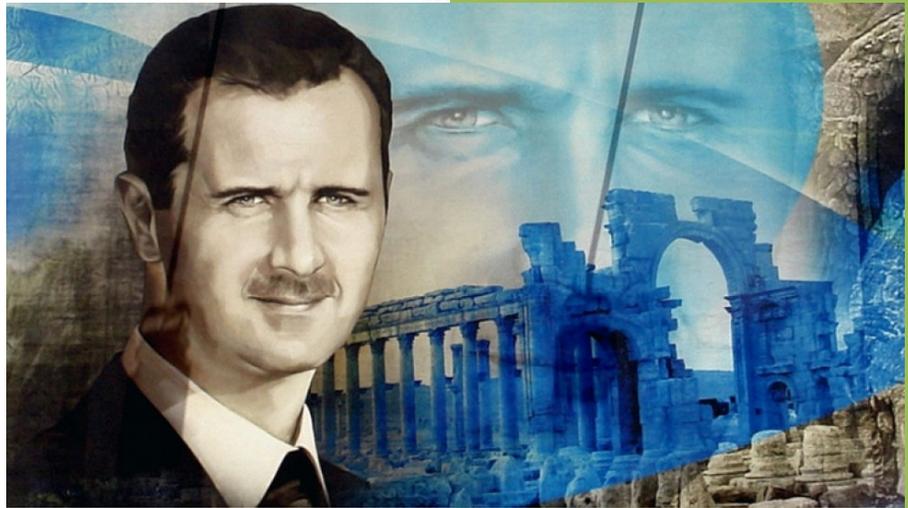


# 2016

## Country Profile: Syria

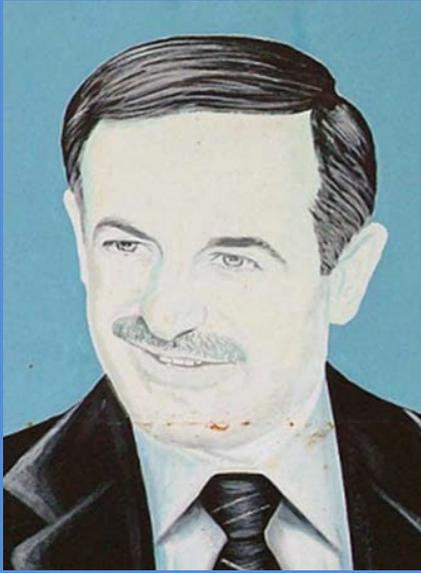


Religious Literacy Project

Harvard Divinity School

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Image of Bashar al-Assad courtesy of  
James Gordon.



## Contents

Overview	2
Historical Legacies	5
The Colonial Era (1918- 1943)	6
Independence & Modern Political Rule (1943–present)	7
Economic Policies & Ideologies	9
Religion, Policies & Legal Structures	10
Relationships with Other Nation-States	11

The Religious Literacy Project is directed by Diane L. Moore and all content is constructed under her editorial direction.

Image of Hafez al-Assad courtesy of James Gordon

## Overview

The modern state of Syria was formed as a French mandate in 1920 following World War I and became independent in 1946. Syria has been governed by the authoritarian military [Ba'ath Party](#) since 1971 under the leadership of minority [Alawi](#) Muslims [Hafez al-Assad](#) (1971–2000) and his son, [Bashar al-Assad](#) (2000–present). Syria was under a state of Emergency Law from 1963 to 2011 that suspended constitutional provisions for citizens justified by the declared war with Israel. While the Syrian government characterizes itself as secular, religion is deeply significant to Syrians and the ideologically secular Ba'ath Party has made concessions in order to retain power, which is reflected in the office of the presidency (who must be Muslim), in Syrian laws (which are based on Islamic law), and in government sponsorship for religious institutions.

Though the majority of Syrians identify with some form of Sunni Islam, the country is home to a vast diversity of religious and ethnic groups, including [Kurds](#), [Armenians](#), [Turkmen](#), [Alawis](#), [Twelver Shi'a Muslims](#), various [Christian](#) denominations including [Greek Orthodox](#) Christians and [Maronites](#), [Druze](#), [Yezidis](#), [Baha'is](#), and [Jews](#).

The country is currently in crisis as the result of a protracted civil war that began in 2011 as a series of protests calling for democratic and economic reforms. These initial protests were led by citizens and inspired by the “Arab Spring” spawned in Tunisia months earlier. President Bashar al-Assad initially appeared open to reform,<sup>1</sup> but soon responded with violence claiming that the protestors were Muslim extremists seeking to overthrow the government.<sup>2</sup> The Arab League suspended

<sup>1</sup> Bashar al-Assad, quoted in “President al-Assad: The Solution in Syria Is Political,” *Syrian Arab News Agency*, August 23, 2011, <http://sana.sy/eng/337/2011/08/23/pr-365292.htm>, accessed May 26, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Bashar al-Assad, quoted in “President al-Assad: Crisis in Syria Is Mostly External,” *Syrian Arab News Agency*, July 5, 2012, <http://sana.sy/eng/21/2012/07/05/pr-429577.htm>, accessed May 26, 2013; “President al-Assad: The Solution in Syria Is Political,” *Syrian Arab News Agency*, August 23, 2011, <http://sana.sy/eng/337/2011/08/23/pr-365292.htm>, accessed May 26, 2011.

Syrian membership due to the government's violent response to protests, and the Arab League, the United Nations, and the European Union have condemned the attacks and called on Assad to step down. The violence has moved into a third stage of conflict with the rise of an influx of foreign jihadist forces. The most prominent of those forces are fighting under the banner of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Qatar and Saudi Arabia initially supplied aid to the rebel forces during the civil war phase that included members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which has long been opposed to the ruling Ba'athists. With the rise of ISIL, overt support has diminished though many assume that wealthy individuals continue to support even this extreme form of opposition to Assad.<sup>3</sup> Russia, China, and Iran remain allies of Bashar al-Assad and his regime, as does Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Inside Syria, the Alawi community generally (though not uniformly) backs the regime and their numbers are prominent in the Syrian armed forces. Many Sunnis in the ruling classes defend the regime, while others are actively opposed. Christians are divided, often by socioeconomic status and/or religious and ethnic security. Many Kurds joined the opposition immediately while others initially attempted to remain neutral hoping to achieve some form of sovereignty once the conflict ceased.<sup>4</sup> As of mid-2014 the Kurds united in opposition to ISIS.

Accurate information on Syrian casualties and displacement is difficult to obtain due to a ban on outside journalists and a state-controlled media. It is widely agreed that the death toll in Syria is above 200,000. In August of 2015, the UN estimated the death toll at 250,000.<sup>5</sup> Overall, about 11 million people have been displaced by the Syrian conflict. 6.5 million people have been forced from their homes to other parts of Syria,<sup>6</sup> while 4.5 million people have fled the country altogether.<sup>7</sup> The majority of people seeking safety outside of Syria left for nearby Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon, while just over 10% traveled to Europe.<sup>8</sup> This huge number of refugees has contributed to what many call a global refugee crisis.

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<sup>3</sup> "Islamic State: Where does jihadist group get its support?" *BBC*, September 1, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29004253>.

<sup>4</sup> "Guide to the Syrian Opposition," *BBC*, April 23, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15798218>, accessed May 26, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> "7504th Meeting, Alarmed by Continuing Syria Crisis, Security Council Affirms Its Support for Special Envoy's Approach in Moving Political Solution Forward," *United Nations Security Council*, August 17, 2015, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12008.doc.htm>, accessed February 5, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen O'Brien, "Statement to the Press on Syria," *United Nations*, 14 December 2015.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Syria Regional Refugee Response Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal*, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>, accessed February 5, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

## Syria's Role in the Global Refugee Crisis

Syria plays a decisive role in global refugee crisis, although people forced to flee countries such as Afghanistan, Kosovo and parts of Northern Africa have also contributed.

Refugees from Syria have overwhelmed neighboring Lebanon, and are thought to make up about 20% of the country's population.<sup>9</sup> Lebanon began to require visas from Syrians in January 2015, and there are now over a million Syrian refugees registered there.<sup>10</sup> Following the suspension of registration, called for by the Lebanese government, many refugees awaiting registration have not been included in statistics.

By contrast, there are 2.5 million refugees in Turkey.<sup>11</sup> Turkey announced it would close the two remaining border gates with Syria in March 2015.<sup>12</sup> After upholding a longstanding policy on open borders, this decision was made in response to terrorist threats to Turkey, in addition to continued pressure from Western allies such as Germany.<sup>13</sup>

Europe is struggling to handle the constant influx of refugees, so many of them travelling from Syria. The European Union (EU) has received repeated criticism for responding inadequately to the crisis. More than 30% of Syrian refugees in Europe have gone to Serbia, Kosovo, and Germany, while 57% are scattered across Sweden, Hungary, Austria, the Netherlands and Bulgaria.

The EU has openly condemned countries such as Hungary for mistreating many Syrians by erecting border-fences, in addition to criminalizing and detaining Syrian refugees, and in 2015, the EU attempted to establish a coherent policy in response to the high inflow of refugees, who are dying in their attempts to reach safety.

Many Syrians have given their life savings to smugglers in the hope of reach destinations such as Europe. The use of inadequate boats for travel has often resulted in refugees dying en route, and many families have been split up. It is not uncommon for parents to entrust their children to smugglers out of desperation if they are not allowed to cross the border, or if they have run out of money. Social media campaigns such as that launched by Humans of New York have been important in increasing the visibility of Syrians in the West by telling their personal stories.

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<sup>9</sup> Patrick Boehler and Sergio Pecanha, "The Global Refugee Crisis, Region by Region," *The New York Times*, August 26, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/09/world/migrants-global-refugee-crisis-mediterranean-ukraine-syria-rohingya-malaysia-iraq.html>, accessed February 5, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Syria Regional Refugee Response Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal*, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>, accessed February 5, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Boehler and Sergio Pecanha, "The Global Refugee Crisis, Region by Region," *The New York Times*, August 26, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/09/world/migrants-global-refugee-crisis-mediterranean-ukraine-syria-rohingya-malaysia-iraq.html>, accessed February 5, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Ceylan Yeginsu and Karam Shoumali, "Turkey Moves to Close All Gates at Border With Syria," *The New York Times*, March 29, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/30/world/europe/turkey-moves-to-close-all-gates-at-border-with-syria.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/30/world/europe/turkey-moves-to-close-all-gates-at-border-with-syria.html?_r=0), accessed February 5, 2016.

Germany has proved a particularly controversial actor in the refugee crisis. The Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, has faced a huge drop in support for accepting so many refugees from Syria and elsewhere. (In 2015 overall, Germany allegedly took in 1.1 million migrants.)<sup>14</sup> A 2016 poll taken by a public broadcaster called ARD found that 81% of people in Germany did not believe the government was handling the refugee crisis successfully.<sup>15</sup> Merkel has been very prominent in EU efforts to welcome more Syrian refugees, and to formalize this process.

A report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) commended the EU for reaching an agreement to resettle 160,000 asylum seekers in Greece and Italy, and to augment the resettlement of refugees currently outside the Union.<sup>16</sup> However, HRW also criticized the EU's slow and inefficient implementation of these plans.

## Historical Legacies

The region formerly known as Greater Syria was under Ottoman rule for nearly four centuries during which time a thriving pluralist religious and ethnic population developed. Though Sunni Muslims were the majority, differing branches of [Shi'a Muslims](#), [Eastern Orthodox](#), [Eastern Catholic](#), [Armenians](#), [Kurds](#), [Yezidis](#), [Jews](#) and others existed in pockets throughout the region. Under the millet system, the religious heads of Abrahamic faiths and [Druze](#) communities were allowed to administer all personal status law and perform certain civil functions. Other minorities were subject to Islamic jurisprudence. Those under the millet system sometimes chose to engage the Islamic court system when it was to their advantage, demonstrating the porous nature of these distinctions.

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<sup>14</sup> "Refugee Crisis Pushes Support for Germany's Angela Merkel to Four-Year Low," *The Guardian*, February 3, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/04/refugee-crisis-pushes-support-for-germanys-angela-merkel-to-four-year-low>, accessed February 5, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> "European Union Refugee Response Falls Short," *Human Rights Watch*, January 1, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/27/european-union-refugee-response-falls-short>, accessed February 5, 2016.

## The Colonial Era (1918–1943)

Following World War I and the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire, the League of Nations divided “Greater Syria” into two parts: The southern half (known as Palestine) was mandated to Great Britain and the northern part (modern Lebanon and Syria) was mandated to France. Insights into the contemporary tensions in Syria can be found by examining the legacies of some of the policies implemented by the French under mandate rule.

According to the principle of the mandate, an “advanced” state was expected to tutor a less-advanced state in the complexities of democratic self-government until the latter was prepared for self-rule. It was perceived as a liberal concept that differed from colonization, though in practice mandated powers tended to act in their own interests. For example, France implemented policies that led to social and political fragmentation in an effort to stem Sunni led Arab nationalist movements that might have jeopardized France’s interests in the region and in northern Africa.

Arab nationalist movements were also threatening for many of the religious and ethnic minorities who were concerned about the prospect of Sunni dominance. France helped to curry the favor of these groups by strengthening influence and autonomy among minorities concentrated in particular regions and by diffusing the power of majority Sunni populations. The [Alawis](#) (known as Nusayris before being formally renamed in the 1920s) were heavily concentrated in the mountain district behind Latakia and that region became a separate state under French rule. Similarly, the Jabal al-Druze region south of Damascus was heavily populated by the Druze and was also granted independent status under the umbrella of French protection.

Another strategy employed by the French was to concentrate religious and ethnic communities within different branches of the government. This was especially pronounced in the army and police forces where the French recruited in areas far from the urban centers where Arab nationalist sentiments were strongest. Several battalions were populated by Alawis who saw the military as a form of social and economic advancement. Though they were always a numerically significant minority under both Ottoman and French rule, they were economically marginalized due to their longstanding status as peasants to Christian and Sunni landowners. Conversely, most Sunni landowners and urban dwellers who were engaged in commerce were loathe to support what they perceived to be French imperial interests through military service and were economically advantaged enough to afford the redemption fee levied as an alternative.<sup>17</sup> A final critical legacy of French mandate rule was its role in influencing the formal recognition of the Alawi sect as legitimately Muslim through a [fatwa](#) issued in 1936 by the Sunni Grand Mufti of



"His Eminence the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. Haj Amin Effendi el-Husseini (1929)," Library of

<sup>17</sup> Fildis, Ayse Tekdal. “Roots of Alawite-Sunni Rivalry in Syria,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XIX, No. 2 (Summer 2012), p. 8.

Jerusalem, [Muhammad Amin al-Husayni](#). Prior to this declaration, most Sunni and Shi'a Muslims had considered the Alawis heretical since the time of their emergence in Iraq in the 9th century. This designation was formalized in a series of fatwas issued by the influential Sunni scholar Ibn Taymiyya in the 14th century.

In light of this long history of marginalization and often persecution, the significance of the 1936 fatwa recognizing the Alawis as legitimately Muslim cannot be overstated. There are several converging factors that led to this shift, but chief among them was the autonomy that the French granted the Alawis in the context of vigorous efforts by Arab nationalists to form coalitions against European rule.<sup>18</sup>

## Independence & Modern Political Rule (1943–present)

Independence was secured largely through the efforts of a diverse group comprised primarily of Sunnis who united under the banner of *al-Kutla al-Wataniya* (the National Bloc). Their main focus was the end of French mandate rule. Though independence was secured in 1946, the French strategy of fragmentation meant that there was no unified national sensibility upon which a new Syrian identity could be forged. The [Alawis](#) dominated the military rank and file and the Sunnis dominated the officer corps and the political arena.

In an effort to unify the country immediately following independence, Sunni political leaders abolished the jurisdictional rights of the Alawis and the [Druze](#), which reignited longstanding fears of repression under Sunni authority. Sunni political and military leaders also promoted Arab nationalism which was concerning to minority groups because of the historical marginalization of non-Sunni Arabs in nationalist movements.

The early years of independence were defined by political instability and internal fragmentation, as evidenced by a series of coups orchestrated by diverse Sunni political and military leaders promoting differing interpretations of Arab unity.

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<sup>18</sup> Yvette Talhamy, "The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol, 46, No. 2 (April 2010), pp. 189–190.

*The Rise of the Ba'ath Party*

[The Ba'ath Party](#) was founded in 1940 in Syria by two Paris-educated intellectuals: Michel Aflaq, an Orthodox Christian, and [Salah al-Din Bitar](#), a Sunni Muslim. It originally promoted Arab unity from a secular foundation and was thus distinguished from Sunni led Arab nationalist movements. In 1953 the party united with [Akram al-Hawrani's Arab Socialist Party](#) to form the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party which was strongly supported by Alawis due to its secular and socialist foundations.

During the short lived Syrian-Egyptian union (1958–61) the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party was dissolved but the party rose to power in a 1963 military coup initiated by diverse factions that were heavily populated by Alawis. Among those was [Hafez al-Assad](#) who staged his own successful coup in 1970 and continued to hold power until his death in 2000. He was succeeded by his son, [Bashar al-Assad](#), who remains in power.

Bashar al-Assad won his third election in June 2014, where he won 88.7% of the votes.<sup>19</sup> Many critics have questioned the legitimacy of this election, in spite of the fact that, for the first time, Assad faced candidates to whom he was not related. That same month, the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons were intended to be completed following an agreement between Russia and the United States. Assad blamed the conflict for the delay, and the disposal of the chemical weapons was eventually confirmed in January 2016.<sup>20</sup>

[The destruction of Syria's chemical weapons](#)

The disposal of Syria's arsenal of chemical weapons was called for after a chemical weapon was used in the Syrian conflict in Damascus in 2013, with devastating consequences for civilians. Many critics argued that Assad had deployed one of the country's chemical weapons, although he himself vehemently denied this, and still blames terrorist groups. As a result, the United States and Russia made an agreement for Syria's chemical weapons to be destroyed in mid-2014. Use of both chlorine and mustard gas is suspected, and the UN voted to initiate an official investigation into who launched these chemical weapons in August 2015.<sup>21</sup> Even after the destruction of Syria's chemicals weapons, evidence of the use of such weapons continued to present itself in 2016. ISIS, along with rebel forces and the Syrian government, are the possible perpetrators of these attacks.



"Baath Party founder Michel Aflaq in the late 1930s," [The Online Museum of Syrian History, from Wikimedia Commons.](#)

<sup>19</sup> "Syrian President Bashar al-Assad: Facing down rebellion," *BBC*, October 21, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/10338256>, accessed February 5, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> "Destruction of Syrian chemical weapons completed," *Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons*, January 4, 2016, <https://www.opcw.org/news/article/destruction-of-syrian-chemical-weapons-completed/>, accessed February 5, 2016.

## Economic Policies & Ideologies

Following his successful coup [Hafez al-Assad](#) diminished the socialist dimensions of [Ba'athist](#) ideology that promoted the welfare of the peasant populations while curtailing the power of the landowners and merchant classes. Instead, Assad launched several state run infrastructure projects and built industrial factories while simultaneously utilizing the revenue from oil production to fund public welfare programs such as free education and healthcare.

By the mid- to late-1970s, however, the economic conditions for a vast majority of Syrians had stagnated while wealth was being concentrated into the hands of well-established landlords and a new emerging bourgeoisie that included several Sunni religious leaders (*alim*, singular; ['ulama](#), plural) many of whom were merchants and craftsmen. In addition, political repression justified by the imposition of Emergency Rule was commonplace.

These conditions led many groups to organize protests calling for economic and political reforms, including the League of Communist Action, various trade unions, and a coalition of Muslims including the [Muslim Brotherhood](#).<sup>21</sup> This latter group organized around Islamist values that served as a counterforce to Ba'athist secularism and [Alawi](#) sectarianism. All efforts were thwarted by the regime, and sometimes brutally, as in the 1982 operation in Hama against the Muslim Brotherhood that resulted in between 10–20,000 deaths. (Similar to the contemporary situation, this was justified by the government's assertion that the Muslim Brotherhood was an "extremist" organization).<sup>22</sup> This crackdown stifled dissent and empowered the traditional *'ulama* who were economically aligned with the rising elite.

In response to a debt crisis in the 1980s the government announced an era of economic pluralism (*ta'addudiyya*), which meant further liberalizing the economy by opening it more to the private sector. This move appeased business interests and government aligned Sunni *'ulama* whose religious organizations and charitable works were increasingly dependent upon patronage from the private sector.<sup>23</sup> The strategy of economic pluralism also served to marginalize a report by The General Federation of Workers Syndicates that blamed the crisis on Syrian dependence on the global market and called on increased government control over the economy to counter this trend.

<sup>21</sup> Omar S. Dahi and Yasser Munif, "Revolts in Syria: Tracking the Convergence Between Authoritarianism and Neoliberalism," *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, No. 47, Vol. 323 (2012), p.9.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Fisk, *Pity the Nation*, (New York: Touchstone, 1990).

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). See especially chapter four, "The Turban and the Chequebook: Political Economy of the Syrian Religious Elite."

*Economic Policies of Bashar al-Assad*

Liberalization of the economy through privatization continued piecemeal throughout the 1990s but was openly adopted by [Bashar al-Assad](#) in several policy changes initiated in the early years of his presidency. Most notably, the “social market economy” was adopted as the new economic model for Syria in June of 2005 during the 10<sup>th</sup> regional congress of the Ba’ath party. This model, however, was “social” in name only. In practice it signaled a full-scale adoption of neoliberal economic policies absent of state-supported measures to provide welfare protections. As a result, these policies led to a dramatic rise in unemployment, an increase in those living below the poverty level, and the concentration of the nation’s wealth in the hands of an increasingly smaller percentage of its citizens.<sup>24</sup>

During this period Assad also sought to strengthen his legitimacy among Islamic groups (including the *‘ulama*) who were potential political allies in support of his economic reform efforts. The confluence of these factors created the conditions for the dramatic increase of Islamic led charities and organizations that were funded in large measure by private sector donors loyal to the regime-friendly *ulama*. These private sector donors are also known to have strong ties to the military, leading to what commentators such as Islamist Yasir al-‘Ayti have denounced as the “destructive triad” of interdependency and support between the regime, the *ulama* and business.<sup>25</sup> These intersections provide a platform for Islamist groups to offer a counter narrative that many who are consistently marginalized find compelling.

## Religion, Political & Legal Structures

The Syrian constitution explicitly supports the free expression of religion. In practice, however, proselytizing is discouraged, conversion is restricted, and groups that are deemed to be “extremists” are banned and subject to arrest and prosecution. Among the prohibited groups are Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Muslim Brotherhood, those judged to be associated with any form of Salafi Islam and (recently) many members of the opposition who are considered to pose a threat to the republic.

Other relevant constitutional features include that the President has to be Muslim; Islamic jurisprudence should be the primary source of legislation; and inheritance laws are based on Islamic law. The government keeps a tight rein on religious groups; all must register with the government,

<sup>24</sup> Dahi and Munif, “Revolts in Syria: Tracking the Convergence Between Authoritarianism and Neoliberalism”; Joshua Landis, “The Syrian Uprising of 2011: Why the Asad Regime is Likely to Survive to 2013,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XIX, No. 1 (Spring 2012); Majid Rafizadeh, “In Syria, Follow the Money to Find the Roots of the Revolt,” *The Daily Beast*, April 8, 2013, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/04/08/in-syria-follow-the-money-to-find-the-roots-of-the-revolt.html>, accessed May 26, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 161–162.

and Jews are banned from communicating with Jews in Israel. Though schools are officially non-sectarian, religious private schools are allowed and religious instruction is provided in schools for Muslims and Christians. Additionally, [the Ba'ath Party's](#) dominant status is established in the constitution as being "the leader of state and society."<sup>26</sup>

## Relationships with Other Nation-States

**Egypt** and Syria unified as the United Arab Republic (UAR) between 1958 and 1961, guided by shared ambitions of pan-Arabism, anti-[Zionism](#) and anti-Communism. The union was led by Egypt's president [Gamal 'Abdel Nasser](#). Though initially popular, Syrian opposition to the union quickly mounted as the terms clearly favored Egypt and Egyptian political and military leaders, and after Nasser disbanded all Syrian political parties, including the [Ba'ath Party](#). The UAR was viewed as a threat by neighboring Arab nations and the American government took steps to discourage Arab leaders from joining the UAR, particularly after Nasser lent support to the 1958 military coup d'état in Iraq. In 1961, Syrian officers staged a coup in Damascus, effectively withdrawing Syria from the union. Relations between Syria and Egypt worsened during Anwar al-Sadat's peace negotiations with Israel, viewed by [Hafez al-Assad](#) as a great betrayal. The relationship remained distant under Hosni Mubarak, who maintained the peace treaty with Israel, even as other Arab nations normalized diplomatic relations with Egypt during the 1980s. Flights between Cairo and Damascus were reinstated in 1989, and shortly thereafter the nations reconciled. Both opposed the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and sent troops to Saudi Arabia. [Post-Arab Spring](#) Egyptian president Muhammad Morsi called repeatedly for [Bashar al-Assad](#) to step down and to be tried for war crimes on account of the current conflict, and encouraged opposition groups to unify militarily against the Assad government.



"Presidents Shukri al-Quwatli (left) and Gamal Abdel Nasser (right) clasp hands in front of jubilant crowds in Damascus days after the union of Syria and Egypt into the United Arab Republic," Bibliotheca Alexandrina, from Wikimedia Commons.

**Iran** and Syria have maintained close but often tense ties beginning in the 1970s when Hafez al-Assad worked to establish the [Alawis](#) as a legitimate [Shi'a](#) sect against challenges from the [Muslim Brotherhood](#) and other Sunnis. Assad offered safe harbor to Iranian revolutionary fighters, including Ayatollah Khomeini in 1978 when he was exiled from Iraq (though he chose exile in France instead). Following the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Iranian leaders sought political allies in the region and forged ties with Hafez al-Assad. In 1980, Syria took the controversial stance of supporting Iran during

<sup>26</sup> "International Religious Freedom Report, 2012: Syria," *United States Department of State* <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dlid=208412%23wrapper%3E>, accessed May 18, 2013.

the Iran-Iraq war, which strengthened their alliance and angered other Arab states in the region who sided with Iraq. Iran supports the Syrian government in the current civil war.

Syria has engaged in four wars with **Israel** (1948 Arab-Israel War; 1967 Six Day War; 1973 Yom Kippur War; and the 1982 Lebanon War) and the Golan Heights remains disputed territory currently occupied by Israel. Several efforts to negotiate a peace settlement have been attempted but all have failed. The current civil war is exacerbating tensions given Iran's strong support of Syria and its leadership's blunt animosity towards Israel, the proximity of military conflict to Israel's borders, and the involvement of outspokenly anti-Zionist groups such as Hezbollah.

Syrian relations with **Jordan** have been strained over the past century. The Ba'athist government supported the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in its struggle against the Jordanian government in 1970, and Jordan lent support to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s. During the Iran-Iraq war, Jordan allied with Iraq and Syria with Iran, deepening the tension between the two nations, which erupted into violence after Jordan and Israel began negotiations for Jordan to represent Palestinian regional interests. Though they came to a truce in the 1980s, the relationship has remained weak. In the current conflict, Jordanian policy has been one of non-interference, though its government acknowledges that arms and support for opposition forces have crossed into Syria over the Jordanian border.

Contemporary relations between Syria and **Lebanon** have been strained, particularly with accusations that the Ba'ath government has orchestrated violence and targeted assassinations of Lebanese politicians within Lebanon. In 1976, Syrian forces entered Lebanon ostensibly on behalf of Lebanese Christians during the Lebanese Civil War, though these alliances later shifted. Syrian troops in Lebanon fought the Israeli army during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Complete withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon did not take place until 2005, following protests triggered in large part by accusations that the Syrian government had orchestrated the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Lebanon has been increasingly involved in the Syrian conflict. In 2013, combat between opposition forces and government forces—including Hezbollah fighters—crossed over the Lebanese border and thousands of Syrian refugees have sought shelter in Lebanon.

**Qatar** and Syria had a friendly relationship in the not-too-distant past, but that relationship has undergone a complete reversal post-2011. Before the civil war, Bashar al-Assad and his wife regularly visited Doha and in 2008 Qatari institutions established a \$5 billion joint holding company for development projects. The Qatari *emir* [commander] even tried to normalize relations between Assad and foreign governments in the years leading up to the conflict. Some commentators believe Qatar saw the cooperation between Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah as politically ascendant and therefore wanted to establish an alliance.

However, after the uprising, Qatar's initial cautious reaction gave way to full, public support for anti-regime forces. Emboldened by its lead role among Arab countries in the NATO intervention in Libya and, according to some, eyeing the possibility of reducing Iran's influence in the region, Qatar decided to support the Syrian opposition. Today an ardent supporter of the Syrian opposition to the Assad regime, Qatar has provided more financial and arms assistance than its international peers. By various estimates, the oil-rich Qatari government has spent between \$1 billion and \$3 billion in Syria as of early 2013. The country even houses the first embassy of those who fight against Assad and claim to lead the new Syrian Arab Republic.

Qatar's support of the opposition might best be understood in light of its new ambition to become a regional mediator and force to be reckoned with. Many political analysts have described Syria as a proxy war in which Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Iran have battled for influence in the post-Arab Spring Middle East and North Africa. The [al-Thani](#)s, Qatar's ruling family, have supported the [Muslim Brotherhood](#) and associated Islamists in uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria. They do so in part because they believe Islamists will win in those revolutions and, grateful for Qatari support, will then forge strong alliances with the country.

Thus, while some point out that Qatar and Saudi Arabia—two Sunni monarchies fighting the Shi'a Iranian regime through this proxy war—have developed and publicly affirmed a diplomatic relationship, others point out key differences. Qatar seeks to support primarily the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, and Saudi Arabia supports more moderate groups for its own religio-political reasons. Furthermore, Qatar's ultimate goal to back a winner capable of bringing down Assad's regime has led it to support extremist groups. According to some allegations, certain Qatari actors may have even provided funding to US-labeled terrorist group [Jabhat al-Nusra](#). This, in turn, has further divided the Syrian opposition and led to infighting. As a result, many Syrians have expressed discontent with Qatar's influence. Most worrisome, some believe that Qatar and Saudi Arabia can only satisfy their goals through a military victory and not a diplomatic solution.<sup>27</sup>

**Russia** and Syria have longstanding ties. The Soviet Union provided economic aid to the socialist governments formed in Syria and Egypt after independence. Among the socialist countries in the Middle East, the Syrian government appears to have been closest ideologically to the Soviet Union, with its emphasis on socialism and a Marxist economic development plan, but also in inviting the Communist Party to play an active role in Syrian politics. When Egypt evicted its Soviet advisers in 1972, Hafez al-Assad remained loyal to the Soviet Union and, at times, was the Soviet Union's only ally in the region. The ties to Syria's government, then, are both personal and diplomatic.

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<sup>27</sup> Contributed by Ben Marcus.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the formation of the Russian government seem to have had little political impact upon the alliance. However, it is possible that the 1986 decision by Mikhail Gorbachev to discontinue aid to Soviet satellite countries, such as Syria and Cuba, may have contributed to Syria's economic problems and its shift towards neoliberalism. Today, Russia continues to sell arms to Syria and for forty years has maintained its only naval base in the Mediterranean at the Syrian port of Tartus, a situation made permanent by Bashar al-Assad in 2008. Two years later, Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev, became the first Russian head of state to visit Damascus, where he met not only with Assad, but also with Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal.

Another significant visit to Syria occurred in 2011, when the Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia arrived to meet with Ignatius IV, Patriarch of the Great Antioch and All the East and the leader of the Syriac Orthodox Church. During his visit, Kirill praised the Syrian regime's support for the Syriac Orthodox Church, but was anxious as to how the current conflict might impact Syria's Christian minority.

In the current conflict Russia has consistently supported the Syrian government, vetoing measures in the United Nations Security Council that would allow military intervention by the United Nations. In September 2013, as the United States considered air strikes against the Syrian government in reaction to the use of chemical weapons, Russia engaged in bilateral negotiations with the United States. The resulting agreement diverted air strikes in return for allowing the deployment of UN teams to secure chemical weapons factories and stocks and destroy the weapons. The agreement was perceived as a victory for the Syrian government and symbolic of Russia's reemergence as an important diplomatic power.

The stated Russian position is for a negotiated peace between the government and the rebels. Russian officials have hinted that they might be willing to accept new leadership, but that an such transition must be fully consensual, which Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated in a controversial *New York Times* op-ed published in September 2013.<sup>28</sup>

Since the end of September 2015, Russia has engaged in aggressive air strikes in Syria, and revived the flagging Syrian army. These strikes, which have continued into 2016, have been blamed for disrupting peace talks in their early stages.<sup>29</sup> Rebels in Aleppo were the targets of these airstrikes. In an interview published in February 2016, Dmitry Medvedev, the Prime Minister of Russia, warned that world war could ensue if foreign ground troops were deployed in Syria.<sup>30</sup> US-Russia rivalry has been heightened in the wake of the Russian airstrikes.

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<sup>28</sup> Contributed by Mary M. Bathory Vidaver.

<sup>29</sup> "Syria conflict: Russia strikes 'undermining peace talks,'" *BBC*, February 5, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35504840>, accessed February 5, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> "Syria: Russian PM Warns of World War if Troops Sent In," *Aljazeera*, February 12, 2016. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/02/syria-russian-pm-warns-world-war-troops-160212074839609.html>, accessed February 12, 2016.

**Turkey** and Syria have long had difficult relations, particularly as a result of disputed territory along the Turkish-Syrian border and Syrian support for the Kurdish PKK political party. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan took steps to improve relations with Syria in 2004, pushing for greater economic and military cooperation. After initial offers to mediate between the Assad regime and opposition forces in the current civil war, Erdogan has been an outspoken critic of Bashar al-Assad. Hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees have relocated to camps in southern Turkey, Turkey has hosted opposition talks, and the Turkish government has approved military incursions onto Syrian soil.

**Britain** carried out its first airstrikes in Syria in December 2015, after a heated debate, and ultimately favorable vote, by Members of Parliament. Since that time, Prime Minister David Cameron, with the United States and France, has reminded those committing human rights violations in Syria, including Russia and the Syrian regime, that ISIS is the enemy, not smaller opposition groups.<sup>31</sup> At the time of writing, a cease-fire, brokered by the United States and Russia resulted in a “rare moment of quiet” for some areas of the country, and also an opportunity for humanitarian aid to reach rebel-held areas. Thousands of Syrians have taken advantage of this relatively stable moment to demonstrate their continued desire that Bashar al-Assad be ousted from power.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> “Thirty-fourth Franco-British summit - Bilateral relations - Migration - Syria - Libya - Statements by M. François Hollande, President of the Republic, at his joint press conference with Mr David Cameron, British Prime Minister – excerpts” *France Diplomatie*, March 4, 2016, <http://basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/vues/Kiosque/FranceDiplomatie/kiosque.php?type=baen>, accessed March 7, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> “Syria truce bring rare moment of quiet,” *BBC*, March 7, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-35743573>, accessed March 7, 2016.