



# Արևմտա-միջերկրյան Հայաստանի Եզգային Խորհուրդ

## Syria

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### Environment

Syria lies on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Turkey lies to its north, Iraq to its east and south-east, Jordan to its south, and Israel to its south-west. Lebanon juts into Syria's south-west, along the Mediterranean coast. The country consists largely of a high arid plateau, but the greener north-west and the Euphrates River valley allow extensive farming. Syria has oil and reserves in the north-east, but these are in decline.

### Peoples

Main languages: Arabic (official), Kurdish (Kirmanji dialect), Armenian, Aramaic, Circassian, Turkish.

Main religions: Sunni Islam (74%), Alawite Islam (11%), other Muslim (including Ismaili and Ithna'ashari or Twelver Shia) (2%), Christianity (including Greek Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Maronite, Syrian Catholic, Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic) (10%), Druze (3%).

Main minority groups: Alawi Muslims 2.1 million (11%), Christians of various denominations 1.9 million (10%), Iraqi refugees 1.5 - 2 million (7.8 - 10.4%), Kurds 2 - 2.5 million (10- 15%), Druze 580,000 (3%), Palestinians 442,000 (2.3%), Isma'ilis and Ithna'ashari or Twelver Shia 386,000 (2%), Armenians 323,000 (1.7%). [Note: Percentages for Sunnis, Christians and Druze are taken from US CIRF, 2007. That report lists 'other Muslims', including Alawi at 13%. The UK FCO's Syria country profile lists Alawi as 11%, so that leaves 2% as Ismaili and Twelver. The 1.5 million estimate for Iraqi refugees comes from the Syrian health minister, as quoted by IRIN News in July 2007; the 2 million estimate comes from the Syrian Organization for Human Rights, August 2007. The figure for Kurds comes from the 2011 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter. The number of Palestinians is taken from UNRWA statistics from December 31, 2006. The number for Armenians comes from Ethnologue, 1993. The number of Jews (mentioned below) is from US CIRF, 2007. Numbers and percentages have been converted using the CIA World Factbook's estimated total population in 2010 of 22.5 million.]

Specific demographic data for Syria is unreliable. Some minority groups are defined primarily by religion, others by ethnicity, and some are relatively recent immigrants. Many of them can also be found in neighbouring countries. Physical and human geography have been major determining factors in Syria's social fabric: city, desert, mountain and sea. Until the present century, social divides between town dwellers, peasants and Bedouin, and the conflict between the latter two, were almost as important as religious differences.

In the mountain ranges stretching along the littoral, and across to Mount Hermon and the Jabal Druze in south Syria, religiously 'dissident' communities were able to hold their own against Muslim or Christian orthodoxy. On the coastline a more cosmopolitan Mediterranean trading culture existed which had as much in common with other seafaring cultures of the Mediterranean as it had with its hinterland.

Alawi Muslims are Syria's largest religious minority. They live mainly in the Nusayri Mountain range in the coastal part of north-west Syria, but also on the inland plains of Homs and Hama. Smaller numbers of Ismaili Muslims live for the most part in the coastal mountain range, south of the main Alawi areas. Twelver Shias live in a handful of communities near Homs and to the west and north of Aleppo.

Greek Orthodox Christians and Greek Catholics are concentrated in and around Damascus, Latakia and the neighbouring coastal region. Syriac Orthodox Christians are located mainly in the Jazira, Homs, Aleppo and Damascus and Syrian Catholics in small communities mainly in Aleppo, Hasaka and Damascus. There is a small community of Maronite Christians mainly in the Aleppo

region. The Maronite community is a surviving remnant from before the majority sought safety in Mount Lebanon in the sixth century. It has maintained ties to Rome since the twelfth century, and the liturgy is in Syriac.

Druze are located primarily in Jabal Druze on the southern border abutting Jordan. Isma'ilis live mainly in Salamiya, east of Hama. There are a small number of Yezidis in Syria, ethnic Kurds who practice a 4,000 year old religion (see Iraq). Their numbers have declined over the years largely due to assimilation into Islam. One community is in Jabal Sim'an and the Afrin valley in north-west Syria, and dates back at least to the twelfth century. A slightly larger group, composed of refugees mainly from southern Turkey but later also some from Iraq during the 1920s and 1930s, is located mainly around Hasaka in the Jazira, north-east Syria as well as Aleppo.

Of a Jewish population that numbered around 40,000 before Israel's establishment in 1948, nearly all have emigrated and only around 100 to 200 Jews remain in Syria today. They are concentrated in Damascus and Aleppo. Jewish settlers moved into the Golan Heights after 1967, and Israel annexed it in 1981, but the United Nations refused to recognize the new status.

Around 1.5 million Kurds form Syria's largest ethnic minority. About a third of them live in the foothills of the Taurus Mountains north of Aleppo, and an equal number along the Turkish border in the Jazirah. A further 10 per cent can be found in the vicinity of Jarabulus northeast of Aleppo, and from 10-15 per cent in the Hayy al-Akrad (Quarter of the Kurds) on the outskirts of Damascus.

Armenians, Circassians and Turkomans are smaller ethnic minorities. Armenians of various Christian denominations live mainly in Aleppo, but also in Damascus and the Jazira. Several thousand Circassians live mostly in Damascus. They are descended from refugees who fled Russian invasion of the North Caucasus in the latter half of the nineteenth century and settled mainly in the Jawlan (Golan). Here they came into conflict with the Druze. They were mobilized as auxiliary forces against the Druze in 1896 and 1910 and by the French in 1925. In 1967 over half the Circassian community lost their homes when Israel captured the area. About half the Circassians are concentrated in the southwestern Hawran Province. Al-Qunaytirah was viewed as their provincial capital that was destroyed during the October 1973 war between Israel and Syria, and they later moved to Damascus. Given that Circassians served as troops with the French during the mandate period, many Syrian Arabs are somewhat distrustful of them, although relations are much improved these days. Little information is available on ethnic Turkomans in Syria, who for the most part are Sunni Muslims, and many of whom have assimilated into Arab culture.

There are over 442,000 Palestinians living in Syria, refugees driven off their land with the establishment of Israel in 1948 and their descendents. About half of them live in refugee camps.

Since the March 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, Syria has taken in around 1.5 million Iraqis and by one Syrian NGO estimate in August 2007, as many as two million. The refugees have swelled Syria's population by 8-10 per cent and the government estimates that the burden has cost it one billion USD each year. Since the beginning of unrest in Syria in March 2011, many Iraqi refugees living in Syria have returned to Iraq. At the same time, more than 20,000 Syrians have fled to neighbouring countries.

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## History

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Syria owes its configuration to the Allied partition of the Arab Near East after 1918, and in particular to French administration from 1920 to 1946. Under the Ottomans the geographical, economic and cultural concept of Syria was known as Bilad al-Sham and embraced all of modern Israel/Palestine and Lebanon as well as modern Syria.

With the defeat of the Ottomans, a congress of representatives from Greater Syria met in Damascus in 1919 and affirmed its intention to found 'a constitutional monarchy based upon principles of democratic and broadly decentralized rule which shall safeguard the rights of minorities'. French military intervention in 1920 thwarted this intention, and Feisal, King of Syria, was driven into exile. Within a month France allocated the ports of Tripoli, Sidon and Tyre, and their respective hinterlands, and the Biqa'a valley, to its creation of Greater Lebanon, and in 1939 surrendered the Sanjaq of Alexandretta (subsequently, the Hatay) to Turkey (in violation of its obligations under the League of Nations mandate).

France played upon minority differences and ignored a more fundamental underlying common identity. It fragmented the rest of Syria into four territories: the north-western Nusayri mountains for the Alawis, Jabal Druze for the Druze, and the cities of Damascus and Aleppo as two separate entities. As a result of Arab nationalist pressure, France reunited these territories in 1936. Among the minorities, notably the Alawis and Druze, there was division between those who wished to foster minority separatism, frequently the dominant chiefs for whom this guaranteed and enhanced their authority, and newly educated people of lowlier birth, who saw their future in a wider nationalist context.

France recruited minority groups - Alawis, Druze, Isma'ilis, Christians, Kurds and Circassians - into its local force, Les Troupes Speciales du Levant, a policy that not only caused tension with the Sunni Arab majority but also paved the way for later minority control of Syria. Military service offered an opportunity for betterment for low-born but ambitious, often nationalist, recruits. Syria became independent in 1946 and three years later a coup installed the first in a succession of Kurdo-Arab officers in power, each of whom relied on minority or local pools of support.

In the meantime the Ba'ath (Renaissance) Party, founded in 1940 with a socialist Arab nationalist ideology, made progress in the poorer parts of Syria, particularly the Alawi and Druze areas, and within the military. Part of its appeal to confessional minorities was its secular emphasis on the equality of all Arabs, irrespective of religion, and its view of Islam as a cultural rather than religious component of Arab national identity. In 1963 the Ba'ath seized power, purging the army of 'disloyal elements' and replacing them with officers drawn disproportionately from the Alawi and Druze communities. By 1966 many Sunnis had been removed from positions of responsibility. A Druze attempt to displace Alawi ascendancy in the Ba'ath Party failed in 1966, and many Druze were

purged from the security forces. Although power was already concentrated in the hands of a largely Alawi leadership, Isma'ilis were the next to be purged from the armed forces.

Syria plotted with other Arab countries to attack Israel in 1967, but Israel launched a pre-emptive strike. At the end of the Six Day War, Israel occupied a part of Syria, the Golan Heights.

In 1970 Defence Minister Hafez al-Assad came to power in a coup against a fellow Alawi, and formally became president in 1971. Although many posts in the armed forces and security apparatus were held by Sunnis, Alawis from al-Assad's own family, tribe or village neighbourhood held the essential keys to control of the state.

A Syrian and Egyptian attempt to regain lost territory through a surprise attack on Israel in 1973 was defeated. Israel annexed the Golan Heights in 1981 and began settling Jews there in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention. The United Nations refused to recognize the Israeli annexation.

From 1979 the regime began to face a serious Sunni revivalist challenge, as civil disobedience spread from one city to another. In 1982 the Syrian military suppressed an uprising organized by the Muslim Brotherhood in the city of Hama, reportedly killing up to 20,000 and causing mass destruction. Much of the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership fled the country.

Hafez al-Assad ruled until his death in 2000, when he was succeeded by his son, Bashar. After initial hopes of political liberalization, Bashar al-Assad continued his father's heavy-handed tactics. Tension between Syria and western countries grew following the March 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, which prompted waves of Iraqi refugees to enter Syria.

Considered as one of the most repressive regimes in the Arab world, the Syrian regime brutally suppressed a Kurdish uprising in 2004, which began as a reaction to the abuses waged against the population of Kurds living in Syria's Kurdish areas.. It is widely believed that the uprising was sparked by an incident at Qamishli stadium before a football game, when Arab Baathists supported by Syrian security forces clashed with Kurdish fans.

Following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005, protests against Syrian forces in Lebanon caused the government to withdraw them. Events in Lebanon appeared to provide a boost to opposition groups in Syria itself. Syrian government policy – which has focused on supporting terrorist groups in Iraq and fuelling unrest in Lebanon and other neighbouring countries especially after 2005 - has intensified the international isolation of Syria.

In March 2011, inspired by current events in Tunisia and Egypt, anti-government uprisings broke out in Syria in mid-March 2011. Bashar al-Assad's regime responded by using military force against defenseless protesters. By September 2011, the protests had left 2,600 people dead, sent 10,000 fleeing to Turkey, and seen tens of thousands more injured or arrested according to the UN. As a result of the crack down on peaceful demonstrators, President Bashar al-Assad is facing increasing international pressure to step down after losing his legitimacy in the country.

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## Governance

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The regime of Hafez al-Assad maintained its position by tight security control, which led to widespread human rights abuses. Generally speaking, these were applied at an individual level, and no minority was the specific target of persecution. In fact, minorities were sometimes thought of as allies of the regime against the majority population, and this led at times to privileges. Technically it was an offence to 'incite strife among the various sects or elements of the nation' (Press Code of 1948) or to carry out 'sectarian activities' (Law of Associations 1958).

His government continued the policy of its predecessors in using one group against another or applying pressure to any minority which demonstrated political cohesion. The regime ensured that no community in Syria had the ability to displace the Alawis. Crudely speaking, the heart of the regime lay in the overlap among four 'circles of power': the army, the Ba'ath Party, the Alawi community, and the Assad family. Under this system, Syria fell into deepening poverty despite its oil exports.

Upon Hafez al-Assad's death in 2000, his son Bashar became president. Initial moves to ease the stifling controls of his father, including the release of hundreds of political prisoners and an expansion of civil liberties, became known as the 'Damascus Spring'. However, the new policy of liberalization suddenly reversed in February 2001, as civil society leaders and reformist politicians were arrested and promised economic reforms were jettisoned. A state of emergency declared in 1963 allowed security services to operate nearly unchecked against regime opponents. But on 21 April 2011, the Syrian government lifted the almost 50-year-old state of emergency in an attempt to placate Assad's opponents. However, despite the abolition of the emergency law and the Higher State Security Court, security forces have escalated the use of violent and repressive measures against unarmed civilian protesters.

Under Syria's 1973 constitution, the president serves for seven-year terms after nomination by the Ba'ath Party and confirmation by popular referendum. On 27 May 2007, Bashar al-Assad was re-elected to a second seven-year term as president, winning 97 per cent of votes in a nationwide referendum. In reality there is no democratic element involved and the entire exercise is controlled by the regime. Parliament is toothless, and undesirable candidates are prevented from seeking office.

Syria has an idiosyncratic position regarding Islam. The constitution includes the requirement that 'Islam shall be the religion of the head of state', included at popular insistence. Along with Lebanon, Syria is unique in the Arab world in not enshrining Islam as the

religion of the state itself. But unlike Lebanon, Syria does not seem to exhibit at the surface level any of the confessional tensions that are prevalent in Lebanon.

Women have enjoyed a measure of emancipation under Ba'athist rule, with some elected to parliament and others appointed to senior professional positions. Yet by other measures, Syria's government still has far to go in improving women's rights. For example, the law provides that rapists be acquitted if they marry their victims, and women may not travel without authorization of their husbands. Social attitudes toward women are extremely varied, especially in the countryside.

In March 2011, anti-government riots broke out in the city of Darra in the south and security forces opened fire onto unarmed crowds, killing several people. Unrest quickly spread across the country. Towns such as Deraa, Homs and Douma were besieged for days as President Bashar al-Assad sent troops and tanks to quell protests, killing hundreds of unarmed civilians. Men were rounded up in night-time raids and electricity and communication lines were cut.

Protesters have continued to call for democracy and freedom and an end to the current regime. But despite economic sanctions and pressure from the international community to step down, President Assad has held firm. After six months of demonstrations 2,600 people have died according to the UN in statement in September 2011.

President Assad has made some concessions and promised further reform, but as long as people continue to be killed by security forces, these promises stand for very little. In July 2011, the Syrian government endorsed a new law to allow new political parties other than the Baath Party. However, the new law prohibits parties based on religion, ethnicity, denomination or profession.

Events from Syria are hard to verify as international journalists have been largely prevented from reporting there, but video and mobile phone images emerging from the country have continued to show tanks and soldiers firing on unarmed protesters. A report published by HRW in August 2011, suggest that the systematic killings and torture by Syrian security forces since protests began qualify as crimes against humanity.

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### **Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples**

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Syria is a highly ethnically and religiously diverse society. The country has a large Sunni majority and minority groups include Alawis, Christians, Druze and Kurds. President Bashar al-Assad belongs to the Alawites (a sect of Shi'a Islam) and has concentrated power among his family and the privileged Alawite community. Alawis hold key positions of power in business, government and the military and rule.

Though the Constitution provides for freedom of religion, the US State Department Report on International Religious Freedom 2010 notes that the government continues to impose restrictions on this right, and that Jehovah's Witnesses remained banned and suffer discrimination in accessing employment as a result. The report also notes that though there is no formal legislation forbidding proselytizing in Syria, those who are considered to be doing so risk arrest and detention that can last from five years to life.

In the decade since President Bashar al-Assad came to power, some of Syria's minorities have continued to suffer repression. The country's ethnic Kurdish minority (around 10–15 per cent of the population) has been particularly affected. The current regime fears the Kurdish community and the possibility that Kurdish advances in northern Iraq will inspire Syria's Kurds to seek an independent Kurdistan. The 1962 census stripped around 120,000 Kurds of citizenship, amid state allegations that they had entered the country, settled and registered illegally. HRW and other NGOs estimate that there are around 300,000 stateless Kurds living in Syria today.

Security officials' heavy-handed response to a Kurdish uprising in 2004 threatened to deepen tensions between Kurds and the Syrian state. Since then, the Syrian regime has escalated its discriminatory policies towards Kurds, many of whom have been killed and arrested.

Between August and September 2010, the UN Human Rights Council conducted its first ever mission to the country. Olivier De Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, reported that Kurds continue to be denied Syrian citizenship, and therefore cannot access publicly subsidized food, cannot travel abroad, and cannot access employment and education in the public sector. Many live in the eastern part of the country, and have experienced severe drought and increasing poverty since 2005, his report said.

Since anti-government protests broke out in March 2011, the Syrian regime has desperately tried to ally with ethnic and religious minorities against the Sunni majority by responding to minority protesters with less violence. But most Syrian minorities have been determined to support the opposition.

Opposition figures have stressed that they seek a 'multi-ethnic and religiously tolerant society'. But they represent a diverse group and many prominent figures in the opposition, including the Muslim Brotherhood, are still abroad. There are fears that the country will descend into chaos if Assad's regime should fall.