



SOCIO - CULTURAL  
PROFILE OF THE  
**SYRIAN**  
POPULATION AT  
THEIR PLACE OF ORIGIN





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Publisher: International Organization for Migration

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## Relevance of the intercultural dialogue in integration processes

For the Argentine government, it is an honour to preface this 'Socio-cultural profile of the Syrian population at their place of origin,' which has been developed aiming at understanding the overall socio-cultural characteristics of the Syrian population and at facilitating its integration process in the Argentine Republic.

This work was prepared in the framework of the 'Emerging Resettlement Countries Joint Support Mechanism' (ERCM), jointly led by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) so as to boost and/or strengthen resettlement programmes and other complementary procedures for the reception of refugees.

With the support of ERCM, the Argentine government has been carrying out various actions to strengthen the Syria Programme, among them, workshops for raising awareness of and training in intercultural communication for callers, healthcare workers, teachers and other social actors involved in the integration of the Syrian population.

To this end, this publication, which is supplemented by the 'Information and intercultural communication strengthening guide for the integration of the beneficiary population of the Syria Programme,' is essential as it will allow participants to be aware of historical, geographical and political aspects related to the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as matters connected with the ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity of its population, its cultural practices, and the configuration of families and gender roles, among other topics. In addition, this valuable document includes data on healthcare, education and employment in the country of origin, and provides a description of the Syrian population residing in the Argentine Republic.

Both publications will make it possible to work with various social actors in the generation of more instances of intercultural encounter, raising the awareness of participants, and mitigating stereotypes and prejudices which they may have due to the lack of knowledge and/or precise information.

We hope that both materials are enriching so as to facilitate and improve the responses that the Argentine government has launched to receive populations of Syrian origin.

Buenos Aires, September 2018

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of Strategic Affairs*  
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## Support of the international community to the Syria Programme

The socio-cultural profile of the Syrian population presented herein is part of the actions carried out by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) jointly with the Argentine State, so as to strengthen and support the implementation of the Special Programme for the Issuance of Humanitarian Visas for Foreigners Affected by the Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, usually referred to as the 'Syria Programme.'

A part of this articulated work has been materialised through the technical assistance provided in the stage prior to the departure of the Programme beneficiaries, for instance, by means of the identification and selection of refugees by UNHCR, and the preparation of people through health screenings and cultural orientation sessions conducted by IOM.

This profile is part of the actions aimed at strengthening the processes of integration of the Syrian population upon its arrival in Argentina, and at supporting the institutional capacities of government agencies, local governments, and civil society organisations responsible for providing services, guidance and support to the Syrian families residing in the country.

This material, as well as the Information and intercultural communication strengthening guide which complements it, arises from the identified need for preparing government agencies and receiving communities, and providing them with the necessary information and practical tools that facilitate the intercultural communication both between them and with the target population.

The aforementioned actions have been carried out through the 'Emerging Resettlement Countries Joint Support Mechanism' (ERCM), an initiative designed to facilitate and strategically channel the support provided by the international community for the strengthening of emerging resettlement programmes or other complementary procedures for the reception of refugees, such as the Syria Programme.

ERCM was launched during the United Nations High-level Meeting on Migrants and Refugees in September 2016. At that meeting, the New York Declaration was drafted, the steps to be followed to reach a Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and a Global Compact for Refugees were established, and the implementation of the commitments assumed on the 2030 Agenda in connection with migration was debated.

ERCM is the result of the common understanding that the response to large displacements of migrants and refugees must be a shared responsibility, for which it is essential to establish solid partnerships among States and to be supported by the international community as a whole.

In this sense, the Global Compact for Refugees and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration which will be adopted in the last months of this year reflect the will of the States to assume such responsibility and to reach a consensus reinforcing the framework for the protection of refugees, especially regarding the search for long-lasting solutions based on the principle of shared responsibility and multi-actor response, as well as to contribute to steering the governance of international migrations. The Syria Programme is inserted in this international context and it is, without a doubt, a clear example of the humanitarian commitment assumed by the Argentine State. IOM and UNHCR will continue to support Argentina to fulfil its goal.

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## Introduction

This document aims at describing the socio-cultural characteristics of the Syrian population, so as to facilitate the processes of integration of migrants and refugees, and, in this particular case, of the beneficiaries of the Special Programme for the Issuance of Humanitarian Visas for Foreigners Affected by the Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria Programme).

Before their departure, IOM provides the programme beneficiaries with orientation and precise information on their place of destination so as to handle the expectations they have before being resettled in a new space, minimising the stress they experience and maximising their capacities and strengths so that their integration can thus be promoted.

IOM's experience of working with other migrating groups in numerous countries has shown that integration is a bidirectional process that works in a better way when both the refugees and migrants and those who receive them understand well the expectations, cultural differences, and practices of one another.

The Socio-cultural profile of the Syrian population is prepared in this sense, introducing historical, geographical and political aspects of the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as information on the ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity of its population, its cultural practices, the configuration of Syrian families and gender roles, among other aspects, from a socio-anthropological perspective. Information on healthcare, education and work in the country prior to the conflict is also added.

Finally, a brief overview of the population of Syrian origin in the Argentine Republic is provided, from the beginning of the migration waves in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to most recent times since the implementation of the Syria Programme, always bearing in mind the diversity that may be found in any social group.

The Profile will be complemented with the Information and intercultural communication strengthening guide for the integration of the beneficiary population of the Syria Programme in Argentina, material that will be offered —among other instances— in the information sessions with local authorities and receiving communities so as to increase the mutual knowledge and to contribute to the process of integration of the programme beneficiaries.

We consider that knowing the aforementioned aspects will contribute to having a clearer depiction, though never complete, of this group, thus promoting its integration and reception.

## Methodology

This study has resulted from the thorough reading of diverse documents, such as academic articles, technical reports of both national and international agencies, newspaper articles, and opinion pieces by specialists in the topic.

The technical support of IOM's offices in Jordan and the United Kingdom was also available, considering the Organization's vast experience of preparing similar materials for other resettlement programmes.

The research conducted, as well the material read and analysed, resulted in highly relevant sections to understand the situation of the Syrian population arriving in the Argentine Republic.

In addition, thorough interviews were held with beneficiaries of the Syria Programme, callers, Civil Society Organisations working with them, and State actors so as to complement and provide different nuances to the material surveyed.



## Brief overview of the history of the Syrian Arab Republic

This section briefly refers to the history of the territory currently called 'Syrian Arab Republic' (Al-Jumhuriya al-'Arabiya as-Suriya). Its history goes back to the Canaanites or Phoenicians, subsequently becoming part of the Ottoman Empire. Following its dissolution, it was a French colony until its independence in 1946. After it, and intermittently, various problems afflicting the country ensued until the current armed conflict, which started in 2011.

This series of events will be summarised in the section below, understanding that they cross-cut the identity construction of the Syrian population. Both the invasions and flows of migrants and refugees going through its territory left marks that can be seen in the ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity which will be described.

The consequences that the conflict has had in the main cities of the current Syrian Arab Republic will be highlighted below.

Finally, a section will deal with the geography so as to know the main regions making up the country, along with their features, aiming at contributing to the awareness of the main cities where the Syrian population arriving in the Argentine Republic come from, as well as the economic development of those regions.

### Remarks on the history of the country

The region between the Anatolian peninsula, Turkey and Sinai was historically known as Syria. Such territory has been the subject of dispute between the ancient Persian and Egyptian civilizations, as the former considered that such area was the first passage to gain access to their expansionist project and the latter understood that it was an access route to their country (Klengel, 1992).

Between the 12th and 7th centuries BC, the Canaanite civilisation, known as Phoenicians by the Greeks, developed in the central part of its shores. This society —mainly made up of sailors and merchants— gave rise to

the first-ever known market economy. In spite of the disputes and temporary dominions which existed in the different Phoenician cities, they were always independent (Hitti, 2002).

In 660, the Arabisation of the territory started under the Umayyad dynasty, which established its capital in Damascus, the current capital of the country (Hitti, 2002). In the 11th century, Christian crusaders arrived in Syria and remained there for 200 years, which is why there still are Christian minorities in the territory. The Egyptians started the process of expulsion of crusaders in the 13th century, which turned the country into a virtual Egyptian province—a theatre of confrontation with Mongol and Tatar invaders. It was in the 16th century, though, when the Egyptians definitively lost dominion over the territory, which was left in control of the Ottoman Empire (Oliva, 2008).

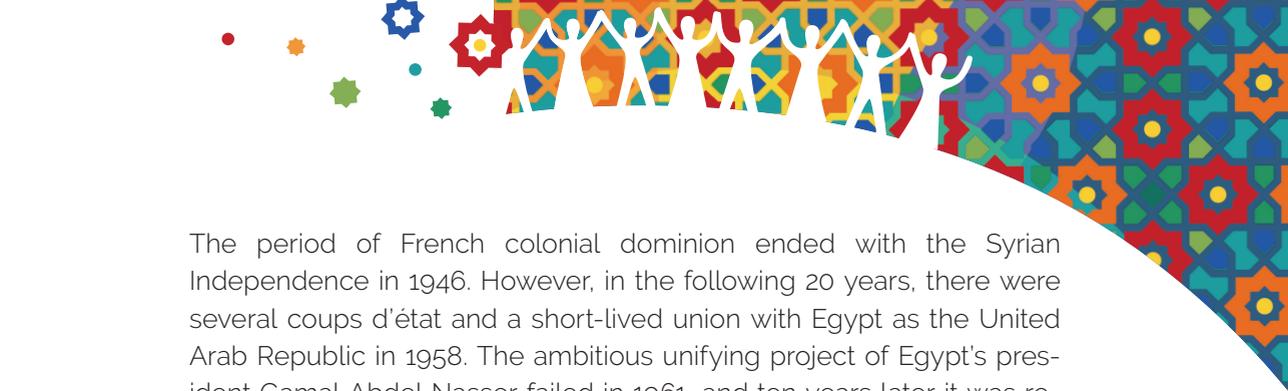
Both the presence of crusaders in Syria and the subsequent dominion of Ottomans led to important consequences in the territory. In the first case, we may mention the strengthening of Christian communities and especially that of the Maronites,<sup>1</sup> which served as a pretext for the European intrusions from the 17th century onwards.<sup>2</sup>

As regards control of the Ottoman Empire over the Syrian territory, it extended from the 13th century to the end of the First World War (1918)—400 years in total—and ended when the victors divided the region. By means of the Sykes-Picot agreement (1916), Paris and London divided the Fertile Crescent: the Syrian Arab Republic (with Lebanon) was allotted to France, while England kept the Palestine Territories, Jordan and Iraq.



1. When Khedive of Egypt Muhammad (Mehemet) Ali conquered Syria in 1831, the heavy taxes and military service caused an uprising in which Christians and Muslims participated. The European powers invoked repression against Christians as a pretext to intervene, stopped Ali's attack, and delegated to the French the 'protection of Syrian Christians.' The process ended up with the Egyptian withdrawal in 1840, the restoration of the Ottoman dominion and the acceptance by Turkish sultans that Christian missions and schools subsidised by Europeans be established. For further information on this topic, refer to: López García, Bernabé (2000). *El mundo Arabo-Islámico contemporáneo. Una historia política*. Madrid: Editorial Síntesis.

2. In 1858, for example, the Maronites, organised in communities concentrated in the mountain region between Damascus and Jerusalem, broke with their ruling class and abolished the feudal system of land ownership. Even though the conflict was suppressed in 1860, one month later, French troops landed in Beirut and forced the Turkish government to create a separate province, 'Little Lebanon,' which had to be ruled by a Christian appointed by the sultan, but approved by the European powers, and to have its own police. In its territory, feudal privileges were abolished. A social conflict thus turned into a confrontation between faith-based groups, which put Christians from 'Little Lebanon' under conditions of pre-eminence over the local Muslim population. For further information, see: Syria - International Religious Freedom Report 2006. U.S. Department of State. 2006 and Etienne de Vaumas, 'La population de la Syrie,' *Annales de géographie*, Année 1955, Vol. 64, No. 341, p. 74.



The period of French colonial dominion ended with the Syrian Independence in 1946. However, in the following 20 years, there were several coups d'état and a short-lived union with Egypt as the United Arab Republic in 1958. The ambitious unifying project of Egypt's president Gamal Abdel Nasser failed in 1961, and ten years later it was re-launched, this time with greater elasticity in terms of links among its members, in the Federation of Arab Republics, in which Libya also participated (Oliva, 2008).

After taking office in 1963, the Ba'ath party made considerable reforms in the country. Some measures taken by the new government included the purge of dissidents and the nationalisation of banks. In addition, a land reform was introduced to give land to peasants, and the curriculum was Arabised. The ruling party thus installed a secular and socialist regime (COR, 2014).

In 1970, the Minister of Defence, Hafez al-Assad, seized power, assuming presidency in 1971. His government forged close ties with the former Soviet Union and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Various production sectors, such as agriculture, plastics, fabrics, and paper, were developed, so as to meet consumer demands in the country. In May 1991, the Syrian Arab Republic acknowledged Lebanon as an independent State —for the first time— since both countries became independent from France, signing a cooperation agreement (COR, 2014).

## Brief current political landscape

The National Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic was voted on by a referendum and approved in 1973. Its last modification was passed on February 26th, 2012, and it establishes the Republic, based on the principle of political pluralism, as its form of government.

Every seven years, a president that must be Muslim is elected, and every four years a People's Assembly and a Council of Ministers (legislative bodies) are elected. The president —who is also the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces— has powers to appoint and dismiss the vice-presidents, prime minister and ministers, in accordance with the National Constitution.

Since 2000, Bashar Háfez al-Ásad has been the president of the country. Before that, and for 29 years, his father —Háfez al-Ásad— was the president, until he died. In the years prior to the conflict, economic and social tensions increased as a result of a severe drought between 2003 and 2010, which made thousands of people leave their land and move to other cities to survive. This massive migration made the prices of food and unemployment rates increase in rural and urban areas, resulting in unrest and complaints.

## Some remarks on the current conflict

Even though the appearance of a graffito<sup>3</sup> drawn by students in the framework of the uprisings known as 'the Arab Spring' in 2011 has been singled out as the trigger of the current conflict, all the aforementioned factors must be considered to understand the problems that have been going on for seven years now, resulting in more than 250,000 casualties and more than one million wounded people (UN, 2018c).

First, the economic difficulties that the country went through as a result of the drought, the massive migration from the countryside to the cities, as well as the dissatisfaction of a part of the population with the government before 2011, must be considered.

It is also necessary to point out that the Syrian Arab Republic is a country with wide faith diversity. Islam is the predominant religion —90 per cent of the population—: 74 per cent are Sunni and 16 per cent belong to different Shia groups. The remaining 10 per cent of the Syrian population is Christian, with a predominance of Orthodox Greeks over Catholics.

Actors in the conflict:

- At the beginning of the conflict, rebels (opponents of the government) grouped under the name of Free Syrian Army (FSA), which led to diverse factions from rebels with no religious affiliation to Islamist groups.
- The Syrian army is supported by between 150,000 and 200,000 people who are in favour of the regime. However, since the beginning of

...

3. The graffito drawn by a group of young people at a school read 'the people want to bring down the regime.'



the conflict, it has lost half its men. In addition, between 5,000 and 8,000 Lebanese Hezbollah fighters joined.

- The Russian air force, a major ally of the Damascus regime, allowed the government troops to recoup several key areas, such as the city of Aleppo.
- The Islamic Republic of Iran, another major ally, sent thousands of fighters to Syria.

To the situation of violence, other problems must be added: livelihoods have also been seriously affected by the conflict, the agricultural production has halved in comparison with the levels in 2011, and many areas in the country have been contaminated by weapons. In a joint assessment conducted in November 2017 by IOM and the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) reported that 33 per cent of all the sub-districts in the Syrian Arab Republic were contaminated with explosive devices (UNHCR, 2018d).

As a result of this situation, a large part of the Syrian population has crossed the borders to arrive in neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. Others have tried to cross the Mediterranean to get to Greece or Italy, or have internally displaced throughout the country (UNHCR, 2018d).

## Geography and location

This section identifies the main regions of the country, its productive areas, and its most important cities, differentiating between rural and urban areas, to have a better understanding of the place where the beneficiaries of the Syria Programme come from.

The Syrian Arab Republic has an area of 185,180 km<sup>2</sup> and a population—as recorded before the conflict— of 21,019,000 people and 18,270,000 people in 2017, according to the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations (UN DESA, 2017).

Located in south-western Asia, to the north it is bordered by Turkey; to the east, by Iraq; to the south, by Jordan and the Palestine Territories; and to the west, by Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea.

## Image 1

### Political map of the Syrian Arab Republic<sup>4</sup>



Due to the large number of desert areas, a major part of the population is concentrated in the western sector of the country and along the Euphrates River to the north. Around 60 per cent of Syrians used to live in urban settings before the conflict and around 40 per cent lived in rural areas.

The capital and largest city in the country is Damascus, with an estimated population of 1,754,000 inhabitants (without counting 2,819,642 people who live in the rural areas of Damascus), followed by Aleppo or Halab (4,769,029 inhabitants, including rural areas), Homs (1,771,921 inhabitants), Hama (1,574,062) and Latakia or Al Ladhqiya (967,581)

•••

4. This map is for illustrative purposes only. The limits and names shown and the designations used do not imply official support or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration.



(Humanitarian Needs Overview, 2018). All the population estimations mentioned herein are as at 2010, that is, prior to the conflict.

Even though it is an essentially agricultural country, the development margin of this sector is minimal and, at present, the irrigated land covers a small percentage of the total cultivated area. The agricultural soil suffers from desertification and erosion, due, in part, to the high deforestation rate and to the fact that many farmers did not use to rotate their crops (COR, 2014).

The main subsistence crops are cereals, fruit and vegetables (ASOCAE, n.d.). Commercial products include tobacco, cotton and nuts, which are mainly exported to France, Germany, Italy and the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the western plains, near Lebanon, cereals, vines and fruits are grown (Jiménez Olmos, 2013).

The main extractive resources in the Syrian Arab Republic are natural gas, phosphates, chrome ore, iron, manganese, asphalt, rock salt, marble and gypsum, and oil is the main pillar of its economy (United States Library of Congress, 2005).

To conclude, it is worth mentioning that, before the conflict, the country had relatively high employment rates, and its population was known in the area for its skills in various sectors, such as the hotel and construction industries. There was a strong entrepreneurial class as well as a professional class of physicians, engineers, chemists, teachers, journalists, among others.

## Changes in the main cities as result of the conflict. Brief overview

As mentioned before, the still active conflict has had a devastating impact: 6.2 million people have been displaced within the territory occupied by the Syrian Arab Republic; around 6.3 million people have fled the country; the availability of water has also decreased; the electricity supply has been reduced; residential homes have been damaged; and there is reduced access to hospitals, schools, as well as increased unemployment and poverty rates (UNHCR, 2018d).

This section will cover the main impacts on the three most important cities in the country so as to understand the situation where most of the Syrian displaced people come from: Aleppo (40 per cent of the city has been destroyed), Damascus and Homs.

## **Aleppo**

Aleppo (*Halab*) is one of the main cities in the Syrian Arab Republic from a population point of view, with 3,570,540 inhabitants (Humanitarian Needs Overview, 2018). At present, it is virtually in ruins due to the conflict.

As it is one of the oldest cities in the region, it has had various names since ancient times. The Turks used to call it Khalpe, while the ancient Greeks used to know it as Beroea. It is located in the northwest of the country and extends over more than 16,000 km<sup>2</sup>, and its location grants it a strategic positioning halfway the trade route connecting the Euphrates with the Mediterranean coast. In addition, Christians range between 20 and 30 per cent of its total inhabitants.

The conflict has particularly affected this city and its inhabitants. Many of them have fled to other regions and its trade has considerably decreased. The high level of devastation is witnessed in the changes that it has undergone when considering the appearance that it had in early 2011. Its historic centre, declared a World Heritage site, shifted from being the epicentre of the country's economy and politics to a bastion of the opposing parties (UNHCR, 2017).

## **Damascus**

*Dimashq* in Arabic, it is the capital city and, at present, it has a population of 3,308,841 inhabitants, including the rural area (Humanitarian Needs Overview, 2018). It is widely known as ash-Sham and it is nicknamed as 'City of Jasmine'. With 4,000 years of history, it is one of the most ancient inhabited cities in the world, which is why it is considered as a highly relevant cultural and religious centre.

In spite of its status as a capital city, this has not protected it from attacks and bombings, which have increased since 2013 —several of them in the most crowded areas. Control of this city is still strategic for the conflicting parties (UNHCR, 2017).



## Homs

*Hims* in Arabic, it is the capital of the Homs Governorate. It is located in the west of the country, and it is ranked third after Damascus and Aleppo according to the size of its population —1,415,805 inhabitants (Humanitarian Needs Overview, 2018). It was known with the Greek name of Emesa. It is an industrial city and it is also considered a railway hub, and it has a major road network. The industries of the city include textiles, jewellery, sugar beet processing, metallurgical projects, and oil refining.

The current landscape shows a devastated city, with virtually uninhabited quarters and houses reduced to rubble, as a result of the fierce battles. Since 2011, at least 13,000 people have died (UNHCR, 2017).

An overall deterioration of the Syrian cities with the subsequent loss of cultural and architectural richness which is hardly recoverable can be seen. According to some experts, it would take around three decades to reverse the effects of such a situation (UNHCR, 2017).

## Humanitarian crisis

The conflict has resulted in millions of displaced people, most of whom have sought to save their lives in nearby countries; in fact, there are 5.5 million Syrian refugees in five countries only (the Republic of Turkey, the Lebanese Republic, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Republic of Iraq, and the Arab Republic of Egypt), according to IOM's data (2018b). There are two main reasons that lead us to look more closely at the situation of the Syrian population in the Lebanese Republic. The first one is their numerical significance compared with the local population; the second one is the great vulnerability that they experience due to the lack of formal refugee camps; the high poverty rates; the lack of access to basic services; and, most recently, xenophobia and other types of violence by the local population (News Deeply, 2018).

The Lebanese Republic is a country bordering the Syrian Arab Republic to the north and east, and the State of Israel to the south. In addition to being immersed in the regional conflict of the Middle East, the

country has had a long history of internal conflict and political instability (Movement for Peace, 2017).

Fifty per cent of the population of Syrian refugees is younger than 18 years of age, and, among them, 80 per cent does not go to any educational centre due to the inability of the school system to meet such a demand (Movement for Peace, 2017).

Around 70 per cent lives below the poverty line. There are no formal refugee camps and, as a consequence, more than one million registered Syrians are scattered throughout over 2,100 communities, as well as in urban and rural areas, usually sharing small basic shelters with other refugee families in overcrowded conditions.

According to the latest study conducted by UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP, Syrian refugees in the Lebanese Republic are in a situation of great vulnerability, with more than half of their population living in extreme poverty, and more than three quarters living below the poverty line. This study stresses that, after seven years of conflict, it is increasingly difficult for Syrian refugees in Lebanon to make ends meet, and they increasingly depend on international aid (UNHCR, 2018c).

Other data from the study show that only 19 per cent of the families surveyed have residence permits in Lebanon —another indicator of the vulnerability that the Syrian population suffers in that country.



Homs, 2016 © IOM



## Statelessness in the Syrian Arab Republic

According to UNHCR's definition, a stateless person is a person who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law. Many people in the world are in this situation; therefore, they only have minimum access to legal protection and basic rights.

This is the situation of some Syrian refugees, as shown by a survey conducted in 2013, which, according to its results, found that around 10 per cent of the Kurdish refugees from the Syrian Arab Republic are stateless in the Iraqi Kurdistan region. This is due to the fact that many of them were forced to flee the country before they could apply for nationality or were not eligible because they had never been registered by Syrian authorities. This statelessness status will also be inherited by their children (UNHCR, 2013).

A 2011 decree allows registered stateless Kurds, called *ajanib* (foreigners), to apply for Syrian nationality, but obstacles remain. Those deemed 'unregistered' are still barred from applying for citizenship. Even those who are eligible to apply for nationality face certain challenges.

In late 2015, UNHCR calculated that the total number of stateless people in the Syrian Arab Republic would be 160,000 (UNHCR, 2016). However, there is no comprehensive data on how many refugees from that country are actually stateless. UNHCR has reported that, in Lebanon, about 0.2 per cent of Syrian refugees have been identified as stateless. In the Domiz camp, in Iraqi Kurdistan, it is calculated that 5 per cent of Syrian refugees are stateless Kurds from Maktoum. But, as not all the refugees are registered, and not all those who are have registered themselves as stateless, figures may be higher (NRC, 2016).

## Diversity

The territory where the Syrian Arab Republic is currently located has been disputed and occupied by various groups throughout history, which makes it possible to understand the configuration of its population to the present day.

This great diversity may be broken down into ethnic, religious and linguistic components, overlapping as a mosaic and giving rise to the various identity constructions of the Syrian population.

### Ethnic diversity

The Syrian population has great ethnic diversity, and Arabs, including Muslims and Christians, are the substantial majority (nearly 90 per cent of the population). Arabs are divided into several religious communities which will be dealt with towards the end of this chapter, and they live in all the areas of the country, in cities and towns, in the desert and the mountains (Collelo, 1987).

The Kurds —the second largest ethnic group— account for around 10 per cent of the population and are part of a Stateless nation, divided among Turkey, the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq. Around one third of them live in the Taurus mountains to the north of Aleppo, and an equal number, along the border with Turkey in Al-Jazira. Ten per cent are settled in Jarabulus, to the northwest of Aleppo, and the remaining percentage in *Hayy al-Akrad* (quarter of the Kurds) on the outskirts of Damascus (Citizenship and immigration Canada, 2015).

Armenians are another minority living in the Syrian Arab Republic, mostly Christians from various affiliations; they live mainly in Aleppo, Damascus and Al-Jazira. There are other much smaller ethnic groups, and also populations of other nationalities due to the conflicts that two of its neighbouring countries have been going through: according to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), there are 438,000 Palestine refugees and 1.2 million Iraqis (2018a and b).



## Linguistic diversity

There is a significant link between ethnicity and language. In general, those who belong to the same ethnic group speak the same language. However, and in spite of all the minorities in the territory, all Syrians speak colloquial Arabic (which has major differences from the Arabic spoken in other countries, and it is, many times, difficult to understand by the population of various national origins), and the great majority can also read and write in modern standard Arabic (also known as 'al-fus-haa', language used in all the Arab world for various specialized activities, such as, for example, education, the media, the written press, and on formal occasions). The variety of the Arabic language spoken in the Syrian Arab Republic is closer to the variety spoken by the Lebanese/Palestinian/Jordanian population (known as Levantine or Shami Arabic), as they share a very similar grammar and vocabulary.

Kurds in the Syrian Arab Republic usually speak, apart from Kurdish, Arabic as their mother or near-native tongue, like Syriac Christians (who also usually speak Syriac). Armenians speak Armenian and, on occasions, colloquial Arabic, but, in general, cannot read or write it. Turkmens speak a variety of Turkish and also Arabic, but most of them cannot read or write it (COR, 2014).

In addition, and due to the French colonisation which occupied the country after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and until its independence, many Syrians speak French and others, English, depending on their schooling.

Other languages are spoken to a lesser degree, depending on the population's ethnicity and nationality, but they are minorities.

## Religious diversity

The Syrian Arab Republic is a secular State that allows for religious freedom, and it is the only Arabic-speaking country in the Middle East (together with Lebanon) which does not have an official State religion. Anyway, and in spite of the fact that the official religion is not Islam, according to articles 3.1 and 3.2 of its national constitution, the president of

the republic has to be Muslim and Islamic jurisprudence is declared as the primary source of law.

Few Syrians are agnostic or atheistic, but various levels of beliefs and religious practices are accepted, even within the same family (Citizenship and immigration Canada, 2015). In general, the geographic distribution of the population is related to the religious denomination, as shown below when describing each of them.

The population in the country is 90 per cent Muslim, but with a significant internal diversity that will be analysed more deeply in the following section. Devout Muslims in the Syrian Arab Republic pray five times a day, but do so in private, and a prayer can be postponed if it is inconvenient to pray at the scheduled time.

Before praying, they must wash their feet, forearms and face, which is why there are usually bottles or jars in bathrooms for that purpose. During the lunar month of Ramadan, fasting during daylight hours is respected, without eating, drinking or smoking.

Christians (around 10 per cent of the remaining population) also show great internal diversity, including Arab Christians (Greek Orthodox and Catholics), Syriac Christians, and Armenian Orthodox. This group has a wide range of rights guaranteed by the constitution (article 35.1 'freedom and respect for all religions').

The cities with the largest Christian populations are Damascus, Saidnaya, Maaloula (these last two cities are places of pilgrimage), and outskirts of Aleppo, Latakia and Tartus. There are also centres of Christian populations in Hama and Homs.

A distinctive feature of devout Christians in the Syrian Arab Republic is that they usually wear crosses around their necks and regularly go to church. Eastern Orthodox Christians also have fast days, including the 40 vegan days of Lent, when they give up all animal food (meat, fish, milk, chocolate, butter, etc.) (García, 2014).

Catholics celebrate Christmas on December 25th, while Eastern Orthodox Christians celebrate Christmas on January 6th and 7th. Western and Eastern churches also differ in terms of their observance of Easter, which is a much more significant religious event than Christmas for Syrian Christians (COR, 2014).



The Greek Orthodox Church —former Byzantine church— is the largest one. It brings together half the Christian believers, even though it is difficult to know their exact number, as the population census in that country is not based on religious affiliation criteria (Kaplan, n.d.). To this community, outstanding academics and modern politicians, such as Michel Aflak, founder of the Ba'ath party, belonged (García, 2014).

The second largest community is the Armenian one, divided into Orthodox and Catholics. Aleppo has been their city of choice until many of them also migrated to Lebanon.

The Greek Catholic Church, promoted by European missionaries, obedient to the Pope in Rome, is the third largest Christian community in the country; its power is decisive in Lebanon and in small congregations such as the Syriac one, which still uses Aramaic in its liturgy (Heritage for peace, n.d.).

Finally, it is worth mentioning the existence of a small Arabic-speaking Jewish community, whose presence goes back to biblical times, but, at present, it is calculated that fewer than 200 Jews live in the Syrian Arab Republic —most of them in the capital (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2006). Many of them left the country in the 1990s.

Both Muslims and Christians (the two most significant religious communities) celebrate holidays not only as religious occasions, but also as family and community matters. All Muslim and Christian holidays are official public holidays, and most Syrians are thus aware of these two religions and their traditions (COR, 2014).

## Diversity within Syrian Islam

As most of the population is Muslim, but there are large divergences within this religion, we deem it relevant to point out the differences between the main branches of the Islam practised in this country, that is, Shia, Sunnis, and Alawites.

Muhammad's death in 632 resulted in a struggle for the leadership of Islam, causing a major division in the Muslim world between Sunnis and Shia. Sunnis adhere to sunna, which means 'tradition,' which is in keeping

with the fact that they have chosen a caliph from the prophet's tribe as successor. On the other hand, the Shia follow Ali, who was Muhammad's son-in-law, married to his daughter Fatimah. Shia means 'Shiat Ali': 'adherent of Ali' (Ruiz Figueroa, 1996). Sunnis consider that Muhammad's succession corresponds to an Arab member of the Quraysh tribe (to which he belonged), while the Shia consider that Ali started Muhammad's line of succession (Cahen, 1972).

In a large part of the world, the Sunnis are a majority, at a population level, within the Islamic world (90 per cent). It is also worth stressing that Arabs are mainly Sunni, while Iranians, ancient Persians, are usually Shia.

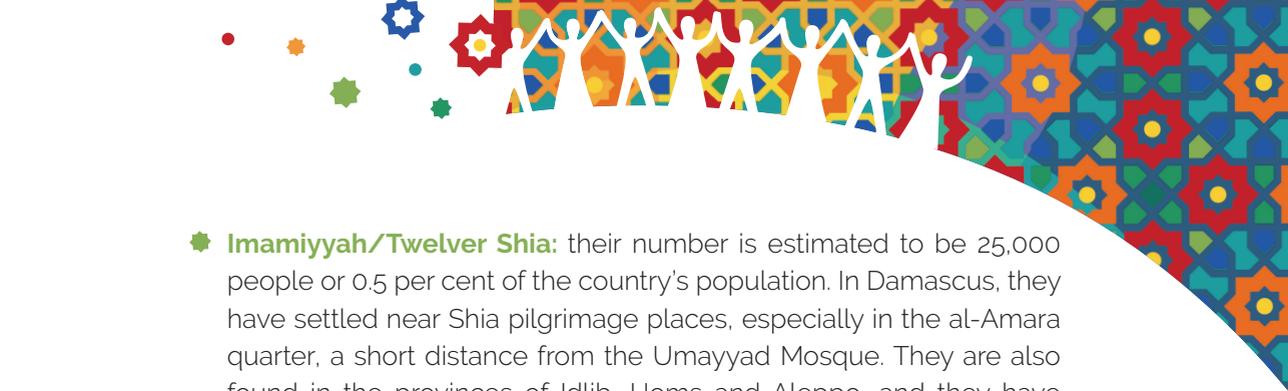
In the Syrian Arab Republic, Sunnis account for around 74 per cent of the population and they have settled in the entire territory of the country. There are only two provinces where they are not the majority: Al-Suwayda, where the Druze predominate, and Latakia, where Alawites are a majority. In Al Hasakah, Sunnis are the majority, but they are not of Arab ethnicity, but Kurds.

The Shia in Syria are divided in turn into several groups: Imamiyyah/Twelvers, Ismailis, also called 'Seveners,' and Alawites (Friedman, 2010).

✿ **Alawites:** they share beliefs with the main branch of Shia Islam, that is, they consider that Ali was Muhammad's legitimate successor as he led the Muslim community since the latter's death in 632. But they differ in the fact that they hold that Ali was a manifestation of God, a notion that Sunnis consider to be heretic (Von Grunebaum, 1975).

They account for around 2,350,562 people or 11 per cent of the country's population, and are the largest religious minority. They live mainly along the coast in Latakia, where they account for more than 80 per cent of the rural population. For centuries, Alawites were the most repressed and exploited minority in Syria. Mostly, they used to work as servants and tenant farmers for Sunni landowners. However, after Alawite president Hafez Assad and his family clan came to power in 1970, their living conditions improved considerably.

A third of the 250,000 military-age Alawite men have died fighting in the conflict that is currently afflicting the country, as a result of their support to Bashar al-Assad's government, against most of the opposing groups.

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- ✿ **Imamiyyah/Twelve Shia:** their number is estimated to be 25,000 people or 0.5 per cent of the country's population. In Damascus, they have settled near Shia pilgrimage places, especially in the al-Amara quarter, a short distance from the Umayyad Mosque. They are also found in the provinces of Idlib, Homs and Aleppo, and they have close ties with the Lebanese Twelver Shia (Der Gougassian, 2001).
  - ✿ **Ismailis (Seveners):** they are, in turn, divided into two large groups: Mustaalis and Nizaris. Ismailis in Syria account for around 200,000 people or 1 per cent of the population and they are predominantly Nizaris. Originally grouped in the Latakia governorate, most Ismaeli Syrians have mainly settled south of Salamiyah (fertile land granted by Abdul Hamid II, sultan of the Ottoman Empire from 1876 to 1909). Other thousands of Ismailis live in the mountains west of Hamah (population with fewer resources usually working seasonally in the harvest), and around 5,000 live in Latakia (Heritage for Peace, n.d.).
  - ✿ **Druze:** the Druze community in Syria accounts for 3 per cent of the population, and they are a majority in Jabal al-Arab—a mountainous region in the southwest of the country. The Druze religion has been a branch of Shia Islam since the 10th century, when al-Hakim—the sixth Fatimid caliph—lived. However, the Druze call themselves 'unitarians,' and their members are not considered Muslims by some followers of the main branch of Islam, but they are legally considered as such in the Syrian Arab Republic and Lebanon (U.S. Library of Congress, n.d.).

## Cultural practices

There is no single feature that can be identified as 'culture,' but certain aspects are usually associated with given cultural practices. They are visible aspects publicly showing deep-rooted traditions that enrich receiving societies, through which populations express themselves and construct their identities.

This section refers to the Syrian music and gastronomy, as well as rules and customs, gestures and greetings that may contribute to a

better understanding of this population and future relationships of coexistence.

## Music

The capital of the Syrian Arab Republic has always been one of the centres of Arab music, as there are a large number of Syrian artists, such as Sabah Fakhri, Nassif Zaitoun, George Wassouf, Asmahan, Lena Chamamyan, Mayada Henawi, Farid al-Atrash, Avraam Russo, among others. Aleppo is also considered one of the main centres of Arab traditional and classical music with the famous *Muwashshahs*, *Qudoods* and *Maqams* (which are religious and secular poetical and musical genres).

In the country, modernism has altered the fundamental traditions of the past, especially in a folk dance called *Dabka*. It is a dance of light coordinated steps with movements of the body and feet, beating the ground in harmony with a drum, a flute or any other country musical instrument. Even though this dance is still performed at present, the movements and specific characteristics of the dance have changed over time.

It should also be borne in mind that, like in many other places in the world, in the Syrian Arab Republic, tradition and modernity coexist, and, thus, Western music, traditional music, and modernised Arab music — influenced by electro— share a space and are easy to find anywhere in a country where, due to a State policy, no royalties or copyrights are paid for sound, cinematographic or bibliographic works.

## Gastronomy

Knowing the main eating habits of a population living in a particular territory —in this case, the Syrian Arab Republic— is important as they show the way in which the typical cuisine of a place results from an evolution nourished by contributions from the various peoples that have gone through it, and by the food practices and eating habits established as exchanges when the population in question moves from one place to the other, incorporating new dietary habits.



One of the most usual preparations in the Syrian cuisine is the use of pita flatbread, which is round, and over which a layer of *hummus* (chick-pea-based preparation) is usually spread, thus making a kind of dip. The other typical Syrian dish is *Baba ghanoush* made with aubergines.



A plate of hummus © Flickr

The most popular salads are *tabbouleh* and *fattoush*. *Tabbouleh* is a vegetarian Arab salad made with bulgur wheat, onion, parsley, garlic and lemon juice. *Fattoush* combines cucumber, pita bread, tomatoes, bell pepper, olives, and mint. Other dishes include vegetables such as stuffed cucumbers (*mahshe*), *dolmas*, *kebabs*, *kibbeh*, and *shawarma* and *shanklish snacks*. In addition, appetizers are usually served before the main course —known as *meze*—, which are also very typical of Eastern Mediterranean cuisines.

One of the most popular desserts is *baklava*, which is made with phyllo dough sheets filled with ground walnuts or pistachios, with sugar syrup.

In general, lunch is served in the early afternoon, around 2 or 3 pm. It is usually the biggest meal of the day, while dinner is served at around 8 and 9 pm, and is smaller in size.

## Mate



Mate in Syria © Flickr

It is estimated that the introduction of *mate* in the territories of the current Syrian Arab Republic resulted from the great immigration of Syrians towards Argentina between 1850 and 1860, who took that custom with them on their return.

The country was the largest importer of *yerba mate* in terms of value and volume, with 71.2 per cent and 67 per cent, respectively, of the total amount exported by Argentina in 2009; some Syrians believe that it is a custom typical of the Middle East (Páginas Árabes, 2017).

Even though, in the Syrian Arab Republic, *mate* is as popular as tea or coffee, there are some habit differences as regards the way it is drunk in Argentina: Syrians usually use an individual cup, and water is shared around a circle. In addition to this, smaller straws are used and mates are not made of gourds or wood, but glass or pottery.

## Rules on food habits in islam

There is a direct relationship between what people eat, how they eat it and when they eat it. In any culture, food choices are conditioned by various factors, such as religious beliefs (among others).



It is worth clarifying that feeding practices in Islam, however, are not uniformly implemented by all Muslims, but vary depending on the regions, people and life cycle moments, among other matters.

One of the main precepts of the Quran (holy book of Islam) is to maintain a healthy body, as the soul will subsequently be so, and it may be developed and perfected to be able to worship and obey God.

Among the suggestions to maintain a healthy body, there is food that is allowed and other that is not. The term used to refer to the food accepted by Sharia (Islamic law) is Halal —a wider term that makes reference to the set of practices allowed by the Muslim religion, but associated with food. The food which is not considered as Halal is called Haram.

There are some guidelines for food to be considered as Halal which may be summarised in three items:

- 1) The animal in question must not be part of the forbidden list;
- 2) It must be slaughtered alive (carrion is not accepted) in the name of God by a qualified Muslim slaughterer; and
- 3) It must be slaughtered by means of a single clean cut on its neck with a sharp knife, not cutting off its head, but severing its trachea, oesophagus and main veins and arteries.

Some of the forbidden food includes:

- Pork and all its products, including sausages, butter, pâté, etc. Blood and any food that may be made with it.
- Land animals without ears: worms, reptiles, snakes, insects, etc.
- Birds of prey and carnivorous animals or scavengers.

### **Food... view of the Syria Programme beneficiaries**

'Here —in Argentina— there is a lack of spices, ingredients such as sesame paste, which is key to Syrian food, and here it is only found in special stores and it is expensive'

*(Caller of the Syria Programme. Interview held in March, 2018).*

'Here, more meat is eaten, but everything is tasty. Asado is the best in the world'

*(Beneficiary of the Syria Programme. Interview held in March, 2018).*

- Any food or recipe containing the abovementioned items, or else cooked in the same container.
- Alcoholic drinks, toxic medicinal plants, or any substance with harmful effects on health.
- Animals dying before slaughter. Maltreated animals or animals that have not been fed on permitted food or that have not been slaughtered according to the Muslim ritual (Uribe, 2017).

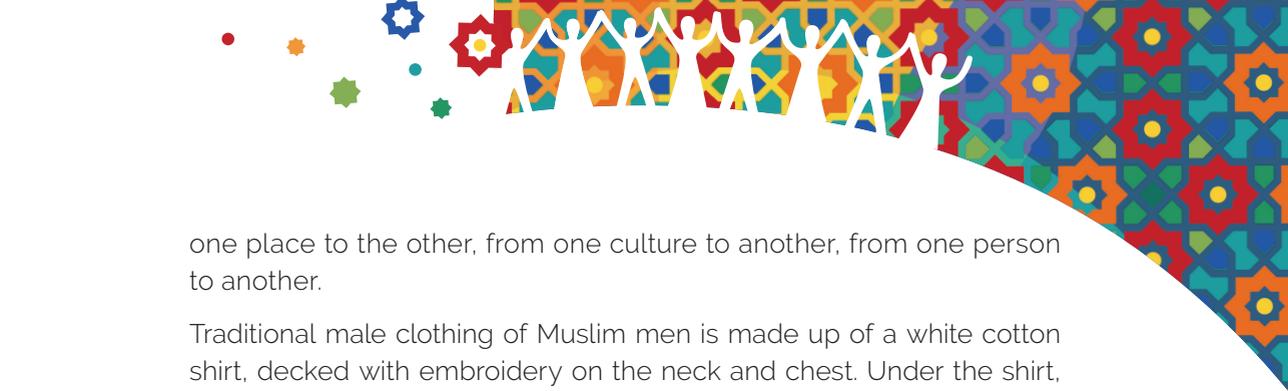
A particular feature of common Muslim practices connected with food is eating with one's hands (specifically, the right hand is used to take food to one's mouth, while the left hand is reserved for cleaning oneself when using the toilet), which makes Muslims maintain strict standards of hygiene both before and after eating (Di Marzo, 2016). It also prescribes that it is not good to feel too full, which is why, when taking food to one's mouth it is advisable to hold small pieces of food only with the first three fingers of the right hand and thus avoid filling it excessively.

In addition to following these rules or guidelines of the so-called Sharia every day of the year, in the ninth month of the Muslim calendar (named Ramadan), Muslims fast, abstaining from food and drink from sunrise to sunset. This fasting is considered as a method of self-purification to foster reflection, generosity, and self-control (Morales, 2001).

Every healthy male and female adult is compelled to fast, even though women are forbidden to fast when menstruating and are exempt during pregnancy or puerperium. Minors are not obliged to fast, but families are advised to start accustoming their children. Chronically ill people, weak old people or those performing hard work are also exempt from the obligation to fast or to pay for compensation.

## Clothing

As anywhere else, the choices that a person makes as regards his or her clothes are related to personal beliefs, values, comfort and customs. In the Syrian Arab Republic, a wide range of clothes vary from



one place to the other, from one culture to another, from one person to another.

Traditional male clothing of Muslim men is made up of a white cotton shirt, decked with embroidery on the neck and chest. Under the shirt, men generally wear trousers (*shirwal*) made of coloured or white cotton. They cover their heads with headscarves made of pure cotton or blue silk fabric with red threads. However, in their everyday lives, men usually wear Western style clothes (jeans and shirts), only wearing traditional clothes for special celebrations and in Friday prayers.

In the case of Muslim women, traditional clothes consist of a dress made of triangular sleeves called *thob*. In the past, tailors used to apply elegant bright-coloured embroideries around the neck, the chest, and on the sides. Women also used to wear other clothes made of wool and other delicate fabrics. This clothing item is usually worn on the eve of nationally relevant celebrations.

Some women (especially the elderly) in ancient cities (Damascus, Aleppo, Homs) wear the *melaya*, that is, they cover their heads and bodies, and show their faces. It should not be confused with the *niqab*, which covers the entire face and only shows a woman's eyes (it is not common in the Syrian Arab Republic; it is a minority practice which has been recently adopted).

It is also worth pointing out that not all women wear the hijab (headscarf). It is an Islamic female dress code that establishes that most of the body should be covered and that, in practice, is shown with various clothing types, according to areas and times (ECURED, n.d.). In a narrow sense, it is usually worn to designate a specific modern garment —also called Islamic veil— which denotes modesty by Muslim women, as well as privacy. It should be clarified that not all those women who wear the hijab are strict in terms of their religious practices; most of them wear jeans or skirts.

Women start wearing the hijab at about 13 years of age. Like men, women wear traditional clothes for holidays and, in their everyday lives, they wear Western style clothes. However, this varies according to a person's creed and level of adherence, and it is normal to have one's arms and legs covered.

## Women and personal care

In the interviews held with callers and beneficiaries, a matter that has always been stressed is the great importance that Syrian women attach to personal care, without distinction of ethnicity or religion. Wearing make-up, waxing, taking care of one's hands and nails are major aspects, even though some of them are 'eased' in Argentina.

## Greetings and customs

Syrian greetings are usually extended and include questions on the wellbeing of family members and other people from one's circle. In general, they welcome people with an extended hand while saying Marhaba (hello). When greeting a man, they may say *kif haalak?* (how are you?) to ask him about his health. When greeting a woman, they say *kif haalek?*

In formal settings, greetings imply shaking hands only with the right hand. Shaking a woman's hand is not appropriate unless she extends her hand first. Informal greetings between people of the same sex may include a hug or two kisses on each cheek between men. Kissing a person's forehead shows extreme respect, but it is not acceptable for a man to kiss a woman in this way unless they are related to each other.

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***Public displays of affection are not usual between partners either; as mentioned by some callers, seeing these displays of affection calls the beneficiaries' attention, as well as the way of dressing which is less conservative than in the Syrian Arab Republic.***

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At the same time, some Syrians may be somewhat reserved when it comes to inviting to their houses people who are not relatives. It is considered well-mannered to refuse food or drink before accepting them, but it is impolite not to accept the complete offering. It is also considered inappropriate to talk about business at home, and, frequently, these topics are dealt with at a private club or restaurant, where the person making the invitation is the one who pays the bill.

Men and women socialise separately, except for those occasions when the whole family is involved. Getting together with family members and



friends is the most common leisure activity. Football is the most popular sport. Water sports (on the coast) and basketball (especially among children at school age) are also played.

There are several celebrations on the lunar calendar that are respected by Muslim people, among them, the most important ones are: *Eid al-Fitr* (the last three days of Ramadan); *Eid al-Adha* (festival of sacrifice, which is celebrated during the annual pilgrimage to Mecca); prophet Muhammad's birth (November 25th); and *Ashura* (Shia atonement day). In addition, Christian groups celebrate Easter and Christmas, but each group does so differently. Armenian Orthodox Christians celebrate Christmas on January 6th, while the other Christians celebrate it on December 25th, as described in the section on religions in the Syrian Arab Republic.

## Rules of etiquette

This section describes some rules of etiquette or customs of the Syrian population to establish better intercultural relationships based on mutual respect and knowledge.

The following may be provided as examples:

- It is inappropriate to show the soles of one's feet to another person.
- It is polite to stand up when an old person enters the room and to offer one's seat if no other seat is free.
- It is expected from people to keep eye contact during their interaction. It shows respect, attention and trust. However, devout Muslims may look down when speaking to people of the opposite sex.
- If something is offered, it is usually refused at first and subsequently accepted after the host's insistence as a rule of politeness.<sup>5</sup>
- It is common to smoke cigarettes in public places, even indoors, as well as to smoke the Arab pipe or nargile.



5. Someone's insistence in extending the invitation shows their hospitality and an initial refusal shows humility.

- Bills in restaurants and cafés are not usually split. Men usually pay for women's food and dispute over the payment of a bill.
- In Syria, raising one's voice is not immediately interpreted as aggressive. Speaking in a loud voice and passionately shows openness and interest in the topic. This genuine expression frequently gives influence and appeal to discussions, and it is not necessarily a sign of anger or offence.
- There is greater physical proximity, including gestures such as kisses and hugs, between family members and friends of the same sex (COR, 2014).

## Family structure and gender roles

There are various aspects where diversity becomes more visible. This section highlights the ways in which Syrian families are mostly structured, as well as the role of women in the Syrian society. This section aims at shedding light on various practices, knowing their origins, their current development, and demystifying some situations which are the basis for the construction of stereotypes and prejudices.

### Configuration of Syrian families

Syrian families —like many societies in North Africa and the Middle East— are made up around extended families, unlike Western societies which are usually established around the nuclear family. Extended families include uncles and aunts, cousins and grandparents, who share the same family unit. It is usual for several generations to live together in the same house.

Family dynamics is mostly patriarchal: the father or the eldest man has the highest authority at home and he is expected to be financially responsible for the family. His opinion generally prevails in a discussion.



Women are responsible for household chores and daughters usually help their mothers.

Divorce is legal in the Syrian Arab Republic, although it still carries a social stigma, especially if it is a woman who applies for it. The weight of the Muslim tradition is still very important and it is shown in the Islamic family courts that still deal with divorce proceedings (COR, 2014). For an application filed by a woman, there are only two valid causes: mistreatment by her husband or non-compliance with marital (sexual) duties. Most of the applications filed invoke the former cause.

Tradition is also present in other aspects, for instance, the dowry system. Even though the State and the Muslim religion oppose it, this tradition is deeply rooted in the family structure. It exerts great pressure on the groom and his family, who need to raise large sums of money, and on the bride, who is often forced to marry the suitor who can bring the largest dowry.

Polygamy is practised in many Islamic populations—let us recall that 90 per cent of the Syrian population is Muslim—; however, it is not such a common situation in this country.<sup>6</sup> In general, it is related to a person's socio-economic level: a Syrian man may take a second wife if he is particularly rich, if his first wife cannot conceive any children or, if his brother dies, he may marry the widow to support both her and her children as a continuing part of the family. It is rare for men to have a third or fourth wife.

There still are many arranged marriages in this country, and cross-cousin marriages are quite common. The average age to marry may vary;

### **The noun 'house' is not the same**

Surprising as it may seem, the word 'house' does not imply the same representation for everyone. In the interviews held with the Programme beneficiaries and callers, as well as organisations working with them, this matter has been recurrent.

In general, in Argentina, families are nuclear and live in flats, especially in cities, while in Syria, as people live with their extended families and visits by the entire family are usual, houses usually consist of larger spaces, with patios and large rooms so that many people can share discussions and meals. This results in various conflicts when the Syrian population arrives in Argentina and sees that 'houses' are as small as a single room.

•••

6. Syria was the first Arab country to pass laws on polygamy. In 1953, it passed the Law of Personal Status, according to which a man should prove that he could financially support two wives before marrying the second one.

in some communities (rural ones), girls are usually between 13 and 16 years old when they marry, while boys are usually between 16 and 20 years old. In the cities, it is more common for both to be 18 or older when marrying (UNHCR, 2014) —this topic will be resumed in the section below. It is worth pointing out that sexual relations outside marriage are not generally accepted.

Another point to consider is that families in the Syrian Arab Republic are usually heterosexual; homosexuality is not only considered as socially unacceptable, but it is also illegal and punishable with up to seven years' imprisonment if prosecuted (Prado and Catalana, 2006).

As regards caring tasks, there are also some differences with urban traditions from Western middle sectors. In the Syrian Arab Republic, it may be seen —like in other communities— that many families have a community caring attitude towards children, where families do not necessarily keep an eye on their own children all the time, but understand that all the community will look after them.

When parents are too old to take care of themselves, they generally move with their children, usually with the eldest child. Therefore, it is common for several generations to live in the same house, leading to, as mentioned before, extended households, where several adults, old people and children share the family's caring tasks.

A family's honour is another issue to consider in order to understand the Syrian population. A person's achievement or action may affect the entire family's perception by others, tarnishing their reputation (Valcarcel, 2013). For that reason, a family's privacy (especially their female members') is extremely protected so as to save their honour, and it usually prevails over their members' individual needs (Roldán Castro, 2016).

## Child marriages

Child marriage is defined as a formal marriage or informal union before the age of 18. It affects girls disproportionately, and girls with little or no formal education are even more affected (UNICEF, 2006). Among the main negative effects that early marriages have on girls, it is worth mentioning the reduced opportunities to receive education, the separation



from their inner circles (family, friends), as well as the lack of freedom to socialise with people of their same age and to participate in community activities. The fact that a child marriage may imply forced labour, slavery, prostitution and violence is even more serious. As sexual relations cannot be avoided and they cannot insist on using condoms, child brides are exposed to serious threats to their health, such as early pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, and, increasingly more, HIV/AIDS.

In many cases, fathers accept and promote their daughters' marriages as a way to obtain economic protection for their families, as well as a way to provide their daughters with male guardianship protecting them against sexual assault by other men, or else, to avoid pregnancies outside marriage (UNICEF, 2006).

Even before the conflict started, it was not rare for girls under 18 years of age to marry (UNICEF, 2016). Both in the Syrian Arab Republic and Lebanon, all faiths accept that minors marry, and marriage belongs to the religious —not civil— sphere, and it is entered into with the father's or grandfather's consent. For girls, the minimum age to marry is 13, and for boys, 15. Child marriages have become an even more common practice in refugee camps. According to a study conducted by UNICEF on this matter, the most frequent factors of child marriage in refugee camps in Jordan include the alleviation of poverty or the burdens of a numerous family with many daughters, to provide protection to young girls, to continue (cultural or family) traditions, and to serve as an escape for girls who live in a family environment of abuse (UNICEF, 2016).

Said report mentions that, among Syrian refugees living in Jordan, the child marriage rate increased from 18 per cent of the total marriages in 2012 to 25 per cent in 2013 (Tenesaca Martínez, 2016). The new data show that this rate increased to 32 per cent in the first quarter of 2014 (UNICEF, 2016).

## Gender roles and the status of women

As mentioned in the previous sections, the Syrian Arab Republic is formally a secular country. However, Islamic traditions exert a strong influence on the society, which has impacts on the role of women.

In spite of this, gender roles—like in other countries— have changed; women's rights to education and equal pay are provided for in the law. Syrian

women have a long history of fight for equality, they have been voting since 1953, and have been lawyers since 1976, and, after this year, there have been female ministers in the successive administrations.<sup>7</sup> Economic conditions influence this change, as the various economic crises that the country has gone through have created the need to have two salaries, so it has become more common for women to work outside the home.

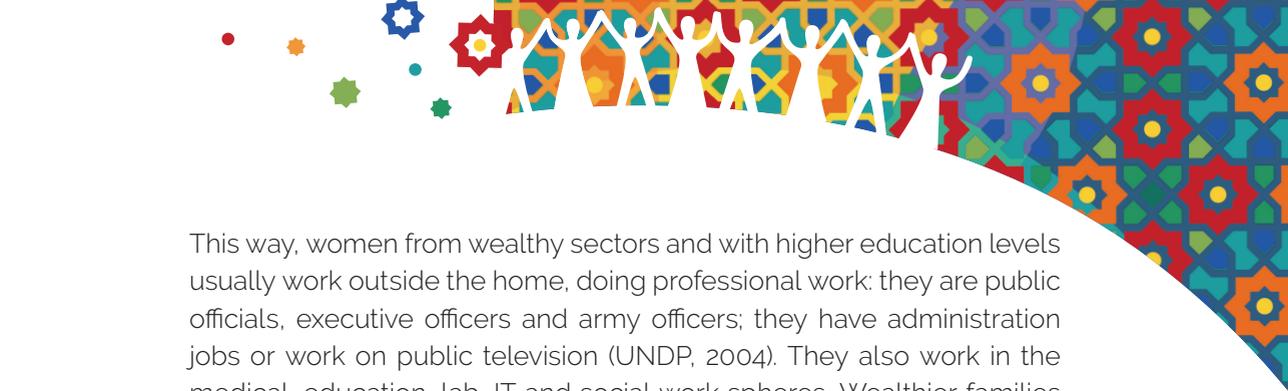


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Broadly speaking, women are expected to cook, clean and take care of children, while men are mainly responsible for doing paid work or working outside the home and for financially supporting the entire family. The same roles are reproduced in children: girls help with household chores, and boys may contribute to family income by performing deliveries or doing farming tasks, even though most boys do not work until they complete or drop their studies. However, gender roles vary according to the family's socioeconomic and education level and the area of residence (rural or urban).

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7. Syria is considered as a pioneer among Arab nations, as women have been entitled to vote and run for elective offices since 1953. Within the League of Arab States, Syria takes the second place after Djibouti to grant women the constitutional right to vote. Further information is available in: United Nations Development Programme. 2004 Human Development Report. Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World. 2004. Inter-Parliamentary Union. 'Women in national parliaments.', available at: [www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm](http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm)



This way, women from wealthy sectors and with higher education levels usually work outside the home, doing professional work: they are public officials, executive officers and army officers; they have administration jobs or work on public television (UNDP, 2004). They also work in the medical, education, lab, IT and social work spheres. Wealthier families support women who wish to study and may hire domestic workers to help with the household chores and child care.

In urban and rural households belonging to middle-class sectors, fewer women work outside the home, especially if there are young children. Women in rural areas also work outside the home, doing agricultural and subsistence work (FAO, 2010).

Urban women from low-income social strata usually take on non-qualified low-wage jobs. These jobs are usually seen as degrading and as a proof that their husbands and families cannot provide enough.

As regards marriage, and as mentioned in the previous section, the law sets forth the age of 18 for boys and 17 for girls as a minimum, but it can be reduced to 15 for boys and 13 for girls, with the approval of a legal guardian. On several occasions, men are usually 10 to 15 years older than their wives (Marín-Guzmán, 1996). In families with higher socio-economic and education levels, women usually marry after completing their university studies, while men are expected to find a regular job as, before getting married, young men are expected to support themselves and their wives.

Based on the study conducted by the statistics centre of the Syrian Arab Republic for 2009, out of a total of 17,565 married women, 4.3 per cent were between 15 and 19 years old. And nearly 58 per cent of the total had only completed primary studies, while the ones who had completed their university studies barely amounted to 4 per cent, showing a significant statistical relation between level of education and marital status.

Therefore, when analysing the role of women in that country, their level of education, place of residence and religion should be considered. As the Syrian Arab Republic is a secular State, women can wear the clothes they prefer. As most of the population is Muslim, it is common to wear the *hijab* or *burka*, except for the university setting, where women rarely wear them.

Finally, it must be stated that the conflict that the country has been experiencing for seven years has brought about changes in the role of women. Apart from the transformations mentioned above, both the women who have stayed in the country and the ones who have fled are changing their role in the family and the society. According to Sancha (2017), thousands of women who had never left their quarters or towns needed to flee from the conflict taking unknown and, in many cases, dangerous routes after becoming widows, and to adapt to new conditions in reception camps.

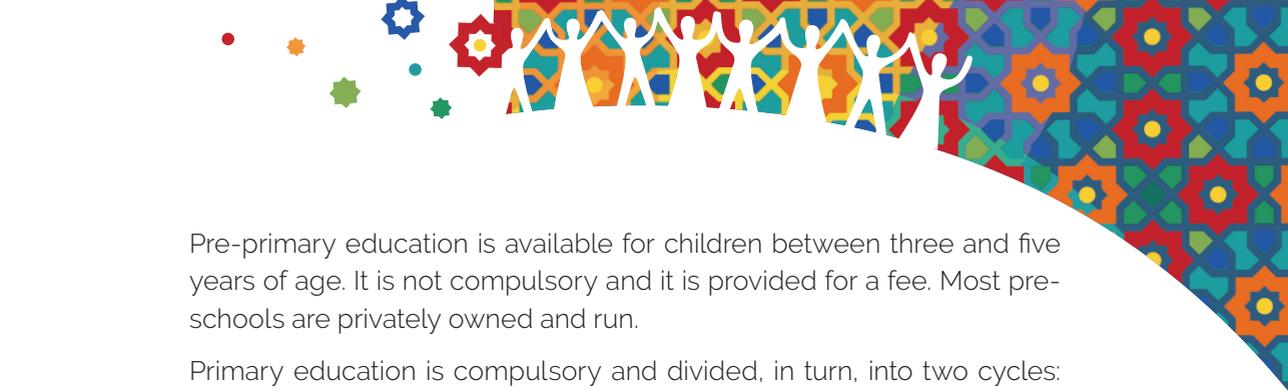
Regarding this aspect as well, the impact differs according to generation and social position. Some young women, especially those workers waiting to get married, see that the situation has been altered due to the lack of men: two thirds of the 300,000 casualties are male soldiers or militiamen. Up to 70,000 young men who are old enough to enter military service have fled the Syrian Arab Republic, refusing to join the ranks both of the national army and the opposition party. Many men have broken their previous commitments when setting foot on European land (Sancha, 2017). Therefore, as was the case in Europe after the Second World War, women enter administrations, factories, small stores, replacing men and gaining experience, positioning themselves in the labour market. However, it should not be forgotten that the traditional roles are still deeply rooted in a large part of the society.

## Education

This section will specify education-related issues in the Syrian Arab Republic, so that the educational backgrounds and needs of the Syrian population arriving in Argentina can be better understood.

### School structure

Broadly speaking, the Syrian Arab Republic follows a twelve-year compulsory schooling system made up of nine years of basic education and three years of secondary education.



Pre-primary education is available for children between three and five years of age. It is not compulsory and it is provided for a fee. Most pre-schools are privately owned and run.

Primary education is compulsory and divided, in turn, into two cycles: the first one of four years and the second one, of five years. Secondary education is offered in mainstream schools of three years and in technical/vocational schools of three years. The last three years of compulsory education —at secondary schools with a single curriculum— are completed with a national examination. This determines whether students may go on to a discretionary or technical (vocational) secondary school (UNESCO, 2016).

The three discretionary years at secondary school are aimed at preparing students for tertiary education. Unfortunately, there are great disparities between urban and rural facilities, as well as in the capacity of families to pay for school fees.

It is worth stressing that, before 2000, it was compulsory to attend school up to 6th grade (12 years of age). After 2000, it became compulsory to attend school up to 9th grade (15 years of age). This resulted in generational differences in terms of learning achievements (Nuffic, 2015).

### *Private and public education*

Ninety-seven per cent of basic education schools are public, while only 3 per cent are private. In addition, 94 per cent of secondary schools are public and 6 per cent are private. The Syrian government authorised the privatisation of higher education in 2001. At present, there are 20 private and 7 public universities in the country. The following types of institutions are offered, with the figures below:

- 201 technical/intermediate institutes
- 20 private universities
- 7 public universities
- 6 higher education institutes (public institutions supervised by the Ministry of Higher Education. Several institutions are also supervised by the University of Damascus. They offer diplomas and degrees through the doctoral level. Entry requirements are higher than for public universities) (Nuffic, 2015).

## *Language, religion and gender in the Syrian education system*

The official language in which classes are taught is Arabic. Up to 2000, English was taught from 8th grade—which generally corresponds to 14 years of age—onwards. However, after the reform, English started to be taught from the initial stages. It should be considered that the frequency of the use of English is still limited, as well as its teaching level.

Sometimes, French and Russian are offered as additional foreign languages. Therefore, those people with higher socio-economic levels are likely to speak three or four languages, especially those who belong to minority ethnic groups with their own languages.

Most classes at primary school are mixed. In general, around the age of 13 to 15, classes start to be separated by gender. However, this depends on the resources of each community and the availability of funds to have multiple teachers for the same age group. In smaller communities, boys and girls continue attending mixed schools where they share classes. This may pose some obstacles for some girls who live in conservative communities, as some families may feel uncomfortable in having to send their daughters with male students (Davis, 2014).

## Enrolment

In early 1980, it was estimated that 44.35 per cent of the Syrian population could not read or write. In the early 2000s, the basic literacy rate for adults living in the Syrian Arab Republic had increased to 17.45 per cent for men and over 37 per cent for women (UNESCO, 2016).

According to more recent estimations, 86.41 per cent of the adult population (15 years of age or older) in the Syrian Arab Republic can read and write. The literacy rate for the adult male population is 91.72 per cent, while the literacy rate for the adult female population is 80.98 per cent (UNESCO, 2016).

However, it is worth pointing out that attendance rates for primary school in rural areas are significantly lower than the national average; dropout rates at the secondary school level are high, especially among women,



and people older than 40 years of age are less likely to have completed the corresponding years of schooling.

Therefore, high primary-school attendance rates have been achieved for boys and girls, but the schooling gap between rural and urban areas is still significant. At the higher education level, the government's support has hugely expanded access to secondary and tertiary education. The education received by many Syrian young people has not lived up to the expectations of finding a stable job, as it does not match the demands of the labour market, resulting in great dissatisfaction (COR, 2014).

Finally, it may be mentioned that the importance given to education may vary from family to family. However, there are some geographic trends. In rural settings, it is common to see children finish school early to start helping their family in their businesses. In cities, it is more common to prioritise university. In terms of gender, not all the families accept that women move to university dorms, which is why their attendance is more frequent when they live near the schools (NUFFIC, 2015). Uniforms are compulsory at school, even though, since the conflict started, the focus on the uniform has shifted onto getting boys and girls into school, as mentioned in the section below.

## Effects of the conflict on education

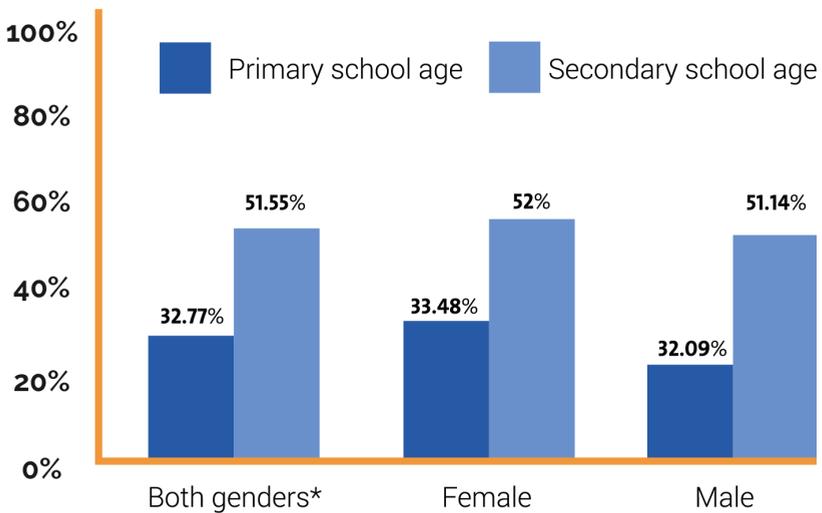
According to World Education News and Reviews, before the conflict, enrolment in basic education was around 93 per cent. In 2015, it was estimated that 2 million Syrian boys and girls did not go to school, and around 5,000 schools could not be used because they had been destroyed (WENR, 2016), turned into reception centres for displaced families or bases for the armed forces and rebel groups. In 2014 only, at least 60 schools were attacked, sometimes deliberately (UNICEF, n.d.).



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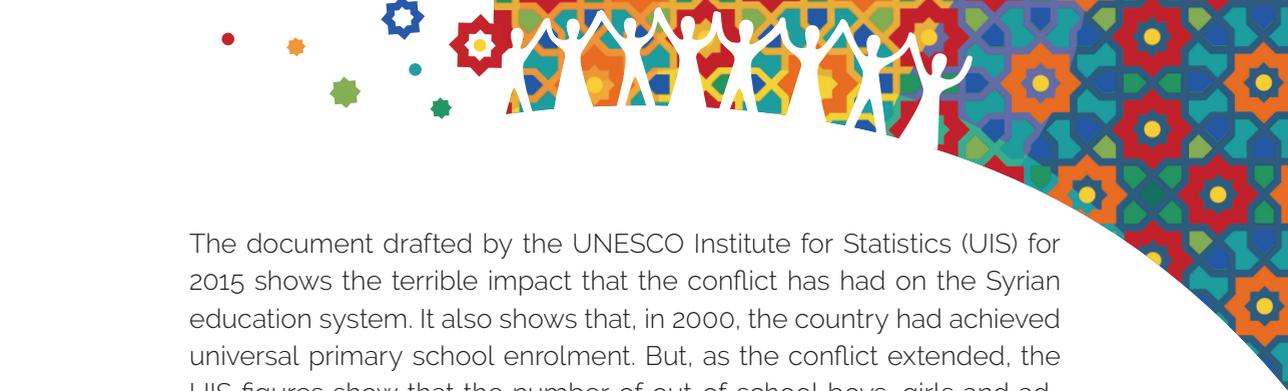
## Graph 1

Out-of-school boys, girls and adolescents (in percentages).  
Syrian Arab Republic. 2013



\*Primary school total number: 6.672.020  
Secondary school total number: 1.941.807

Source: Compilation based on UNESCO data



The document drafted by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) for 2015 shows the terrible impact that the conflict has had on the Syrian education system. It also shows that, in 2000, the country had achieved universal primary school enrolment. But, as the conflict extended, the UIS figures show that the number of out-of-school boys, girls and adolescents increased from 0.3 million in 2012 to 1.8 million in late 2013. Schooling in grades 1 through 12 decreased by 35 per cent between 2011/12 and 2012/13. As a result, one out of three primary school-age children and two out of five adolescents of age for the first cycle of secondary school did not go to school, thus eliminating all the progress made since the beginning of the century (UNESCO, 2015).

## Healthcare

Like in the section above, the items below seek to identify aspects related to the Syrian healthcare system and the population's health —before and after the conflict— so as to provide information and contribute to the generation of good healthcare practices for the Syria Programme beneficiaries.

### Healthcare in the Syrian Arab Republic

In the Syrian Arab Republic, there is free medical healthcare provided by the State, in addition to private healthcare. The data prior to the conflict indicate that life expectancy was 73 years for 2009 (WHO, 2016).

Like in the case of education, there also were major differences in terms of access to healthcare between rural and urban areas before the conflict —in the latter, there were state-of-the-art facilities, most of which have been destroyed in the last years. As for medicines, around 90 per cent of the drugs used in the Syrian Arab Republic were produced by the country itself, in the areas of Aleppo, Homs and Damascus.

As regards the functioning of the healthcare system, many Syrians are used to being seen on the same day they make an appointment, having

a quite direct access to specialists and chemists —symptoms can be described to the latter, who can provide drugs with no prescription. This is the reason why, once in Argentina, when going to an emergency ward to receive some kind of healthcare, they feel the lack of bonds with a general practitioner, as expressed in the interviews with callers and beneficiaries of the Syria Programme.

It is important to underscore that there are significant taboos about mental health in the Syrian Arab Republic, which is reflected on its infrastructure before the conflict: for a population of around 22 million people, there were only two mental health hospitals and 70 psychiatrists. Therefore, it is not usual for people to receive healthcare for cases such as depression or anxiety, which has an impact on the provision of healthcare for traumas caused by the conflict (COR, 2014).

## The healthcare system after the conflict

The destruction of the country's infrastructure due to the conflict that started in 2011 has affected the entire healthcare system. Fifty-eight per cent of the hospitals are not working in their full capacity or have closed down, and many health workers were murdered or have left (UNHCR, 2014). Additionally, many drug producing facilities were destroyed, resulting in the interruption of vaccination schemes. As a consequence, there have been increased outbreaks of polio, diarrhoea, measles, and other communicable and preventable diseases (WHO, 2017).

Preventable diseases have also spread in refugee camps. In 2013, UNHCR conducted healthcare surveys in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, and drafted a report describing some of the most prevalent diseases among Syrian refugees, which include respiratory tract infections, diarrhoea, skin infections, urinary tract infections, and eye or ear infections (UNHCR, 2018a). UNHCR's research also shows that a large number of Syrian refugees are wounded, in some cases causing physical disabilities.



## ***Mental health. Traumas***

Mental health is one of the most prevalent problems because, as stated above, a large part of the population of Syrian refugees have suffered some kind of trauma, such as losing family members, witnessing violent acts or suffering some kind of physical damage. According to UNHCR (2018a), 43 per cent of the Syrian refugees submitted for resettlement presented themselves as 'survivors of violence and/or torture' between 2013 and 2014.

It is worth pointing out that the attitudes of many Syrians towards mental health have changed according to the Cultural Orientation Resource Centre (2014). Before the crisis, receiving mental health treatment carried a stigma, making people more reluctant to seek care or to discuss their problems. However, after the conflict traumas, many people have been more open to receiving mental health support.

The need for treatment is difficult to predict, as symptoms may arise after several months since the arrival in the resettlement country. Some of the most common symptoms of trauma in adults include anger, depression, anxiety, memory problems, confusion and isolation. Traumas cause difficulties in the integration processes, which is why it is necessary to adequately address the psychological needs of refugees.

## ***Situations of sexual violence***

Sexual violence was a concern for many women and girls in the Syrian Arab Republic before fleeing, but it also affects men and boys, although to a lesser extent. It is usually perpetrated in detention centres, in the context of house searches or raids and military controls. Sexual violence is also a concern in asylum countries. According to the Cultural Orientation Resource Centre (2014), the fear of sexual violence experienced by many women in reception countries makes many of them stay inside their houses, only leaving them in company of other members of the family. Delayed reports (due to cases reported after the events) and under-reporting are common, and, therefore, the magnitude and seriousness of the situation are unknown (COR, 2014).

# Work

This section aims at describing the career paths and main economic branches developed in the Syrian Arab Republic, so that capacities and challenges for the insertion of the population in the local labour market can be identified.

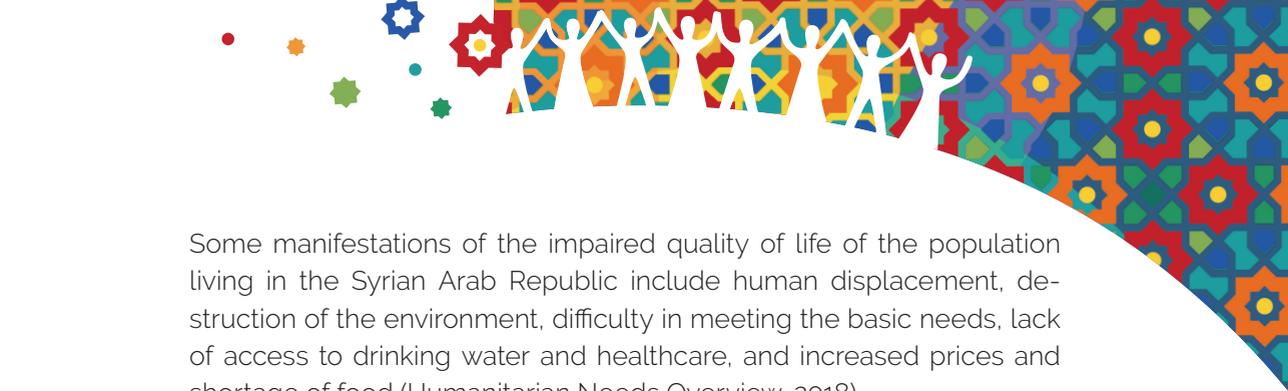
## Syrian economy and productive sectors

In spite of the fact that a great part of the Syrian territory is a desert, agriculture exerts a fundamental influence on the economy (generating 27 per cent of the GDP). Wheat, rye, legumes, potatoes, vegetables, vines, olives, cotton and citrus fruits are grown. Livestock farming —mainly caprine and ovine based on traditional nomadic herding— is aimed at wool exportation.

As for the soil exploitation, oil, natural gas, phosphates and rock salt are extracted. The industrial activity includes the refining of oil, cotton and wool spinning and weaving, manufacturing of cigarettes, beer, sugar, cement and glass. The country also exports oil, cotton and other agricultural products (COR, 2014). The fees from the passage of foreign oil through oil pipelines in the country generate great revenues for the government and place it in a strategic position between the Middle East and Europe.

The conflict caused serious problems for the economy, which has stagnated since its start. Many Syrian workers joined the troops or had to leave the country; the Syrian countryside has also been impacted as it has become a battle field and also, technically speaking, there is no one to work in it.

The market has stalled and, therefore, so has the economy. It is estimated that the unemployment rate is 60 per cent (around 3.5 million people) and that absolute poverty affected 83 per cent of the population in 2014, compared with 12.4 per cent in 2007. Most Syrians cannot satisfy their basic needs (UNICEF, 2018).



Some manifestations of the impaired quality of life of the population living in the Syrian Arab Republic include human displacement, destruction of the environment, difficulty in meeting the basic needs, lack of access to drinking water and healthcare, and increased prices and shortage of food (Humanitarian Needs Overview, 2018).

By 2011, before the beginning of the conflict, the work force was made up of 5.642.965 people: a quarter of the Syrian population. Around 55 per cent of the employed people were wage earners, followed by self-employed workers (about 25 per cent of the employed population). The percentage of unpaid workers (mainly engaged in family labour) was significant, while employers were the smallest proportion of the active population, as can be seen on the table below, which disaggregates the sectors of the economy where the population living in the Syrian Arab Republic was inserted, according to the Syrian Statistics Centre for 2012.

**Table 1**

Distribution of the work force (15 years and older) by sector. Syrian Arab Republic. 2012

Distribution of the work force (15 years and older) by sector			
Sector	2010	2011	Difference
Public	1.260.023	1.489.420	129.397
Private	3.682.466	3.448.890	-233.576
Cooperatives and family/domestic labour	11.968	10.928	-1.041
<b>Total</b>	<b>5.054.458</b>	<b>4.949.238</b>	<b>-105.220</b>

Source: Own translation from English to Spanish. Data taken from the Syrian Statistics Centre for 2012.

## Impact of public employment and working hours

The callers and beneficiaries interviewed stated that a great part of the population in the Syrian Arab Republic is employed in the public sector, whether in the administration, healthcare or education fields. This makes it possible to have flexitime, with relatively short working hours, between 8 am and 2 pm. Social life is thus very intense, both before going to work, having coffee and chatting with friends, and after finishing work, meeting people. This situation changes radically upon arrival in Argentina, with longer working hours and the lack of social relations in the afternoon/evening. It is also difficult to adapt to the long working hours as in Syria people usually have a break to take a nap, even in the capital, and distances are shorter than the ones in large cities in Argentina, such as Buenos Aires and Córdoba.

As regards the economic sectors, the table below shows the distribution of the economically active population for 2008. According to the World Bank, 67 percent of the population was inserted in the services sector, accounting for the great relevance of this sector of the economy.

**Table 2**

Distribution of the work force based on the branches of the economy. Population of the Syrian Arab Republic, 2008

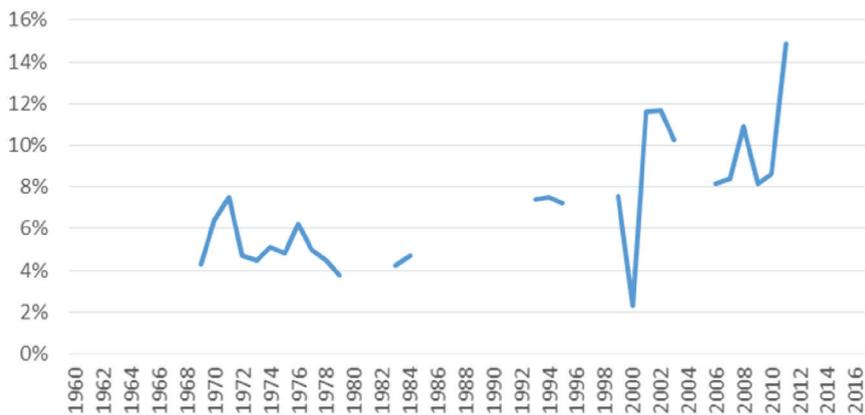
Sector	Percentage
Agriculture	17
Industry	16
Services	67
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: World Bank

As regards unemployment, it is worth mentioning that it had been affecting the country before the conflict, even though the latter has considerably increased it. The graph below shows the evolution of unemployment rates in the Economically Active Population (EAP) of the country. As can be seen, the unemployment rates have increased sharply and constantly since the beginning of the conflict, based on the estimations by the World Bank (the discontinuity of the lines is due to the lack of information for those years).

### Graph 1

Evolution of unemployment rates of the EAP (%).  
Syrian Arab Republic. Years 1960-2017.



Source: Own compilation based on data of the World Bank.

Even though unemployment has increased in the entire population, its incidence is greater in the young population, from 15 to 24 years old. The considerable growth of the population, combined with the slow increase in job opportunities, results in a rapid decrease in the perspectives for the growing numbers of young people who enter the labour market, and, within it, the female population is affected the most, as shown on the table below.

**Table 3**

Distribution of unemployment according to gender in the young population (15-24 years old). Syrian Arab Republic. 2011

Gender	Percentage
Male	11%
Female	38,2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>49,2%</b>

Source: Own compilation based on data of ILO.

This shows that, apart from the generational dimension, there is also a division in terms of gender which affects access to employment. The female unemployment rate was estimated to be 22.5 per cent for 2010.

Finally, it is worth pointing out the great number of workers who have lost their jobs since the beginning of the conflict; depending on the sources, this number ranges between 90,000 and three million people. Many of them had jobs related to the growing tourist sector. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, even though travel and tourism directly generated nearly 8 per cent of the total employment rate in 2010, in 2012, the sector only amounted to 4 per cent of the employment rate.

In conclusion, all the areas of the economy have been seriously affected by the conflict, both in the rural areas and the industrial and services centres. Many areas have stopped operating due to problems related to transport and supplies. Companies in the private sector have either closed down or dramatically reduced the salaries of their employees (Citizenship and immigration Canada, 2015).

## Economic and business practices

As regards economic practices, personal relations play a very important role in the Syrian corporate culture. In general, it is preferable to work with those one knows, as trust is considered as a key factor for good business. On many occasions, personal qualities are more acknowledged



than financial skills. In addition, planning too long in advance is usually avoided due to political, social and economic unrest, which usually renders long-term business plans in the country obsolete.

The informal economy is widely spread in the Syrian Arab Republic, both in street selling and microenterprises, and in all the practices and relations derived from them.

For the abovementioned reasons, informal labour is also much extended in the country, especially for boys and girls, who may be seen performing domestic work, selling on the streets or even working as shop assistants, in the agricultural sector and also in construction works (SCPR, 2014). As it is known, workers in the informal sector are in a situation of greater vulnerability than those people employed in the public sector or in formal companies due to the fact that they lack social benefits and protection, in addition to earning lower wages.

The Syrian working week is from Sunday to Thursday, while Fridays and Saturdays are left for the weekend. The average working hours start at 9 am through 2 pm, when there is a lunch break. After this break, work is resumed from 5 pm through 9 pm (COR, 2014).

## Syrians in Argentina. History and present time

This section seeks to review the presence of population from the currently named Syrian Arab Republic in Argentina since the late 19th and early 20th centuries up to the present.

First, the earliest migration flows of Syrian-Lebanese people, the places in Argentina where they settled, and the institutions that they established —many of which are still operational— will be identified.

We will subsequently refer to the Syria Programme by virtue of which families of said origin have resettled in Argentina since 2014 to the present, mentioning highlights, as well as statistics making it possible to contextualise their impact.

## History of the Syrian-Lebanese immigration into Argentina. Settlement and associations

The presence of Arabs in Argentina is contemporary with the migration processes in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Diverse studies usually divide the arrival of Syrian and Lebanese people (at that time, territories of the Ottoman Empire) in Argentina into three distinct stages, in terms of the configuration of the population according to its religious affiliation and the reasons for migrating and the type of settlement — processes that are closely linked.

The first stage spanned from 1860 to 1920. It was mainly due to the great demographic growth in the Middle East and, especially, in Lebanon, which disturbed the balance between land and population. However, for this reason, persecutions suffered by Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire need to be added. Following the spatial distribution pattern of the remaining immigrants who arrived in those years, Syrian immigrants settled not only in Buenos Aires, but also in numerous provinces and towns in Argentina, mainly Tucumán, Córdoba, Santiago del Estero, Salta, Mendoza and San Luis (Klich, 2004, Katz, 2017).<sup>8</sup>

As regards the city of Buenos Aires, by 1900, Syrian merchants of Aleppine origin established their businesses in the quarters of San Cristóbal or Once (Germinal Nogués, 2003), while those coming from Damascus settled in the quarters of La Boca, Barracas and Flores.

With the advent of the First World War, the difficulties in the overseas transport lines and the possibility to become independent of the Ottoman Empire, the Syrian-Lebanese immigration significantly decreased. Most of the immigrants who arrived up to that moment were of Christian origin, establishing some churches in Argentina, and especially, development associations for the community, which played an essential role in the provision of aid to new immigrants.

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8. The public spaces shared by immigrants in general, and Syrians in particular, who were engaged in common business activities in the early 20th century, were located around the port of Buenos Aires, between Reconquista and 25 de mayo streets (Senkman, 2008). As shown in the first national census of 1869, immigrants at that time —before the great agricultural expansion— were mainly settled in urban areas, for example, 41 per cent of all the foreign people already lived in the city of Buenos Aires (Devoto, 1995).



The second stage may be placed between 1920 and 1945. In it, the percentage of immigrants of Muslim and Druze origins increased, as the territories where Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic are currently located were then under French dominion, which granted more privileges and participation to the population of Christian and mostly Maronite origin. Also in those times Syrians of Jewish origin arrived. After the First World War, and coinciding with the second stage of Syrian migration in urban centres, associations of fellow nationals began to emerge throughout the country, with the generic name of 'Syrian-Lebanese' associations. This type of gathering played an important role of communication and solidarity towards the inner Syrian group, and of public presence in the civil life of the cities. Hospitals and education centres, which made it possible to maintain strong social, commercial and family ties among the members of the community, were also created (Nasser, 2016).

In a study conducted on Syrian and Lebanese immigrants in Latin America, Mónica Almeida (1997) stressed the importance of family and social ties among the members of this community. In spite of, at first, earning a living by street selling, thanks to the strong cohesion among the members of this group, Syrian-Lebanese people have been able to achieve certain degree of social advancement, in addition to amassing, in some cases, a considerable fortune.<sup>9</sup>

The main provinces from which Syrian-Lebanese migrants departed at that time were Homs, Damascus, Mount Lebanon, and Matn. In turn, within them, the main cities of departure were Hafar, Yabud, Tripoli and Metain. Most men arriving in Argentina spoke Arabic and French (as a result of the colonisation after the fall of the Ottoman Empire mentioned in the section on the history of the country). In addition, these early migrants started to build the first migration chains, based on which family members and other countrymen would follow the same route (De Luca, n.d.).

The third moment for the study of the Syrian-Lebanese immigration towards Argentina is placed between 1945 and 1974, but especially in 1958, when a civil war started in Lebanon. From then onwards, other



9. Something similar is found in a paper by Beatriz Vitar (1998) on Syrian and Lebanese people in the province of Tucumán. In it, the author asserts that the presence of foreign people of this origin was rejected in the second half of the 19th century because it was perceived as negative by Argentine liberals. There we find again the issue of social advancement. Even though the first Syrian immigrants arriving in Tucumán were mostly street vendors, in the second generation an economic and cultural growth can be seen.

countries were chosen to migrate to, such as the United States, Canada, Australia and Kuwait (with a great growth due to the discovery of oil). Argentina, however, due to the political and economic problems it had as from those years, ceased to be a place of destination as it had been until that moment (De Luca, n.d.).

Among the most highlighted aspects by specialised researchers, the great adaptability and on-going progress, which have led some of its members to become province governors and even presidents (Menem and Rodriguez Saa), are noted (Brauner and Schammah, 2012).

## Syria Programme

The Syria Programme is a 'Special Programme for the Issuance of Humanitarian Visas for Foreigners Affected by the Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic' addressed to people of Syrian nationality and their family members, regardless of their nationality, and people from the Palestine Territories, provided that they were habitual residents or that they had resided in the Syrian Arab Republic and received assistance by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

The Programme seeks to provide a joint response of the Argentine State and community to the humanitarian needs of the Syrian population. To that end, the caller or sponsor institution assuming the responsibility to receive and support people during their process of local integration in Argentina for at least one year play a key role.

Argentina is one of the few South American countries, together with Brazil and Paraguay, which has implemented a mechanism facilitating entry into the territory through the Syria Programme, and it is the only State that has created an institution specifically devoted to the implementation of that public policy so as to achieve the social integration of that community (Kerz and Cicogna, 2017).

For its implementation, a provision of the National Directorate for Migration (Provision NDM No. 3915/14, modified by Provisions NDM No. 4499/15 and 1025/19, known as the 'Syria Programme') by virtue of which beneficiaries enter the country as temporary residents in the framework of article 23 paragraph m) of National Migration Act No. 25.871, has been



created, and therefore they are not refugees acknowledged in the terms of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or Law No. 26.165. Without prejudice to the foregoing, they obtain temporary residence for two years, renewable for one year more, after which they may access permanent residence. After staying in the country for two years continually, they may also apply for citizenship. In addition, they retain the right to demand recognition of the status of refugee in the country by means of the procedures in force. It is worth pointing out that, from the creation of the Programme to March 2019, 415 people have entered the country with humanitarian visas.

The Migration Act sets forth the principles and guidelines aimed at ensuring the integration of the migrating population into the receiving society or community, based on equal treatment and access to the protection and rights which Argentine citizens have, as well as equal access to social services and public goods, without subjecting this equality to a person's migration status. This is a commitment explicitly shared by all the levels of the national, provincial and municipal State (NDM).



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## Final remarks

In this report we have sought to characterise the Syrian population. To that end, we designed a Socio-cultural Profile, construing culture as a dynamic practice.

In this sense, the information presented does not intend to be representative of all the population of Syrian origin, given that, as this paper has tried to show, it is a heterogeneous group of people, with diverse ethnic, religious and linguistic identities, as well as practices.

Nevertheless, presenting the country's history, its diverse invasions and political transitions from the Canaanites to the Ottoman Empire, going through the Crusaders and the French Protectorate up to its Independence in 1946, makes it possible to understand to a greater extent the great current diversity of its population.

In addition, we have referred to the geographic dimension, the main regions in the country, its productive sectors, as well as an overview of its economy and labour market before the conflict that started in 2011 and still goes on to this day.

We have also described the main characteristics of the education and healthcare systems in the Syrian Arab Republic and the consequences that the conflict has had on them, as well as on the main cities of the country, such as Homs, Aleppo and Damascus. Finally, in this part, we have mentioned the living conditions of the Syrian population which has had to resettle in neighbouring countries, such as Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq.

Furthermore, we referred to highlights related to the gastronomy, music, clothing, as well as rules of etiquette followed to a great extent by the population in the Syrian Arab Republic, so as to contribute to greater knowledge of the country and its population.

To conclude, the history of the Syrian population in Argentina, from the flows that started in the late 19th century up to the mid-20th century, has been mentioned to subsequently describe the Syria Programme and its functioning.

The objective of the Profile is that readers are able to understand overall guidelines of the population of Syrian origin that has arrived in Argentina,



and that will do so in the future, thus facilitating the integration process and trying to contribute to the deconstruction of stereotyped appraisals which may be made as regards migrants and refugees, and which, on occasions, result from the lack of information.

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