

# Short Guide to: Syrian Arab Republic

**Location:** officially the Syrian Arab Republic, Syria is a country in Western Asia, bordering Lebanon to the southwest, the Mediterranean Sea to the west, Turkey to the north, Iraq to the east, Jordan to the south, and Israel to the southwest.

**Population:** 16.9 million

**Language:** Arabic is the official language, although Kurdish, Turkish, Neo-Aramaic, Circassian, Chechen, Armenian, and also Greek are spoken.

**Major Religions:** About 87% of Syrians are Muslim (74% are Sunni), 10% are Christian (Orthodox, Uniate, and Nestorian), 3% are Druze, and a few are Jewish (mainly in Damascus and Aleppo).

**Major Ethnic Groups:** 74% Arab, indigenous Levantine people, 10% Kurds, 8% Turkish speaking Syrian Turkman, 4% Assyrians, 1.5% Circassians and 1% Armenians

## Geography

Syria can be divided geographically into 4 main areas: the fertile plain in the northeast, the plateau, coastal and mountain areas in the west, the central plains, and the desert and steppe region in the central and south eastern areas. The Euphrates river flows from Turkey in the north, through the Syrian Arab Republic and down to Iraq in the southeast.

## History and Politics

Syria has a very long history. It was a land of Phoenicians. Later it became part of the Achaemenid Empire, Roman Empire and then the Eastern Roman Empire. In those days people spoke the Syriac language. The city Antioch was great and one of the important cities in Christendom. In the Arab Empire people began to speak the Arabic language. When World War 1 ended, France was given control over Lebanon and Syria. Britain was given power over Iraq, Jordan and Palestine. A border was drawn between Iraq and Syria in 1920. France controlled Syria until 1946. That year Syria became its own country. Syria was part of the United Arab Republic with Egypt in 1958-1961. Syria had some wars with Israel and some territories like the Golan Plateau were occupied by Israel. Syria is a republic. A new constitution has been in place since 2012 a bloody civil war began against President Bashar Al-Assad.

## Culture

Syria is a traditional society with a long cultural history. The family is the heart of Syrian social life. Frequent visits and exchanges of invitations for meals among family members are integral to daily living. Although formally arranged marriages are becoming less frequent, parents ordinarily hold decisive authority in approving or rejecting a match. A visible expression of Syria's cultural eclecticism is demonstrated in its range of clothing styles: while some women choose the latest European fashions, others are completely veiled; older men in traditional black baggy trousers contrast with youths sporting Western styles.

## Arts

The artistic representation of animal or human life in Syria is proscribed by Islam, and until World War 1 public figurative art in Syria was restricted to geometric, vegetative, and animal designs, which adorn most palaces and mosques. Following World War I, drawing was taught in the schools, and talented artists began to emerge. Sculpture is mainly confined to decorations hewn in white marble. Damascus is particularly famous for this type of sculpture, and beautiful examples of it can be seen in its palaces and public buildings. Syrians' taste for the traditional arts is expressed in dances such as the al-Samah, the Dabkeh in all their variations, and the sword dance. Marriage ceremonies and the births of children are occasions for the lively demonstration of folk customs.

## Sport

Football (soccer) is the country's most popular sport, and Syrians closely follow both Arab and European matches broadcast on national television. Weightlifting, judo, and karate are popular in the cities, and health clubs and gyms are becoming increasingly common in the capital. There are stadiums in Damascus, Aleppo, and Latakia, where occasional sporting events are held. Damascus was home to the fifth and seventh Pan Arab Games

## Food & Drink

Syrian cuisine is rich and varied in its ingredients, linked to the regions of Syria where a specific dish has originated. Syrian food mostly consists of Southern Mediterranean, Greek, and Southwest Asian dishes. Some Syrian dishes also evolved from Turkish and French cooking: dishes like shish kebab, stuffed zucchini/courgette, and yabra. The main dishes that form Syrian cuisine are kibbeh, hummus, tabbouleh, fattoush, labneh, shawarma, mujaddara, shanklish, pastırma, sujuk and baklava. Baklava is made of filo pastry filled with chopped nuts and soaked in honey. Syrians often serve selections of appetizers, known as meze, before the main course. Za'atar, minced beef, and cheese manakish are popular hors d'œuvres. The Arabic flatbread khubz is always eaten together with meze. Drinks in Syria vary, depending on the time of day and the occasion. Arabic coffee is the most well-known hot drink, usually prepared in the morning at breakfast or in the evening. It is usually served for guests or after food. Arak, an alcoholic drink, is a well-known beverage, served mostly on special occasions.