

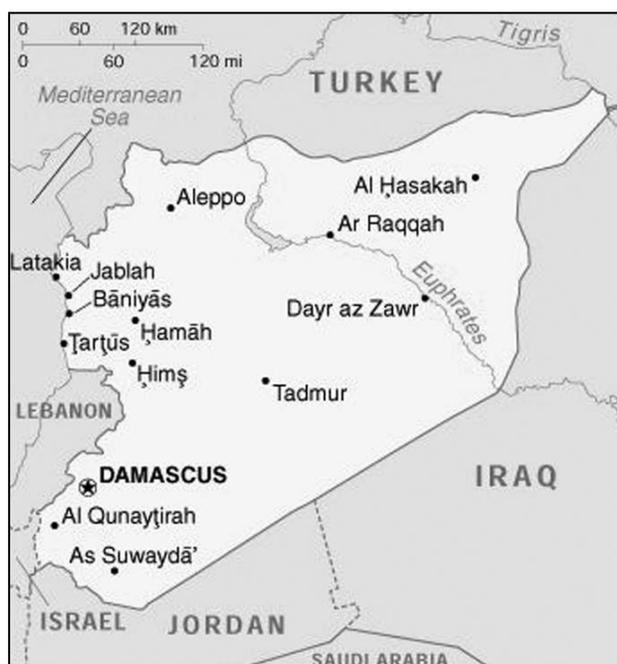
Country Profile

SYRIA

Syria has been called the heart of the Arab world. Before the Islamic religion came to its borders, Syria was Arabic in culture and language. Most of the Christians are Arabic Christians. Many Christians take Arabic names. Arabic languages are used in the church liturgies. The culture is warm, open, and hospitable. Clothing is bright and bold. Families are close and tightly knit. Syria is Arabic.

A Long History

Syria is also ancient. Damascus, the capital of Syria, is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. Founded around 2500 BC, it stretches back into Bible times. Damascus is mentioned 67 times in the Bible. Syria is home to Naaman the leper, the Hittites of the Old Testament, and most famously, the conversion of Saul.



Syrian Arab Republic

Size

Slightly larger than North Dakota

Capital

Damascus (population 2,550,000)

Government

Republic with military regime

Major Ethnic Group

Arab (92%)

Official Language

Arabic

Religions

Muslim (90%)

Christian (5%)

Climate

Mostly semi-arid desert

The history of the Christian church in Syria is a long one. The Apostle Paul met Christ on the road to Damascus. He was led to the city, where he met Ananias and a group of other disciples (Acts 9:8,10,19). There were believers in Syria from the beginning of the spread of the Christian faith.

The ancient territory of Syria was larger than the borders of Syria today. In New Testament times, Syria included the city of Antioch, which was its capital city. The book of Acts records that Paul and Barnabas both labored in Antioch for a year (Acts 11:26). Before they arrived, the Apostle Peter is believed to have brought the Christian faith to Antioch. Some say that he planted the first Christian church as early as 37 AD. Peter is believed to be the first bishop of Antioch, and a man named Ignatius was his successor. Ignatius, in turn, passed the office of bishop to someone else. The Syrian Orthodox Church believes that its bishops still follow in this succession today.

Church Pressures

As the church grew, it was divided by doctrinal differences on the nature of Christ. In the fifth century the church split. One side

persecuted the other, and the Orthodox Church was forced out of Antioch. Persecution pushed them southeast, and they settled in the modern-day area of Syria.

Soon pressures came to the church from another area. Islamic rulers captured Damascus in 634 AD. When this happened, nearly all of Syria's population was nominally Christian. One hundred years later, in 722, most of Syria was still Christian. Out of 4 million, 3.8 million claimed the name of Christ. Relations broke down, however, and Christians were persecuted. The population was half Muslim by the time the crusaders arrived in the 12th and 13th centuries. The crusaders only made life worse for everyone. After they left, (600 years after Islam first came to Syria), ninety percent of Syria was Muslim.

Political Changes

As history continued, Syria was incorporated into the Muslim Ottoman Empire. After the defeat of the empire in WWI, Syria was handed over to French colonialists. Syria soon regained her independence after WWII. Since then, Syria has been stuck in a quagmire of Middle Eastern politics.

After WWII, the Allies divided up the Middle East into several different countries. Among them were: Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and unforgettably, the new nation of Israel. Problems arose immediately. Partnering with other Arabic countries, Syria tried to capture Israel back for the Arabic world. The plans failed. After a series of wars, Israel actually covered more land than it did in the beginning. Today the land occupied by Israel is highly disputed. A very sensitive area is a slice of land northeast of the Jordan River known as the Golan Heights. Israel took this land from Syria in the Six Day War of 1967. This is still a source of violence and political tension today.

Syria Today

Within the main country of Syria itself, there is peace and relative freedom. Syria is officially a secular state, although by law the president must be a Muslim. The government tries to stop

extremist movements. Islamic fundamentalism is discouraged. Even Jehovah Witnesses are banned from the country for being politically motivated Zionists. Syria joined the war on terror after Sept 11, 2001, but after opposing the war with Iraq, Syria came under US sanctions.

Syria has many spiritual needs. Seventy five percent of Syrians are Muslims. Many of these have never heard a true, Christian presentation of the gospel. Although evangelism is legal, it is done discreetly. There are 14 million Muslims in Syria. Over five million of these Muslims belong to more than ten unreached people groups. Of these groups, many have no Christian workers reaching them. **Pray** for laborers in the harvest. **Pray** that Syria's Muslim majority would see the Lord.

Five percent of the population is considered Christian. Most of these Christians belong to one of the Orthodox churches, which trace their roots back to New Testament times. They are neither Catholic, nor Protestant, nor Anabaptist. The Orthodox churches believe in two forms of revelation: the Bible and the traditions handed down from the Apostles. Over the years, the traditions have become a major emphasis. For a large part, the church has drifted into a nominal Christian culture. **Pray** for a revival of personal salvation experiences within the church.

Less than one percent of Syria is evangelical Christian, although the number is growing. Most major cities have an evangelical witness. There are tensions between Western evangelicals and the Syrian people. Some Western evangelicals use Bible texts to argue that Israel should be in possession of areas like the Golan Heights. This is a stumbling block to Syrians, shifting the focus onto politics and off the true message of Christ. Strangely enough, politics in Israel has also helped the growth of evangelicals in Syria. Some time ago, a rumor spread through Israel that all Arabs would be put to death. Groups of Arabic Christians moved north to Syria, bringing their faith with them. **Pray** for these indigenous believers. **Pray** for a thriving Arabic church in an Arabic country, free from Western political hindrances.



Story for the Children

Ismeee Hibah. That means "My name is Hibah." I am eight years old. I live in a city called Damascus. It is in a country called Syria.

I come from a big family. We all live together in one house. Even my older married brother and his wife live with us. Everyone old enough to work has a job to make money. When we put all of our money together, we can afford rent and food. Things cost a lot in Damascus, but I have everything that I need.

I like living together with my family. My father always tells me, "Even paradise is no fun without the people." I love people. My family loves each other too. We talk a lot. We do almost everything together with our relatives, because we don't trust strangers. When my father needs someone to work for him, he always hires a relative. When I grow up, I might even marry one of my first cousins. We consider that to be a good kind of marriage.

We have lots of people over to visit. I like it when my mother cooks for them. All of our guests like her cooking. She makes them hummus. Have you ever had it?

I wish that I could show you inside of our house. We like decorating in many different colors. We painted pretty designs all over our ceilings. Our wallpaper and furniture have all sorts of pretty colors and designs too. All of the wood-work is gilded, which means that it looks like it is covered in gold. Best of all, we have huge chandeliers in our rooms.

The one in the living room comes down to my father's forehead!



When we go outside of the house, we see so much traffic. We have cars and trucks and motorbikes and even donkeys on the road outside our house. There is a lot of noise too. Everybody likes to blow their horns. The taxi drivers like to blow them more than anybody else. Some people have horns that play music. I like that kind.

My family is Muslim. We don't believe in God the same way that Christians do. We believe that if our good works are more than our bad works, we will get to paradise on judgment day. We believe that angels write down everything that we do. I try to be good so that they will write down good things about me.

A man came to our house last night and gave my father some little papers. He said that the papers were about Jesus. The man told my father that Jesus can forgive the bad things we do. Maybe my father will let me read the little papers. I'd like to find out more about Jesus.