

# Syria

## **Location**

Syria is a country in Southwest Asia and is bordered by Lebanon, the Mediterranean Sea, and Cyprus to the west. Israel is Syria's neighbor to the southwest; Jordan and Turkey are the neighbors to the north, and Iraq sits to the east of Syria. Major cities in Syria include: Damascus, Aleppo, Latakia, and Homs.

## **Geography**

The geography in Syria is arid plateau, and only turns into fertile, green land when you get closer to the Mediterranean Sea. The northeastern and southern areas of Syria, Al Jazira and Hawran respectively, are the major agriculture sites in the country. The Euphrates River also goes through the eastern portion of Syria. The majority of larger cities in Syria are located along the coastline.

## **Climate**

The majority of the year in Syria, the weather is hot and dry. The winters in this country are mild. Because of Syria's elevation the country does receive snowfall during the winter.

## **Demographics**

The Euphrates River Valley is where most of the Syrians call home. The majority of the population calls the valley and the fertile strip between the coastal mountains and the desert home. The population density, is 258 people per square mile.

## **Ethnicity**

The population (2008) in Syria is 90% Arab (including 400,000 Palestinian refugees). The minorities in Syria include the Kurds, Syrian Turkmen, Assyrian Christians, Armenians, and Iraqi refugees. The Kurds make up approximately 9% of the population and are one of the largest minorities in Syria. The Kurds reside in the northeast corner of Syria and still speak their native language. The Syrian Turkmen also make up approximately 8%-9% of the Syrian population.

That population lives in the larger cities in Syria (Damascus, Aleppo, Latakia). The Assyrian Christians make up 3% of the total Syrian population and live in the northern portion of the country. A large amount of Syrians have migrated to the Americas and Brazil.

## **Religion**

The religious makeup of Syria is 90% Muslim and 10% Christian. Due to the large surge of Iraqi refugees since 2007, the Christian inhabitants have risen to a little under 12%. In the Muslim category, approximately 74% are Sunni and the rest of the Muslims are scattered between different categories. The other categories include Alawis, Druze, and Twelver Shi'a. There are also different sects of Christians in Syria. These include Greek Orthodox, Catholics, the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church, and Nestorian Assyrians. There is also a small Jewish population that is contained to the city of Damascus.

## **History**

Research has shown that Syrian civilization is one of the oldest on earth. Ebla, a city in northern Syria, appears to have been founded in 3000 BC and built its empire through trade with neighboring areas. There is evidence of Ebla's contact with pharaohs in Egypt, which confirms its antiquity. During the second millennium BC, a variety of populations moved into Syria. Populations included Phoenicians, Arameans, Canaanites, and Hebrews. Syria also proved to be an important Roman province in 64 BC. This was a time when Antioch (the Athens of the East) was the capital of Syria. This was one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire and ancient world.

Syria was a crucial in Christian history. The first Christian Church was organized in the Syrian city of Antioch. During Muslim conquests, Syria was then divided into several military districts and all of them were a part of the Umayyad empires. During the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, Syria was under constant attacks from the Byzantines. From the 16<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, it was part of

the Ottoman Empire. After World War I, the empire broke apart and Syria and its surrounding areas were divided by the United Kingdom and France. Modern-day Syria was taken control of by France. After WWII, France fell and Syria ended up declaring their independence in 1941, but was not recognized as independent until January 1, 1944. After their independence, Syria was enduring constant upheavals from British, French, and Israeli troops.

The Baath Party took over in 1970 and its reign lasted until the year 2000. Hafez al-Assad was the party leader and moved to consolidate control under the Baath Party. He created a legislature and 87 out of 173 members of this legislature were from the Baath Party. In 1973, Syria and Egypt began the Yom Kippur War with a surprising attack against Israel. Egypt and Syria both ended up losing the war despite the surprising attack. Soon after, Syria sent troops into Lebanon to prevent the country from being taken over. This marked the beginning of 30 years of Syrian military presence in Lebanon. After Hafez al-Assad died in 2000, the constitution amended a law that lowered the president's minimum age to 34, so his son could be president. Bashar al-Assad was voted into office a month after his father's death. Most recently, a site outside of Damascus was bombed for being a suspected terrorist training facility. In 2003, the US Congress passed the Syria Accountability Act to end Syrian involvement in Iraq and Lebanon.

## **Economy**

The country of Syria as a whole is middle-class. The economy is based largely on agriculture, industry, and energy. Gross Domestic Product growth skyrocketed in the 1960s and proved too good to be true, and shrank back approximately 30% in the 1960s. Due to diversification, the Syrian GDP has steadily risen. Foreign aid was given by the United States to Syria in 1997 in the amount of \$199 million for various programs. The amount of Syrian Pounds

that are needed to equal \$1 US is going up substantially. Today (2008), if you were to go to Syria and exchange \$1 US, you would receive 52 Syrian Pounds. Overall, the Syrian economy has made gradual improvements as they are beginning to address structural problems.

## **Language**

Arabic is the official language and most common language spoken in Syria. Kurdish is spoken in the Kurd region, and many educated Syrians speak English and French. Other languages spoken in specific regions include Armenian, Turkmen, Aramaic, and Western Neo-Aramaic.

## **Education**

Education in Syria is free and compulsory from the ages of six to eleven. It is based on the old French System. Their education entails six years of primary education followed up by three years of vocational training then three more years of an academic or vocational program. The last three years are necessary to train for university admission. There are tests after each stage of education to see if the student will go into academic training or vocational training. Enrollment of Syrians in post-secondary education is over 150,000. The education system in Syria has been under close government supervision by the Baath Party. The literacy rate of Syrians over age 15 is 86% for males and 73.6% for females.

## **Government**

Like previously stated, Bashar al-Assad is the current president of Syria and a member of the Baath Party. Syria is also divided into fourteen governorates, which are divided into sixty districts. There is a governor in charge of each area and he heads each governorate.

## **Transportation**

The railway system in Syria is crucial for transportation of goods and people. An agreement was also reached to provide more railways between Syria and Lebanon. Waterways and ports are also important in Syria, with it being a costal country that runs along the

Mediterranean Sea. The transportation of crude oil is important and substantial enough that there are pipelines for the movement of the product.

## **Food**

Syrian cuisine includes pita bread, which is quite popular in the United States. Hummus, which goes with the pita bread, is another large portion of Syrian cuisine. Stuffed zucchini, minced beef, and cheese are popular in Syria. A popular dessert in Syria is baklava, which originated in Turkey.

## **Conclusion**

Syria is a country whose past is full of constant upheaval and turmoil. With ties to recent terrorist activities, it looks like that turmoil is not going to go away any time soon. With an improving and more aware economy, Syria has been building up there economic state, despite the decreasing value of the Syrian Pound.

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