

S Y R I A

SECTION A

Capital

Damascus 1,394,322 (1994 est.)

Area

185,180 sq km (71,500 sq mi)

Form of government

Republic under military regime since March 1963

GDP—per capita

Purchasing power parity - \$2,500 (1999 est.)

Population

16,305,659

Note: In addition, there are about 38,200 people living in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights - 18,200 Arabs (16,500 Druze and 1,700 Alawites) and about 20,000 Israeli settlers (July 2000 est.).

Ethnic composition

Arab	90.3%
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Kurds, Armenians, other	9.7%
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Official language

Arabic (standard)

Other languages

Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic, Turkic, Syriac, and Circassian is widely understood; while French and English are somewhat understood

According to the Ethnologue (Summer Institute of Linguistic, 1996) the number of languages listed for Syria is 16.

Legislation dealing with the use of languages

Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, adopted on March 13, 1973,

Background notes

Independence was achieved on April 17, 1946 from a League of Nations mandate under French administration.

Syria is located in the heart of a region that has experienced intense political conflict since World War II. Its strategic location and considerable military power give it a political significance within the Middle East that contrasts with its small size and economic potential. Syria has been deeply involved in many of the region's political problems.

The political system places virtually absolute authority in the hands of President Hafiz Al-Asad. Al-Asad's election to a fifth 7-year term was confirmed by a March (1999) national referendum. Key decisions, regarding foreign policy, national security, internal politics, and the economy, are made by President Asad with counsel from his ministers, high-ranking members of the ruling Ba'th Party.

The Government continues to restrict or deny fundamental rights. The Ba'th Party dominates the political system, as provided for by the Constitution, and citizens do not have the right to change their government. The Government uses its vast powers so effectively that there is no organized political opposition, and there have been very few anti-regime manifestations.

The Government does not allow independent domestic human rights groups to exist and discriminates against the stateless Kurdish minority, suppresses worker rights, and child labor continues to occur.

SECTION B

Where does one observe language to be a problem in the country?

KURDISH MINORITY

The Government generally permits national and ethnic minorities to conduct traditional, religious, and cultural activities, however, the Government's attitude toward the Kurdish minority is a significant exception to this policy. Although the Government contends that there is no discrimination against the Kurdish population, it has placed limits on the use and teaching of the Kurdish language, Kurdish cultural expression, and, at times, the celebration of Kurdish festivals. The

Supreme State Security Court has tried some members of the Kurdish community for expressing support for greater Kurdish autonomy and independence. Although the Asad Government has stopped the practice of stripping Kurds in Syria of their Syrian nationality, some 120,000 persons lost Syrian nationality under this program in the 1960's and it has yet to be restored.

As a result, those who had their nationality taken away, and their children, have been unable to obtain Syrian nationality and passports, or even identification cards and birth certificates. Without Syrian nationality, these stateless Kurds, who according to UNHCR estimates number about 200,000 persons, are unable to own land, cannot be employed by the Government, and have no right to vote. They also encounter difficulties in enrolling their children in schools. Stateless Kurdish men may not marry Syrian citizens legally.

The use of language in everyday life e.g. education, broadcasting and other

ARABIC LANGUAGE

Throughout the Arab world three forms of the Arabic language exist. Classical written Arabic is used in the Holy Koran. Modern Standard Arabic is used for education, official purposes, books, newspapers, and formal speeches. Lastly is the spoken form, e.g. Syrian Arabic and other Arabic dialects.

Therefore educated Arabs are bilingual, with knowledge of both Modern Standard Arabic and their own dialect of spoken Arabic. Even uneducated Arabic speakers usually comprehend the meaning of something said in Modern Standard Arabic, although they are unable to speak it. They may, however, have difficulty fully understanding radio and television programs. Classical Arabic is the language of the Koran and is regarded literally as the language of God. Arabs almost unanimously believe that the Arabic language is their greatest historical legacy.

KURDISH LANGUAGE (KIRMANJI)

Most Kurds speak both Kirmanji and Arabic, although some Kurds, particularly those in Damascus, may speak only the Arabic language.

Use of Kurdish language is limited.

ARMENIAN LANGUAGE

Armenians retain many of their own customs, operate their own schools, and read newspapers in their own language. Some leaders adamantly oppose assimilation and stress the maintenance of the Armenian identity.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF SYRIA



APPENDIX B

SYRIA - CONSTITUTION

(Adopted on March 13, 1973)

(Document Status in 1973)

Article 4 (Language, Capital)

The Arab language is the official language. The capital is Damascus.

Note: The complete text of the Syrian Constitution and further information on the constitutional background of Syria are provided by the International Constitutional Law Project at the University of Wuerzburg.

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