Building urban livelihoods: two generations in an unauthorized settlement in Damascus
Zakarya, N.

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2. An Introduction to Syria

In this second chapter I wish to provide a general introduction to Syria. I present the country’s geographic and demographic composition, the evolution of the government, historic and economic developments. The idea is to provide a backdrop and tapestry against which the daily life of the people living in the Damascus’ unauthorized settlement can be better portrayed and understood.

Following independence from France in 1946, Syria experienced high levels of political and social instability. This changed with the rise of the Ba’th nationalist party to power in 1963 with Hafez Al-Assad taking over the leadership. The ‘Assad period’, as it came to be known, lasted from 1970 until the present day (with Bachar Assad as President since 2000). It led to the establishment of a state which was stronger in comparison to the previous period. Although the Assad period can be criticized for its rigidity, many analysts believe that the strong state prevented civil unrest, given existing tensions in the region (Iraqi wars, Lebanese civil war, Muslim brotherhood terrorists in Syria, and the Palestine-Israeli conflict). President Hafez Al-Assad drove the country towards nationalisation in its social, political and economic system. The major infrastructure was in the hands of the government and the state became the single largest employer. The new government led by Bachar Al-Assad - Assad’s son - is trying to steer the country towards a market economy with increased political and social modernization.

To date, Syria has achieved a high level of social development in both educational and health care systems, ranking 106 out of 173 on the human developments index (UNDP, 2003). According to Table 2-1, priorities in public spending have shifted in the past decade. As a percentage of GDP, fewer expenses are allocated to the payment of debt service and military expenditures. Health expenditures have been multiplied by 6. Education expenditures have decreased slightly in percentage of GDP but this decline does not imply a decrease in absolute value.

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1 Although extensive use is made of secondary sources on Syria, the researcher has found them to be self-contradictory and, in several cases, they were contradictory to the actual experience in the field. Indications will be given where doubts exist as to the validity of information.
Despite noticeable improvements, Syria faces a prejudicial negative reputation internationally, from both Israel and the United States. In addition, relations with Turkey continue to be tense as regards water issues for large-scale irrigation projects. Turkey is preventing the flow of the main channel of the Euphrates River. This is resulting in a large quantity of water—legally Syrian waters—from reaching its final destination and impedes irrigation water supply for large-scale agriculture projects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2-1: Priorities in public spending (comparison between 1990 and 2001)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public expenditures on health (% of GDP)</td>
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<td>Public expenditures on education (% of GDP)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Military expenditures (% of GDP)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total debt service (% of GDP)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.1. Geography

Syria, officially known as the Syrian Arab Republic (S.A.R) is located in southwest Asia on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea at 35° North and 38° East. Turkey borders it to the north and Iraq to the east. To the south are Palestine, Israel and Jordan and to the west are Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea.  

2 The borders are contested and vary according to the source of information used.
The country has a total area of 185,180 square kilometres, including 1,295 square kilometres of Israeli-occupied territory. There are 42 Israeli settlements and civilian land use sites in the Israeli Golan Heights. The irrigated land was estimated in 1998 as being 12,130 square kilometres. The climate is Mediterranean, characterized by rainy winters and dry summers. Most of Syria consists of the Syrian Desert. This semi-arid steppe region includes the desert plains in the southeast of the country near the Jordanian and Iraqi borders. The Syrian Desert is crossed by the Euphrates River, which originates in the mountains of Turkey and flows diagonally across Syria into Iraq. Northeast of the Euphrates river is the fertile Jazirah region, a narrow coastal plain that stretches from the Turkish border to Lebanon. This flat littoral area covered by sand dunes, is broken by lateral promontories running down from the mountains to the sea. In the west, a double mountain belt formed by the Anti-Lebanon Mountains, including Mont Hermon and in the southwest the fertile plain of the Houran, extends from the Jabal al-Druze mountains to the sea of Galilee. This mountainous region includes peaks and highlands facing the Mediterranean coast, extending from north to south.
2.2. Population and Society

In 2004, population growth rate was estimated at 2.45%. The birth rate is 29 births per 1,000 and the death rate is 5 deaths per 1,000. Gender demographics are as follows: 1.05 male(s)/female. At birth the ratio is 1.06 male(s)/female. For those under 15 it is 1.06 male(s)/female, for those between 15 and 64 it is 1.05 male(s)/female and for those over 65 it is 0.92 male(s)/female. Life expectancy at birth is 69.71 years (68.47 years for men and 71.02 years for women). The fertility rate is 3.61 children born/woman.

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annual population growth rate</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources:

The population density was estimated as being 95 people per square kilometre in 2003. The estimate of annual population growth has been decreasing since 2002; some authors estimate that this is the result of the impact of education on birth control, and others mention that this decreasing trend could also be explained by later marriages (Maluli 1996).

<table>
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<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of people</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Syrian society is a mosaic of social groups with diverse linguistic and religious characteristics and traditions. Major ethnic groups include Arabs (90%), Kurds, Armenians, Circassians and Turkomans (10%). The dominant religions are Sunni Muslim (74%), Alawite, Druze, Shi'a and other Muslim groups (16%), Christians (10%). There is also a small Syrian Jewish community in Damascus, Al Qamishli and Aleppo. The number of Christians has been steadily declining and, as a result, family size among Christians is relatively small compared to the majority of Muslims.

Arabic is Syria's official language and is most widely spoken by the Arabs/Arabo-Syrians. Kurdish is spoken by the Kurds living mostly in the northeast corner of Syria and in most major Syrian cities as well. Armenian and Turkish are spoken among the small Armenian and Turkoman population. Aramaic/West Syriac is still used by the large native Aramean/Syrian minority. French and English are spoken mostly by well-educated citizens.

3 http://www.indexmundi.com/syria/people_profile.html
4 http://countrystudies.us/syria/20.htm
5 http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Demographics-of-Syria
Map 2-2: Population growth by urban areas, Syria (1960-1991)

Source: Statistic Centre of Syria, 1991


Source: Statistic Centre of Syria, 1991
2.3. Government

Syria gained its independence from the League of Nations mandate under French administration on 17 April 1946. The period between independence and 1963 was characterised by politically instability. The constitution was written on the 13 March 1973. Under the requirements of the Syrian constitution, the President has to be a Muslim. However, it does not stipulate that Islam should be the state religion. Islamic jurisprudence is nevertheless required to be the basis of the legislation and the legal system is therefore founded on Islamic law as well as civil law. Special religious courts handle issues of personal and family matters. The judicial system is an amalgam of Ottoman, French, and Islamic laws, with three levels of courts: courts of first instance, courts of appeals and the constitutional court, the highest judicial body.

Syria has three branches of government, the executive, the legislative and the judicial. The President heads the executive branch with vice-presidents and the council of ministers appointed by him. The President is elected by popular vote every seven years. The most recent election was held on the 25th of July 2000, following the death of President Hafiz al-Assad. The legislative branch, known as the People’s Council, has 250 seats. Members are elected by popular vote to serve a four-year term. The last election was held on 2 and 3 March 2003. The judicial branch consists of a Supreme Constitutional Court, which is the highest judicial body. Justices are appointed to a four-year term by the president. There are also a High Judicial Council, a Court of Cassation and a State Security Council.

Syria’s main political coalition is the National Progressive Front (NPF) dominated primarily by the ruling Baa’th party. President Assad is secretary general of the Baa’th party and the leader of the National Progressive Front. There are other political parties, namely the Social Democratic Party, the Arab Socialist Party, the Arab Unionist Movement, the Syrian Arab Socialist Party (ASP), the Syrian Communist Party (SCP) and the Syrian Social National Party. They exercise little political power and influence over national affairs. There is also a political movement called the Muslim Brotherhood led by conservative and extremists religious leaders. This group operates in exile out of Jordan and Yemen.

Administratively, Syria is divided into 14 provinces, including 60 administrative regions. The regions are divided into 112 districts, including 6,259 villages and 7,033 farms. The provinces have little to no autonomy or authority and only serve to implement the policies

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6 [http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm)

7 Hafiz al-Assad died on 10 June 2000. On 20 June 2000, the Ba’ath party nominated Bachar al-Assad as President and presented his name to the People’s Council on 25 June 2000.

8 The Social Democratic Party is led by Ahmad al-As’ad; the Arab Socialist Party by Abd al-Ghani Qannuti; the Arab Socialist Unionist Movement by Sami Sufan and Bachar al-Assad as chairman; the ASP by Safwan Qudey; the SCP by Ysuf Faysal and the Syrian Social National Party by Jubran Urayji.

of the central government. Each province is headed by a governor, appointed by the Minister of the Interior and approved by the Council of Ministers. The governor is assisted by an elected provincial council.

Political participation by women is strong in several areas of government. 11% of the ministers are women and the number of seats in parliament held by women grew from 9% in 1990 to 12% in 2004. Moreover, the level of education and employment among women is quite high in Syria if compared to other Arabic countries. The literacy rate of girls over 15 is 74%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women literacy rate (above 15 years old)</th>
<th>Syria</th>
<th>Egypt</th>
<th>Algeria</th>
<th>Morocco</th>
<th>Yemen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>74</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


2.4. History

Archaeologists and historians have long recognized Syria as the centre of one of the most ancient civilizations on earth. In 1975 the ancient city of Ebla was discovered. Ebla, with an estimated population of 260,000, headed one of the greatest Semitic empires stretching from the Red Sea through Turkey to Mesopotamia (2500-2400 B.C.). The language of Ebla is considered to be the oldest Semitic language.

Historically, Syria included all of modern Syria and Lebanon, as well as parts of Israel, Jordan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. For millennia it was an object of foreign conquest because of its strategically important trade and military routes leading from the Mediterranean to Mesopotamia. The Amorites, a Semitic people from the Arabian Peninsula, settled in Syria in 2100 B.C. It fell to the Hittites between the 15th and the 13th centuries B.C. It fell again to the Assyrians and the Babylonians between the 11th and the 6th centuries B.C., then to the Persians between the 6th and the 4th centuries. In 333 B.C., it was Hellenised by the Greeks. The Seleucids settled in Syria until it fell to Rome in 63 B.C. After a period of Byzantine rule between the 5th and the 7th centuries A.D., Syria was conquered by Muslim Arabs in 633-640.

Syria is also significant in the history of Christianity. The apostle Paul was converted on the road to Damascus and established the first organized Christian Church at Antioch in ancient Syria. Damascus was settled around 2500 B.C. and is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. After coming under Muslim rule, Damascus became the capital of the Umayyad Empire, which extended from Spain to India from 661 to 750 A.D., when the Abbasid caliphate was established at Baghdad. The area was later ruled by the Seljuk Turks, the Mongols, Saladin, the Mamluks and the Crusaders until the 14th century. It was part of the Ottoman Empire for the next 400 years from 1516
until the end of the World War I, except for a brief occupation by Ibrahim Pasha of Egypt from 1832 to 1840.

In 1920, an independent Arab Kingdom of Syria was established under King Faysal of the Hashemite family but his rule over Syria ended only after a few months. French troops occupied Syria after France received a League of Nations mandate over the Levant States (roughly modern Syria and Lebanon). During World War II, when France fell in 1940, Syria came under the control of the Vichy Government, until the British and Free French occupied the country. Under pressure from Syrian nationalist groups, Free French forces granted independence to Syria in 1944, but French troops did not evacuate until 1946, leaving the country in the hands of a republican government that had been formed during the mandate.10

After the declaration of independence, Syria experienced rapid economic growth but also political instability and hostility towards Israel. From independence until the late 1960s, Syrian politics was marked by a series of military coups. In 1949, a weak civilian government came to power. In 1951, the army of colonel Adib Shishakli seized power. Syria’s political instability continued until the takeover of the Ba’thist regime in 1963.

During this period of instability, the appeal of Egyptian President Nasser’s leadership in the 1956 Suez crisis created support in Syria for a union with Egypt. On 1 February 1958, the two countries joined to create the United Arab Republic. This union was dissolved in late 1961. Syria seceded, after a military coup, in re-establishing itself as the Syrian Arab Republic. Instability again characterized the next 18 months with various coups. The final coup d’état was engineered by members of the Arab Socialist Renaissance Party (Ba’th Party), which had been active in Syria and other Arab countries since the late 1940s.

Hafez Al-Assad, notable for his strong character and intelligence, came to power in 1970, and led the country to more political stability. During the 1970s and under his leadership, the country became closely aligned with the communist bloc and marked a strong political and economic ties with the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries. This political direction changed during the 1980s towards a more Western-European orientation to countries such as France and Germany.

In 1991, Syria contributed 20,000 soldiers to the international coalition forces in the Gulf War. In October 1991, Syria participated in the multilateral Middle East Peace Conference in Madrid and, during the 1990s, engaged in peace talks with Israel. The negotiations failed in 1996. However, Syria attempted to restart talks following the installation of a Labour government in Israel in 1999. The peace process collapsed in September 2000 with the second Palestinian uprising (Intifada) against Israel.

Following the death of Hafez Al-Assad in June 2000, after 30 years in power, his son Bashar Al-Assad became President. The new President is regarded as an advocate of a free-market economy and political change. However, progress towards these goals has been slow and at times counterproductive. Nevertheless, Assad and his progressive

10 http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm
government are attempting to guide the country towards both an economic and political modern system. A new cabinet with a mandate to push reforms forward was appointed in September 2003.

2.5. Economy

During the period 1960-2000, the Syrian economy passed through several difficult stages. In the 60s and 70s, the state nationalised major industries and institutions under the symbolic notion of revolutionary progress. This included nationalizing the oil industry, introducing land reform acts and nationalizing education. As a result, the state became the single largest employer in the country. Inflation rates rose sharply during the 80s as a result of a drop in oil prices and political instability in the region. At present, Syria is a middle-income developing country with a diversified economy based on agriculture, industry and energy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2-5: Economic performance (1975-2002)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GDP (US$ billion), 2002</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP per capita (US$), 2002</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP per capita annual growth rate (%), 1975-2002</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP per capital annual growth rate (%), 1990-2002</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP per capital, year of highest value (1975-2002)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Commerce has always been important factor to the Syrian economy because of the country's location along major east-west trade routes. Syrian cities boast both traditional industries such as weaving and dried-fruit packing as well as modern heavy industry. The greater part of Syrian imports has comprised of raw materials essential for industry, agriculture, equipment, and machinery. Major exports include oil, refined products, raw cotton, clothing, fruits and grains. Revenues from oil exports are one of the government's most important sources of foreign exchange. The major import trade partners in 2002 were Italy (8.1%), Germany (7.4%), France (4%), China (5.6%), South Korea (4.6%) and Turkey (4%). The major trade partners for exports in 2002 were Germany (17.5%), Italy (15.9%), France (6.8%), Turkey (7.1%) and Saudi Arabia. In 2003, exports were estimated at 5,143 billion and imports at 4,845 billion.

Around one-third of the 72,000 square miles of Syria’s surface area is arable, with 80% of cultivated areas dependent on rainfall for water. Most farms are privately owned. Major crops include wheat, fruits and vegetables, barley, sugar beets, cotton and tobacco.

11 http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm  
12 Ibid.  
14 Ibid
Poultry, cattle and sheep are also kept. The government actively promotes economic development priorities in the agricultural sectors in order to achieve food self-sufficiency, enhance export earnings and reduce rural migration. Thanks to sustained capital investment, infrastructure development, subsidies of inputs and price supports Syria has gone from a net importer of many agricultural products to become an exporter. One of the main reasons for this turnaround has been the government’s investment in large-scale irrigation systems in the north and northeast regions of the country. A plan currently exists to increase irrigated farmlands by 38% over the next decade\(^\text{15}\). Major industrial goods include refined petroleum, textiles, processed foods, chemicals and precision-engineered products.

The government owns most of the large-scale industry\(^\text{16}\). Syria has produced heavy-grade oil from fields located in the northeast since the late 1960s. In the early 1980s, light-grade, low-sulphur oil was discovered near Dayr as Zawr in eastern Syria. This discovery relieved Syria of the need to import light oil to mix with domestic heavy crude in refineries. Syria’s petroleum industry accounts for a majority of the country’s export income. Oil production was estimated at 522,700 barrels per day in 2001 and the oil consumption at 265,000 million barrels per day. The oil-proved reserves were 2.4 million barrels on 1 January 2002. The government has successfully begun to work with international energy companies to develop Syria’s promising natural gas reserves, both for domestic use and export. The natural gas production was estimated at 5.84 billion cubic meters in 2001, so as the consumption. The natural gas-proved reserves were 240.7 cubic meters on 1 January 2002\(^\text{17}\). Electricity production was estimated at 23.26 billion kilowatts hours in 2001, divided in fossil fuel (57.6%), and hydro (42.4%). Electricity consumption was 21.63 billion kilowatts hours.

In 2000, Syria’s labour force was estimated at 5.2 million with a 20% unemployment rate. Syria’s economy faces serious challenges with almost 60% of its population under the age of 20. Moreover, the average annual migration of workers to Lebanon is between 800,000 to 1 million with tens of thousands also migrating to the Arab Gulf states (Marzouk, 2001:2). However, economic liberalization continues to provide hope to Syria’s private sector. In 1990, the government established an official parallel exchange rate to provide incentives for remittances and exports through official channels. The new Assad government also appears to be making several positive steps in moving the country towards a more modern state.

To conclude, Syria is a country with a long and rich history and a geographically important location. Its population is a complex mosaic; both economic and political systems are in a transitional phase; but it has the capabilities of moving forward in the coming years.

\(^{15}\) Ibid

\(^{16}\) [http://www.heijleh.com/countries/syria.html](http://www.heijleh.com/countries/syria.html)

\(^{17}\) Ibid