turkey sign deal to train and arm Syrian rebels fighting IS.

March:

IS suffers a series of defeats in both Iraq and Syria.

The UN and a global alliance of agencies, including Oxfam and Save the Children, say 2014 was the worst year of the conflict yet, and accuse members of the international community of failing victims and doing little to mitigate the humanitarian disaster in Syria.

Sept:

Russian military intervention begins. The activities consisted of air strikes primarily in north-western Syria against militant groups opposed to the Syrian Government.

Nov:

A Russian bomber was shot down by a Turkish air fighter jet in the vicinity of the Turkish Syrian border.

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