

Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailedanalysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.



Syria

Population: 17.95 millions (#61 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 185,180 square km. Located in the Middle East, Syria borders Iraq, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, Turkey, and the Mediterranean Sea. Desert plains occupy north and east areas, whereas hilly terrain and low mountains occupy central and western areas. A narrow coastal plain is adjacent to the Mediterranean Sea. Semi-arid conditions occur in most areas. The Euphrates River flows through the east, entering Syria from Turkey and exiting into Iraq. Dust storms and sandstorms are natural hazards. Environmental issues include deforestation, overgrazing, soil erosion, desertification, water pollution, and water scarcity. Israel annexed a portion of the Golan Heights in 1967 and maintained forty-one settlements in 2017, although sovereignty of the area is disputed. Syria is divided into fourteen administrative provinces.

Peoples

Arab: 90.3%

Other: 9.7%

The population is predominately Arab. Kurds and Armenians comprise the largest minority ethnic groups. There are approximately half a million Palestinian refugees and 17,000 Iraqi refugees. There are more than five million internationally displaced Syrians due to the ongoing civil war that began in 2011.

Population: 18,028,549 (July 2017)

Annual Growth Rate: Unknown

Fertility Rate: 2.5 children born per woman (2017)

Life Expectancy: 72.7 male, 77.6 female (2017)

Languages: Arabic dialects (88%), Kurdish (8%), Assyrian Neo-Aramaic (1%), other (3%). Arabic is the official language. Languages spoken by over one million speakers include Arabic dialects (15.9 million) and Kurdish (1.4 million).

Literacy: 84.6% (2015)

History

Some of the oldest known civilizations thrived in present-day Syria and achieved advanced technological and developed cultural legacies that have been unearthed by modern archaeologists. The Akkadian Empire of Sargon the Great expanded into Syria around 2500 BC, and many large cities were founded. One of the most populous cities of the ancient world, Ebla, supported an estimated 260,000 inhabitants at this time. Syria's present-day capital Damascus was founded at about 2500 BC and is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities. Nearly a dozen ancient civilizations controlled Syria at one time or another between the second millennium BC and the seventh century AD, including Canaanites, Phoenicians, Arameans, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Nabateans, and Byzantines. Saul of Tarsus, who later became the apostle Paul, received his vision of Christ on the road to Damascus, as recorded the New Testament book of Acts of the Apostles. Islam spread to Syria in 636. The Omayyad Empire based its capital in Damascus and at its peak stretched from Spain to India from 661 to 750. The Mongols invaded in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and devastated Damascus. In 1517, the Ottomans captured Damascus and ruled Syria until 1920 when Syria attained a brief independence lasting only a few months before French forces overran the country. Syria was placed under French mandate by the League of Nations the same year. The Vichy Government administered Syria following the fall of France to Nazi Germany in 1940. French forces evacuated in 1946, and a republican government formed during the mandate declared independence. Severe political instability persisted from 1946 until the late 1960s as successive military coups took control. In 1958, a joint Syria-Egypt state known as the United Arab Republic emerged, but Syria seceded from the union in 1961 following another military coup. In 1963, the Arab Socialist Resurrection Party (Ba'ath Party) engineered a comprehensive takeover of all executive and legislative government authority. A similar takeover carried out by army officers occurred in 1966 in an effort to rectify Ba'ath Party principles in the government. The socialist government was weakened by the frustration of plans to unify with Iraq and Egypt, as well as war with Israel, which culminated in another military coup in 1970 under Hafiz al-Assad. Assad enacted several legislative and political reforms that stabilized the country. The Islamist fundamentalist political party, the Muslim Brotherhood, attempted to seize control of the government in a failed uprising in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Assad annihilated rebel forces in 1982, leveling portions of the opposition stronghold of Hama with heavy artillery fire that killed and wounded thousands. Syria improved its relations with the West and other Arab states by participating in the United States-led military offensive against Iraq in 1990 and engaging in international conferences and peace talks. Assad died in 2000 and was succeeded by his son Bashar Al-Assad.

Relations with the United States soured in the 2000s as Syria opposed the Iraq War and refused to comply with the United States' and United Nations' demands for Syria to cease its support of terrorist organizations, military interference in Lebanon, and alleged development of weapons of mass destruction. Consequently Syria was subject to economic sanctions that severely restricted trade with the United States. There was some improvement and increased dialogue between Syria and the international community in the late 2000s, but relations with most nations remained poor and border disputes with Lebanon continued. The Arab Spring protests in early 2010s culminated in significant internal instability as rebel forces called for the toppling of the Assad regime. A brutal civil war erupted and ultimately resulted in more than five million Syrians fleeing the country. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) headquartered its operations in Raqqa, Syria and sought to establish an Islamic caliphate through brutal military campaigns that at its height captured approximately half of Syrian territory by mid-2015. ISIS posed a major regional security threat that took several years to subdue with assistance of several additional nations. The United States and Russia entered the conflict by supporting rebel forces and the Assad regime, respectively. In sum, the civil war has created one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world at present with 13.1 million people in Syria within need of assistance and 6.4 million internally displaced persons. The death toll from the conflict was most recently estimated at over 400,000. There remains no end to the civil war in sight as control of the country is primary divided between the Assad regime, the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, and the Syrian opposition. Smaller areas of territory are controlled by additional militant groups such as Tahrir al-Sham and ISIS.

Culture

Syria has historically been a major influence on the development of Arab culture and literature. Today, Islam, Arab culture, and the family are the primary influences on society. The coexistence of Muslim, Christians, and other religious groups has been largely peaceful for several centuries. Close physical contact is commonplace, and gender segregation occurs in most publics areas. Film, literature, poetry, and art are proud Syrian traditions. A fusion of Mediterranean and Arab foods comprise local cuisine, which includes vegetables, hummus, bread, cheese, coffee, yogurt, lamb, and chicken. As a result of past French rule, European influence is visible in the largest cities.[2] Tobacco cigarette consumption rates are high, whereas alcohol consumption rates are low. Polygamy is legal.

Economy

GDP per capita: $2,900 (2015) [5.14% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.536

Corruption Index: 14 (2017)

The government heavily regulates the economy. Prior to the outbreak of the civil war, economic reforms were enacted, including the establishment of the Damascus Stock Exchange, the opening of private banks, and the reduction of interest rates. However,

the current civil war has severely damaged the country's infrastructure. The economy has declined by more than 70% since 2010. Many Syrians have recently left the country due to economic problems. Severe inflation occurred in 2017 as the inflation rate was 25.5%. Natural resources include petroleum, phosphates, metallic minerals and ores, rock salt, marble, gypsum, and hydropower. Services account for 60% of the GDP, whereas agriculture and industry each account for approximately 20% of the GDP. Petroleum, clothing, food processing, mining, and cement are major industries. Common crops include grains, cotton, lentils, olives, and sugar beets. Beef, mutton, eggs, milk, and poultry are additional agricultural products. Primary trade partners include Russia, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq.

Syria ranks among the world's most corrupt countries. Corruption is perceived as widespread. Human trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation and domestic servitude is a major concern involving women and children from Iraq, Southeast Asia, and sub-Sahara Africa. These difficulties continue to increase. Syria is a transshipment point for cocaine, hashish, and opiates destined for Europe and neighboring nations. Syria is vulnerable to money laundering as anti-money laundering legislation remains undeveloped.

Faiths

Muslim: 90%

Christian: 10%

Christians have historically comprised 10% of the population. However, the percentage of Christians in the Syrian population has appeared to decrease due to ongoing civil war.

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Orthodox – 590,000

Catholic – 430,000

Evangelicals – 23,663

Jehovah's Witnesses – less than 500

Latter-day Saints – less than 50 – 3

Seventh Day Adventists – 0

Religion

Sunni Muslims account for 74% of the population, whereas other Muslim groups constitute 13% of the population. Approximately 10% of Syrians are Christians, although due to emigration the percentage of Christians may have fallen. The Greek Orthodox Church is the largest Christian denomination. Other prominent Christian churches include the Syriac Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, and Catholic Churches. Christians are concentrated in the largest cities and the Hasaka governorate. There are approximately 80,000 Yezidis before the war. There are less than 20 Jews.[3]

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index: 15th (2018)

The constitution protects religious freedom, but local laws and government policies restrict this right. There is no state religion but the constitution mandates that the president must be a Muslim and that Islamic law is the source of legislation. All citizens must state their religious affiliation as Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, as such documentation was required for birth certificates, marriages, and religious pilgrimages. The government monitors all religious groups and discourages proselytism. Conversions of Muslims to other religions is illegal. The government has demonstrated favoritism to Shi'a Islam and has permitted Shi'a missionaries to proselyte and convert Sunni Muslims. Several Islamic sects are deemed illegal by the government, such as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafist movement. Religious groups must register with the government. No permits or approval is required for regular worship services. However, other types of religious meetings require permits from the

government. Registered religious groups and clergy receive tax benefits and other economic benefits, such as free utilities. Civil law varies between Muslims and Christians on several issues regarding inheritance and marriage. There are no specific laws that prohibit proselytism or the distribution of religious literature. Christian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are permitted to operate without registering with the government as an appendage of the Catholic or Orthodox Churches. Religious instruction in public schools is required and provided on Christianity and Islam for Christian and Muslim students. Government abuses of religious freedom have been most severe with Muslims participating in or identifying with Sunni Muslim fundamentalist sects. There have also been recent instances of the government demolishing churches and mosques. Radical Islamist groups such as ISIS have terrorized religious minorities in Syria through killings, kidnappings, assault, and arrests.[4]

Largest Cities

Urban: 54.2%

Aleppo,Damascus, **Homs,** Latakia, **Hama, Ar-Rakka, Deir ez-Zor, Hasakeh, Al-Qa-mishli, Al-Yarmu-k, As-Si-dah Zaynab, Tartous, Jarama-nah, Duma.**

Cities listed in **bold** have no LDS congregations.

Three of the fourteen cities with over 100,000 inhabitants has an official or unofficial congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Thirty-five percent (35%) of the national population resides in the fourteen most populous cities.

Church History

Latter-day Saint missionary efforts in the Middle East commenced in Syria in the late nineteenth century among Armenian Christian communities under the Turkish Mission. A branch established in Aleppo became one of the largest branches in the Turkish Mission, resulting in the relocation of mission headquarters to Aleppo from 1907 to 1909. The Turkish Mission was closed in 1909 due to political instability and reopened in 1921. When the mission reopened, missionaries alleviated the dire circumstances of the few remaining members that weathered the war. Many members died or left the country during this period. The mission president coordinated with French government officials to relocate Armenian members in Aintab, Turkey to Aleppo in 1921. The mission was renamed the Armenian Mission in 1924. By 1927, there were 173 members and consideration was given to establish a colony for these Armenian members in Syria. However, only twenty of these members were self-sustaining and it was decided the Church would not purchase land to establish a colony.[5] The mission closed in 1929 following the death of the mission president. The mission reopened in 1933 as the Palestine-Syrian Mission, was closed in 1939, and reopened again in 1947. The mission was renamed the Near East Mission in 1950 and was permanently closed in 1951. Between the mid-twentieth century and 1997, expatriate members periodically held church services in Syria until a permanent branch was established.[6]

Syria was assigned to the Europe Central Area until 2008 when it was assigned to the newly created Middle East/Africa North Area. The Church closed the Damascus Branch at approximately the same time the civil war began in 2011. However, there were several converts who joined the Church in the 2010s. This prompted the reestablishment of an official branch and additional member groups thereafter with leadership support from the Beirut Lebanon District presidency.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: less than 50 (2018)

Most Latter-day Saints known to reside in Syria in the late twentieth century and during the 2000s were expatriate members temporarily living in the country. There were a few native Syrian members during the late 1990s and 2000s. Small numbers of Syrian natives joined the Church in the 2010s.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 0 Branches: 1 Groups: 2? (2018)

The Damascus Branch was organized in 1997 for expatriates living in the country.[7] The branch either pertained to the Amman Jordan District or reported directly to the area presidency prior to its closure at the onset of the Syrian Civil War in 2011. The Damascus Branch was reinstated in 2016. Member groups appeared to begin to operate in Aleppo and Latakia sometime in the mid-2010s. In 2016, the Beirut Lebanon District administered the Damascus Branch as well as any member groups that continue to operate.

Activity and Retention

Prior to the civil war, members were encouraged to not regularly attend church services due to security concerns. However, since the mid-2010s essentially all members in the country are Syrian natives. Specific information of convert retention and member activity rates is unavailable. However, many recent converts appear active.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Arabic, Armenian (East), Armenian (West), English.

All Latter-day Saint scriptures and most church materials are available in Arabic and Armenian (East). The Liahona magazine has four issues in Armenian (East) a year. The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith pamphlet, Book of Mormon selections, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price are translated in Armenian (West).

Meetinghouses

Church meetings likely occur in private residences or in a rented space.

Humanitarian and Development Work

A total of ninety-one humanitarian and development projects have occurred in Syria, including sixteen in 2017. These projects have included Benson Food initiatives, community projects, emergency response, immunizations, maternal and newborn care, refugee response, vision care, and wheelchair donations.[8] Humanitarian and development work at Damascus University has included neonatal resuscitation training, hygiene kits for cancer patients, medications, and a career workshop.[9]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Latter-day Saints have performed humanitarian and development projects for several years and likely do so under the Catholic or Orthodox Churches as a Christian NGO. Association with Damascus University on previous service projects may indicate that humanitarian and development work fully depends on the university rather than a traditional Christian church. Full-time senior missionary couples have served regularly in Syria as humanitarian workers. Strict proselytism bans prohibit any overt missionary activity. Cultural customs and government bans on the conversion of Muslims to non-Islamic religions renders more than 90% of the population unreached by member-missionary associations. However, there are good opportunities for local members to share the gospel among close friends and associates who are Christians. Additionally, there are no government requirements for permits to hold worship services, providing opportunities for the Church to hold meetings.

Cultural Issues

Conversion from one religion to another is extremely rare, especially for Muslims converting to Christianity. Syrian religious communities are tight-knit and unaccommodating of change. Prospective Latter-day Saint converts may face intense persecution from family and their respective communities, which may require relocation to another area in the country or abroad. The importance of the family unit in society complements Church teachings, but the strong connection of family and religion poses major challenges for prospective missionary activity. Widespread coffee consumption opposes Church teachings.

National Outreach

With the exception of close member associates, the entire population is unreached by the Church. However, the Church operates a branch in Damascus and member groups in two additional cities – cities inhabited by 22% of the national population. Thus, there are opportunities for member-missionary activity in three of the four most populous cities at present.

Internet outreach may be a useful means to provide opportunity for more of the population to become aware of the Church and its teachings. Arabic-language Church websites created by ordinary members have facilitated the conversion of Arab Muslims in other nations in the Middle East. Continued humanitarian and development work offer positive public relations building opportunities within the scope of the law.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Intense societal opposition to conversion and government restrictions on religious freedom require a high degree of dedication and faith from Syrians who desire to join the Church. Consequently, Latter-day Saint converts exhibit strong devotion to the

Church. However, converts in similar cultures often struggle with the societal backlash of their conversions and are unable to attend church regularly. Nevertheless, recent converts appear well-supported by local members and district leadership, and thus far retention and member activity appear good.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Arab-Syrians, Palestinians, and Iraqis share many cultural and linguistic similarities, resulting in few potential ethnic integration issues if individuals from each of these groups attend the same congregations. Integration of Kurds and Armenians into predominantly Arab congregations presents greater challenges due to differing cultural and religious backgrounds. The Church may experience greater success among Kurds and Armenians than among the Arab majority, as these groups have been more receptive to missionary-oriented Christian groups in recent years than Arabs.

Language Issues

Most, if not all, members appear to speak Arabic. The Syrian dialect of Arabic features many similarities with standard Arabic, and so there is no need for the translation of Church materials into Syrian Arabic. There are no scriptures or materials translated into Kurdish. Church materials available in both Armenian dialects provide opportunities for outreach among Armenian communities.

Missionary Service

No Syrian Latter-day Saints are known to have served a full-time mission. With the exception of senior missionary couples on humanitarian assignment, no full-time missionaries have been assigned to Syria since the mid-twentieth century.

Leadership

Only native members appear to currently serve in leadership positions. Local leadership has been developed to the point to warrant the operation of an official branch in Damascus. Leadership remains too undeveloped and limited in numbers to warrant the organization of branches from member groups in Aleppo and Latakia.

Temple

Syria is likely assigned to the London England Temple district. Native members are generally unable to attend the temple due to time constraints, travel expenses, and visa issues.

Comparative Growth

Several other countries in the Near East have had a Church presence established among the native population such as Iraqi Kurdistan, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine (West Bank) and Turkey. However, the organization of new member groups or branches has only occurred in Iraqi Kurdistan, Syria, and Turkey. The Arab Gulf states such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar have a significantly larger Church membership, notwithstanding their predominately Arab-Muslim populations, due to the large expatriate presence in the largest cities.

Mission-focused Christian groups report stagnant or declining membership and congregational growth as many Christians have emigrated and the government bans proselytism among Muslims. Jehovah’s Witnesses report government surveillance and persecution.

Future Prospects

The reestablishment of the Damascus Branch along with the creation of member groups in Aleppo and Latakia stand as the most significant developments for the Church in Syria in nearly a century. Even more impressive, the Church has been able to baptize and retain small numbers of local converts with support from district leadership in Lebanon despite the ongoing civil war and exodus of millions of Syrians abroad. A permanent Church presence will only be established if local members remain within the country, stay active, and mature in leadership to warrant the organization of additional branches. Continued member-missionary efforts will be essential to strengthen and expand the Church in established locations. Political instability, religious freedom restrictions, and economic problems continue to pose challenges for long-term stability of the Church especially given its recent reestablishment.

[1] “Background Note: Syria,” Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, 8 September 2010. http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm

[2] “Syria,” Countries and Their Cultures,” retrieved 28 February 2011. http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Syria.html

[3] “Syria,” International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed 30 October 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=281006#wrapper

[4] “Syria,” International Religious Freedom Report 2017. 30 October 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=281006

[5] Lindsay, R.H. “The Dream of a Mormon Colony in the Near East,” Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, Vol.1, No. 2. https://www.dialoguejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/Dialogue_V01N04_52.pdf

[6] “Syria,” Global Mormonism Project—BYU, retrieved 25 February 2011. http://globalmormonism.byu.edu/?page_id=83

[7] “Syria,” Global Mormonism Project—BYU, retrieved 25 February 2011. http://globalmormonism.byu.edu/?page_id=83

[8] “Where We Work,” LDS Charities. Accessed 30 October 2018. https://www.ldscharities.org/where-we-work

[9] “Projects—Syria,” Humanitarian Activities Worldwide, retrieved 25 February 2011. http://www.providentliving.org/project/0,13501,4607–1–2008–252,00.html