

Syria's Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

The first thing you'll notice in Syria is the hospitality. Those travelling from Western countries with preconceived ideas about the country being a 'rogue state' or part of an 'axis of terror and hate' will find little to support these notions on the streets of Syria. While Syrians might intensely dislike some Western governments' actions, they make a distinction between the government and the people. The friendliness and offers of tea and a chat are constant and only occasionally linked to the sale of a carpet! However, underneath this hospitality, the Syrians can be a little reserved on some topics, such as their own government's actions. This is tied to the fact that most people still believe someone's always listening, and during Hafez al-Assad's reign they were probably right. Until you really get to know a local well, discussing *their* politics is generally off the table.

Don't be surprised, however, at how many questions *you* are asked – about your family, where you live, your life and how much you earn. While many visitors consider the constant questions about family as being too personal, remember that family is of paramount importance throughout the Middle East. Having a large, healthy family is seen as a gift from God and in traditional Arab greetings it's the first thing you ask about after saying hello.

LIFESTYLE

Family is the core unit of Syrian life, regardless of religious sect or ethnic background. Several generations of the one family will often live together. The elderly are greatly respected and are not placed in nursing homes, as there are usually enough family members willing to take care of them. When a person dies there are three days of mourning when friends and relatives pay their respects. Family and individual pride is very strong and this is one reason that, despite being a relatively poor country, you'll rarely see begging on the streets.

Marriage is a major social event in Syria. There is pressure on women to marry young, and more than a little advice on prospective marriage partners is forthcoming from the family – especially from the older women. These days young people have a greater say in whom they marry; however, many living in rural areas still have partners chosen for them. Young couples who are engaged usually meet under supervision, generally a male member of the girl's family, and in the Muslim population they never live together before marriage. It's common for a couple to save money to buy their own place and they'll often delay marriage until they are financially stable; others will marry and stay at home for a few years until they are able to have a place on their own.

The conduct of young women is constantly scrutinised and they are expected to uphold the standing of their family. Bringing shame on the family can occur through something as simple as being alone with a man not from her immediate family – when girls marry they are expected to be virgins.

For most of the desert-dwelling Bedouin of Syria, the seminomadic life has been replaced by a more settled life in a town or city. There are still a few who keep to the old lifestyle – albeit often with a 4WD parked next to their goat-hair tent. Many work a 'normal' job, but get out to the desert as often as possible to enjoy its peace and solitude. For more on the fascinating Bedouin, see p212.

'Having a large, healthy family is seen as a gift from God'

POPULATION

Nearly two-thirds of Syria's total population of around 18.5 million live in a city, concentrated in Damascus (1.6 million in the city itself), Aleppo (2 million) and between Lattakia and Tartus on the coast. Syria's Muslims make up around 90% of the population and this statistic includes the Ismailis, Alawites and Druze, as well as the Sunnis and Shiites. The Alawites have traditionally occupied the mountainous ranges along the coast, which to this day are known as the *Jebel Ansariyya*, or *Jebel an-Nusariyya*, after the founder of the Alawite sect, Ibn Nusayr. The other 10% of the population mainly consists of Armenian and Greek Orthodox Christians. For more on religion, see p42.

Syria has a Palestinian population of around 300,000. The invasion of Iraq also saw an incredible influx of Iraqi refugees, who numbered more than 1.5 million before Iraqis began timorously tricking back to their devastated country (see *Border Crossing Crisis*, p31).

Syria has a youthful population, with over 36% under 15 years of age. Population growth is around 2.5%, down from previous decades but still one of the region's highest. Life expectancy is 69 years of age for men and 71 for women and has been steadily increasing over the last few years.

'Syria has a youthful population, with over 36% under 15 years of age'

SPORT

By far the most popular sport in Syria is football (soccer) and it still remains a male-dominated pastime for participants and armchair fans alike. While results on the international stage have been less than stellar (they've never made it past the qualifying stage of the World Cup, for instance), they do reasonably well in regional tournaments such as the West Asian Football Federation Championships. The national competition, the Syrian League, has existed since 1966 and popular teams to look out for are Al-Jaish (Damascus), Al-Karamah (Homs) and Al-Ittihad (Aleppo). The Syrian Cup, a knockout tournament, is exciting to watch. The only other sport that's overtly popular on the national stage is basketball – but it runs a poor second to football.

MULTICULTURALISM

To the casual observer, Syria appears to be a homogeneous, Arab-Muslim country. However, around 10% of the population is Christian, and a proportion of the Muslim community is Alawite or Druze. In terms of ethnic background the largest minority group in Syria is the Kurds, who make up around 7% of the population and remain a people without a homeland, with the rest of the Kurdish population based in Turkey, Iraq and Iran.

The Armenian community, mainly based in Aleppo, maintain their traditions and culture. The Armenian language is widely spoken and mass is celebrated in the classical Armenian dialect. Much of Syria's large Palestinian population lives on the outskirts of Damascus. While Syria's Arab hospitality has been sorely tested by the influx of Iraqi refugees and the lack of support provided for these refugees by the governments that invaded Iraq, the country has coped reasonably well. All across Syria you'll hear people say that they don't care about ethnicity or religion, nor enquire about it when meeting people, but generally they'll know – either by the dress, accent or name of the person.

WOMEN IN SYRIA

The place of women in Syria today defies traditional classification, although these women must tackle many of the same problems facing women globally. Key issues of concern to women include, but are not

THE THOUSAND & ONE NIGHTS

Long before the novel, a deeply rooted tradition of Arabic literature existed in the form of oral storytelling. Before print, professional storytellers circulated tales, epics, fables and histories. A standard entertainment was to entrance audiences with tales attributed to Sheherezade from *The Thousand and One Nights*, or *Arabian Nights*, a mixed bag of colourful and fantastic tales that were periodically committed to manuscript from the 12th century onwards. Collectively they comprise thousands of stories, sharing a core of 271 common tales that employ the same framing device. A Persian king, Shahriyar, discovers his new wife was unfaithful, executes her and marries a succession of virgins only to dispatch them the next morning. Sheherezade, the daughter of the vizier who is helping locate virgins, offers herself as a bride. To save herself, every night she tells fascinating stories to the king, but withholds the ending, thus giving herself another day to live. In the earliest written versions available, the adventures, enchantments and goings-on take place in the semi-fabled Baghdad of Haroun ar-Rashid (r 786–809), and in the Damascus and Cairo of the Mamluks (1250–1517). The *Nights* provides a wealth of rich period detail, from shopping lists and slave prices, through to vivid descriptions of the practices of assorted conjurers, harlots, thieves and mystics. The best-known stories from the book are *Aladdin*, and *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. The best translations are the Penguin Classics version, translated by NJ Dawood and the colourful version by Sir Richard Francis Burton – see Richard Burton, *Renaissance Man* (p100).

limited to, human rights, access to education, gender discrimination, equal opportunity, fairer laws relating to household expenses, violence against women, annulment, divorce, alimony, and custody laws.

Perhaps due to their socialist leanings and connections to the former Soviet Union, women in Syria have long had equitable employment opportunities, have excelled in fields such as education and health and have attained good positions in the legal and political fields. Thirty of the 250 members of parliament are women, and there is a female vice-president – something that never would have happened under Bashar Al-Assad's father's regime. The General Union of Syrian Women, established in 1967, has branches across the country, and has worked hard to encourage women to take a more active social and political role in society. Overall though, there is a strong expectation that women will conform to 'traditional' roles.

MEDIA

Liberalisation of the media appeared likely when Bashar al-Assad came to power, but regional tensions and government interference have seen plans fall far short of expectations. The introduction of the internet opened the floodgates for educated Syrians looking to broaden their knowledge, but a concerted campaign against outspoken bloggers, opinion forums, independent news outlets and even Facebook doesn't bode well.

For most Syrians, news still comes via traditional means. The dailies – three in Arabic and one in English – are mouthpieces for the government and its Ba'ath Party. It's possible for private citizens to start a newspaper, but it's easy for the government to shut it down via 2001's press laws. See p226 for general information on newspapers and magazines available.

Television is state-run, and the only time you'll find anything approaching a critique of life under the Al-Assad regime is during Ramadan programming. Comedies and soap operas attempt to cast a critical eye over life in Syria, but are edited before screening.

Radio doesn't fare much better. While there are no privately owned Syrian radio stations, private Lebanese companies can broadcast in Syria.

ARTS

Syria has a vibrant arts scene, both traditional and contemporary, with Syrian artists and cultural practitioners producing provocative works. Contemporary Middle Eastern culture has been the flavour of the month for a while in Europe, which has meant you were more likely to stumble across an interesting Middle Eastern exhibit or film in Paris or London than you were in Damascus or Beirut. That's starting to change, with the revitalisation of the Damascus International Film Festival, the flourishing of the contemporary arts scene and the growth of the music industry.

Literature

The first great literature in Arabic came from the Arabian Peninsula. The Holy Quran is considered to be the finest example of classical Arabic writing.

Al-Mu'allaqaat, a collection of the earliest Arabic poetry, predated the Quran, and was a celebrated text. Al-Mu'allaqaat means 'the suspended', and refers to the tradition of hanging poems for public view. That explains those pages you see decoratively hanging across the street during *eid* (Islamic feasts; see p231).

Syria didn't become the focal point of classical Arabic poetry until the 10th century. However, as the Arab world came to be dominated by the Ottoman Turks, its literature faded and continued to stagnate until the 19th century. The most popular recent poet was a Damascene, Nizar Qabbani (1923–98), who transformed formal Arabic poetry with the use of everyday language, and was adored in the 1950s for his love poems and, later, for his expressions of the Arabs' collective feelings of humiliation and outrage after the wars with Israel.

The novel as an art form emerged with the awakening of Arab national consciousness after WWII. Since then, Egyptians (including Nobel Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz), Lebanese, Palestinians and Syrians have dominated the Middle Eastern literary scene, although in Syria repression has kept most writing banal or forced authors into exile. Zakariya

THE GREATEST ARAB POETS

Abu Nuwas (756–815) Considered *the* greatest of all Arab poets, he was companion to 8th-century Baghdad Abbasid caliph Haroun ar-Rashid. Abu Nuwas spent his summers at Raqqa on the Euphrates River, where he wrote humorous accounts of court life and countless odes to the wonders of wine – his 'research' landed him in jail more than once. His reputation earned him a few mentions in *The Thousand & One Nights* (see opposite).

Al-Mutanabbi (915–65) The Syrian 'Shakespeare of the Arabs' was born in Al-Kufah, in modern-day Iraq. Having spent his youth bragging to local Bedouin that he was a prophet (hence the nickname al-Mutanabbi, which means one who wants to become a prophet), a stint in prison was where he found his voice as a poet. The prince of northern Syria, Sayf al-Dawlah, became his patron and many of his best works were written while he was part of his court at Aleppo. Not without ego, al-Mutanabbi's lyrical style would fit right in with the hip-hop crowd today, boasting that his poetry was so powerful blind men could read it.

Abu Firas al-Hamdani (932–68) An Aleppan who wrote most of his poetry while a prisoner in Byzantium, his notable works were part of the genre called *habsiyah* (prison poem), where the lament of the author's personal life was the overarching theme of the work.

Abu Ala al-Ma'ari (973–1057) Born in Ma'arat an-Nu'aman, the near-blind 'philosopher of poets and poet of philosophers' was a recluse, having refused to ever sell his work. His writings are marked by a heavy scepticism about the decadent, fragmented society surrounding him, and in one poem he suggests that people not reproduce to save the children the pain of existence.

'Syrian and Lebanese filmmakers have created films of great beauty that speak to their countries, peoples and region.'

Tamir (b 1931), Syria's master of the children's story, deals with everyday city life marked by frustration and despair born of social oppression, which may explain why he ended up in London. Initially his work was realist in manner, but increasingly he turned to fantasy and surrealism. Having been virtually forced to leave Syria in 1980, he was awarded the Syrian Order of Merit in 2002. Of the noted writers who remained in Syria, the most celebrated and outspoken was Ulfat Idilbi (1912–2007), who wrote about the late Ottoman Empire and French Mandate and the drive for liberation and independence. *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet* is critical of the mistreatment of women by their families. Much of its anger stemmed from Idilbi's own experience of being married off at 16 to a man twice her age.

In 2007 the release of *A Story Called Syria*, a collection of pieces by 40 writers, was celebrated, and was quickly followed by calls from Syria's writers and intellectuals to reinvigorate the literature scene.

Cinema & Television

Middle Eastern movies have often been treated as products of a single, unified 'Arab world', yet the unifying factors – Pan-Arab identity, Arab nationalism and Islam – also represent the range of identities characteristic of the region. The most successful industries are those in Egypt, Iran and Turkey; however, countries less developed in terms of film production, such as Syria and Lebanon, have produced carefully crafted movies that reflect upon issues specific to their cultures and countries. Despite Hollywood's dominance of their cinema screens, Syrian and Lebanese filmmakers have created films of great beauty that speak to their countries, peoples and region.

Syria was one of the first Arab countries to develop a cinema industry, yet its production has always been intermittent, with only a handful of films made each year. It got off to a dazzling start in 1928 with Ismail Anzur's stunning silent film, *Under the Sky of Damascus*. However, after a flurry of filmmaking activity following independence in the 1940s, nothing much was made until the 1960s, when a state organisation was created to promote film production and distribution.

Ever since, the government has supported screen education, sending many of its filmmakers to Moscow's excellent cinema academies for training, and financing first feature films. Successful filmmakers include Omar Amiralay, an active director, curator and critic, who made a groundbreaking documentary, *Daily Life in a Syrian Village* (1974) and Mohamed Malas, who directed *Dreams of the City* (1984), an evocative fictional study of Damascus. Abdulatif Abdulhamid, whose brilliant first feature was *The Nights of the Jackal* (1989), has garnered critical praise in recent years for *Two Moons and an Olive Tree* (2001) and *Listeners Choice* (2003), both of which screened at the November 2007 Damascus International Film Festival. The festival screened eight new Syrian feature films under the banner 'New Syrian Cinema', a programme that was the talk of the festival, sparking excited whispers about the rebirth of local film production.

While the handful of movies Syria produces have earned the tiny film industry critical acclaim, it hasn't been able to compete with the production levels of television drama, which has delivered a constant output of quality programming since the 1980s when the government allowed independent companies to produce television content. Since then, Syrian television has boomed, developing a reputation as the indisputable leader of soap opera and series production in the Arab world. Many Syrian

SYRIAN SOAP OPERAS

Soap operas have always been popular in the Arab world and Syria has a reputation for producing the best of them. The peak period for soap watching around the region is Ramadan, when families spend quality time together around the TV set in the evenings. Whereas historical epics once dominated the small screen, a recent trend is for directors to tackle subjects such as Islamic militancy, terrorism, the Arab–Israeli conflicts and the US occupation of Iraq. Two of the most recently popular soap operas were *Al-Hur Al-Ayn* (The Beautiful Maidens) and *Al Tareeq Al-Waer* (The Rugged Path), which dealt with Islamic extremism. Made by Syria's most revered television director Najdat Anzour, the critically acclaimed *Al-Hur Al-Ayn* (the title of which refers to the beautiful virgins that martyrs will be rewarded with in Paradise) had Arab families across the region glued to their screens during Ramadan in 2007. Based on the Al Qaeda bombing of a Saudi Arabian compound that killed mostly Arabs, Anzour's aim was to show the brutal results of extremism and, in doing so, diminish support for calls for jihad among an audience who might ordinarily be sympathetic. The series received critical acclaim and was one of the most watched around the region.

series have sold successfully abroad, not only in other Middle Eastern countries, but – somewhat unexpectedly – in Latin American countries, where there is a great fondness for the melodrama and epic drama in which Syria specialises.

Most of the talent graduating from the National High Institute for Drama head straight for lucrative television work rather than into film as they do in most countries. One of the most successful Syrian television dramas was *The Silk Market*, by Nihad Sirees, an Aleppan novelist and screenwriter, which presented the city of Aleppo, its culture and dialect, on television for the first time. During Ramadan 2007, Bassam Al-Malla's *The Neighbourhood Gate*, a nostalgic portrayal of Damascus during the wars, captivated audiences across the Arab world. More recently, however, Syrian productions have dealt with Islamic militancy, terrorism, and conflict in the region. See Syrian Soap Operas (above).

Music

From the sounds of contemporary Arab pop to the myriad tunes of the adored Farid al-Atrache, music is everywhere in Syria. Contemporary Arab music today reflects a successful synthesis of indigenous harmony, taste and instruments, combined with some Western instruments and influences. In the Syrian desert the Bedouin have long had simple, but mesmerising, musical traditions. However, the music you hear on the Arab street has little to do with timeless desert traditions. Its roots are in Egypt which, for much of the past hundred years, has been the undisputed musical capital of the Arab world. If the artists weren't always Egyptian-born, they were Egyptian-bred, groomed and broadcast. Syria's most famous performer, Farid al-Atrache, spent most of his career in Cairo. See Farid al-Atrache, (p72).

The most popular style of music focuses on a star performer backed by anything from a small quartet to a full-blown orchestra. The all-time great remains Umm Kolthum, an Egyptian diva renowned in the Arab world as the Kawkab ash-Sharq (Nightingale of the East), who died in 1975. The only singer who has come close to supplanting her in the affections of the Arabs is Fairouz, a Lebanese torch singer who has enjoyed star status since first recording in Damascus in the 1950s. Although the kind of orchestra that backs such a singer is a curious cross-fertilisation of East and West – instruments such as violins, piano,

FARID AL-ATRACHE

This legend of 20th-century Arabic music was born in Suweida in the Hauran region of Syria, in 1915. A Druze, his prominent family were fighting the French at the time of his youth and his mother took the young Farid and brother and sister to Egypt, where they were granted permission to stay, with his mother earning money as a singer and *oud* player. Music ran in the family and Farid and his sister, Amal (later Asmahan) were soon playing to rapt audiences themselves and starred in their first feature film together, *Intisar al-Chabab* in 1941. Farid's sister tragically died during filming of their second movie together, but Farid went on to appear in more than 30 films during the '40s and '50s, several with his girlfriend and belly dancer, the seductive, always smiling, Samia Gamal. Far more than just an 'Arab Sinatra', he was a highly accomplished *oud* player and composer, who succeeded in updating Arabic music by blending it with Western scales and rhythms and the orchestration of the tango and waltz. His melodic improvisations on the *oud* (he is still known as 'King of the Oud') and his *mawal* (a vocal improvisation) were the highlights of his live performances and recordings of these are treasured. Suffering ill health in later life, he still performed until his death in 1974 in Beirut and was buried in his adopted home of Egypt. Of all the male performers of Arabic music in the last century, Farid is the best-known and most respected. His music still reverberates through the streets of the Middle East and especially his birthplace, Syria.

wind and percussion instruments predominate, next to such local species as the *oud* (lute) – the sounds that emanate from them are anything but Western. There is the seduction of the East in the backing melodies and the melancholic, languid tones you'd expect from a sun-drenched and heat-exhausted region.

Held in such esteem as they still are, singers like Farid al-Atrache, Umm Kolthum and Fairouz have little appeal to younger generations of Syrians who have grown up on a sugary diet of Arabic pop. Characterised by a clattering, hand-clapping rhythm overlaid with synthesised twirlings and a catchy repetitive vocal, the first Arab pop stars came out of Cairo. While the Arab world's biggest selling song ever, Amr Diab's 'Nour al-Ain' (1998), was an Egyptian product, these days the Egyptians are being beaten at their own game by Syrian and Lebanese artists.

There were a number of signs in 2007 that the emerging Syrian music industry could be about to experience a boom with the local success of albums by Kulna Sawa (All Together), Lena Chamamian, Itar Shameh, Anas and Friends, Gene, and InsaniT, and a sell-out Woodstock-type concert that toured the country featuring many of these bands.

Hailed as Syria's new diva, charismatic Lena Chamamian released her second CD, *Shamat*, one of 2007's most successful. Its heartfelt folk songs focused on social issues of concern to Syria's youth, such as Syrians having to leave their country to fulfil their dreams, and lovers weary of their families' interference in their romance.

To catch live music performances, check out the *What's On Syria* magazine listings (see p84).

Architecture

The earliest architectural efforts undertaken by Muslims were mosques, which inherited much from Christian and Graeco-Roman models. The Umayyad Mosque (p88) in Damascus was built on the site of a Christian basilica, which itself had been the successor of a Roman temple, and is one of the earliest and grandest of Islam's places of worship.

With the spread of Islam, various styles soon developed and the vocabulary of Islamic architecture quickly became very sophisticated and

expressive, reaching its apotheosis under the Mamluks (1250–1517). The Mamluks extended the types of buildings to include the madrasa (theological school), *khanqah* (Sufi monastery) and mausoleum complex. These were typically characterised by the banding of different coloured stone (a technique known as *ablaq*) and by the *muqarnas*, the elaborate stalactite carvings and patterning around windows and in recessed portals. The Mamluks were also responsible for the transformation of the minaret from the Umayyad Mosque's square tower into a slender cylindrical shape. The Ottoman Turks defeated the Mamluks, and during the Ottoman era Damascus and Aleppo flourished, growing rich on trade monopolies. Much of the architecture from this time reflects that wealth. The most prevalent Ottoman building type is the khan, or travellers' inn.

The most notable development in architecture in Aleppo and Damascus is the restoration of Ottoman-era houses and their conversion into restaurants and hotels.

Painting, Visual Arts & Photography

If you think of painting in the Western sense, you may think there is little artistic tradition in the Arab world. Islam's taboo on the depiction of living beings (which clearly doesn't extend to political figures) means that the Arabs have traditionally limited their artistic endeavours to calligraphy and patterning, hence the term 'arabesque'. In the late 19th century a smattering of educated Levantines travelled abroad and returned to form schools of fine art, although their styles were all imported.

In Syria, many of its best artists and photographers have studied, and continue to study, at the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Damascus. One of Syria's most successful artists, Homs-born Abdulla Murad (b 1944) was initially inspired by the European modern masters such as Kandinsky and Miro. Others went overseas to study, such as the prize-winning sculptor Abdel Rahman Mouakket (b 1946), who studied at the Fine Arts Academy of Rome. Murad gradually developed his own style, combining abstract forms with arabesque. A distinctive style and identity began to emerge in the region in the latter half of the 20th century and in recent years a vibrant contemporary art scene has developed in Damascus.

Damascus has half a dozen dynamic and influential independent art galleries, and a handful of others that show local art. Two galleries that have been most supportive of Syria's artistic talent are Atassi and Ayyam galleries (p97), which regularly show the work of renowned Syrian masters such as Mahmoud Hamad, Louay Kayyali, Naseer Chaura, Safwan Dahoul, Fateh Moudarres, Yousef Abdelke, Mouneer Al-Sharaani, Fadi Yazigi, Mouonzer Kamnakache and Abdulla Murad, and acclaimed sculptors such as Mustapha Ali and Abdel Rahman. Art House (p97) recently joined them with its regular exhibitions of work and open-door policy to artists – artists can even go and work there. These are the best galleries to visit to experience quality Syrian art.

Theatre & Dance

With a limited number of theatre venues and little funding in Syria, young dramatists and performers find it difficult to get a start in theatre yet Syria does have a lively Arab theatre scene. Unlike practitioners in the West, Syrian actors, writers and directors are fairly fluid and tend to move easily between working in theatre, television and film. If you can understand Arabic, you can see local theatre at Dar Al Assad for

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Arts and Culture (p112). Performances are often filmed and broadcast on television.

Syria's elite love nothing more than to catch a performance by the Russian Ballet, a French contemporary dance group or even Cirque de Soleil at Dar Al Assad, but seeing contemporary Syrian dance is virtually impossible. Travellers have a greater chance of seeing the traditional Levantine dance, the *dabke*. This energetic folk dance is performed at weddings and celebrations throughout the region. People join hands and are led by a 'master' dancer. The dance can also be seen in tourist-oriented restaurants where dancers wear the traditional costume of the mountains and portray aspects of village life. Far more fun is when a spontaneous *dabke* erupts at a wedding or social occasion, and people form circles and start to move. You may also catch a glimpse of some raqs sharki (belly dancing) at a wedding or a 'women only' social occasion. Belly dancers, with their gyrating hips and spangled bikinis, are one of the Middle East's most famous sights, and belly dancing is still very popular in the region, although these days many dancers are not even Arab.

Syria's Environment

From its urban soup of smog, traffic and dusty, littered streets, to the arid deserts, Syria's environment is in a brittle state. Much of Syria's scant vegetation has been depleted by tree felling, farming and grazing, and water bottles, plastic bags and empty shell casings from hunters litter the landscape in some of the more remote areas. While Syria set up the Arab world's first environment ministry in 1991, it's clear that priorities do not lie with 'keep clean campaigns', understandable when you have a faltering economy, war at your doorstep and well over a million neighbours who have moved in to escape it.

One of the key issues for Syria is water conservation. Syria is located in a very arid area of the Middle East. Water scarcity is compounded by the demands of a rapidly growing population, development and by pollution of natural water supplies. A huge proportion of Syria's water is used for agriculture; however, the amount of money that Syria earns from agriculture is small. Water pollution is a problem throughout the country, but the greatest risk is industrial and household waste polluting water intended for agricultural use.

In the larger urban areas of Syria almost 30% of housing is illegally built or occupied, mainly due to people migrating from rural areas to look for work. These dwellings often lack basic amenities (running water and waste disposal) leading to waterborne diseases such as cholera, typhoid and diarrhoea. Occupation of and damage to historic buildings is also a concern in both Aleppo and Damascus.

Air quality is a problem in urban areas, where air pollution, often visible as smog, exceeds Syrian allowable limits most of the time. Rapid industrialisation on the outskirts of the cities, high-density living, and aged transport vehicles belching smoke are the main contributors, with carbon monoxide levels sometimes double the maximum allowable. In the Old City of Damascus, health problems such as pulmonary diseases have been attributed to this. In addition, vegetation (what little there is) and fragile historic buildings are affected.

Arable land issues are also pertinent in Syria, where only around one-third of the total land is suitable for growing crops. Poor use of land and unsustainable development are causing widespread soil degradation, while wind and water erosion are causing further losses of fertile land. Many residential and commercial developments (both legal and illegal) are located near land used for agriculture: it doesn't take a biologist to work out that building houses without sufficient plumbing or cement plants adjacent to fruit farms is not a great idea.

Solid and hazardous wastes are a major concern. While domestic waste is collected at a high rate within the cities, in rural areas the figures are only a little better than half. Open burning and uncontrolled landfill is as unsightly as it is harmful and often domestic waste is mixed with medical waste.

Population growth, developments and expansion of agricultural activities have had an adverse effect on Syria's biodiversity. Forests are shrinking, desert ecosystems are under pressure, and hunting and destruction of habitat are threatening bird and mammal species. Aquatic fauna is under threat from over-fishing and the use of illegal fishing methods.

The Syrian National Environmental Action Plan (NEAP), completed in 2003, clearly recognised the significant challenges of protecting Syria's environment – however, funding the recommendations is an ongoing issue.

Syria's land types: arid lands 20%; pastures 45%; fertile lands 32%; forests 3%

Syria has borders with Turkey to the north, Iraq to the east and southeast, Jordan to the south, and Lebanon and Israel and the Palestinian Territories to the southwest.

Visit www.ecotourism-syria.com, an ecotourism company that has some good information on wildlife- and bird-watching areas in Syria.

THE LAND

There are four broad geographical regions of Syria: a coastal strip, backed by mountains, which then flatten out into cultivated plains, quickly giving way to desert.

The coastline is not particularly extensive, stretching for just 180km between Turkey and Lebanon. In the north, the coast is almost fronted by the Jebel Ansariyya.

This range of peaks, with an average height of 1000m, forms a formidable and impenetrable north-south barrier and dominates the whole coast. In the south, the mountains angle inland somewhat to give space to the Sahl Akkar (Akkar Plain). Deep ravines mark the western side of the range, while to the east the mountains fall almost sheer into Al-Ghab, a fertile valley through which the Nahr al-Aasi (Orontes River) flows on its way north into Turkey.

The Jebel Libnan ash-Sharqiyya (Anti-Lebanon Range) marks the border between Syria and Lebanon and averages 2000m in height. Syria's highest mountain, Jebel ash-Sheikh (the Bible's Mt Hermon), rises to 2814m. The main river flowing from this range is the Barada, which has enabled Damascus to survive in an otherwise arid region for over 2000 years.

Other smaller ranges include the Jebel Druze, which rises in the south near the Jordanian border, and the Jebel Abu Rujmayn in the centre of the country, north of Palmyra.

The Fertile Crescent is, as the name suggests, Syria's main agricultural region and forms an arc in which are cradled the major centres of Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo and Qamishle.

The Euphrates and Nahr al-Aasi provide water for intensive farming, while away from the water sources, dry-land wheat and cereal crops are grown.

The Syrian desert, a land of endless, largely stony plains, occupies the whole southeast of the country. The oasis of Palmyra is on the northern edge of this arid zone. As with other oases, it used to be an important centre for the trade caravans plying the routes between the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia.

WILDLIFE

ANIMALS

Officially, wolves, hyenas, badgers, wild boar, jackals, deer, bears and even polecats still roam some corners of Syria, but don't expect to see these on your travels.

The number of bird species found in Syria and their population densities are both low. While Syria has only a small number of major wetlands, they are significant for globally threatened species of birds.

Syria's big claim to faunal fame is as the original home of the golden hamster (see below).

A global alliance of conservation organisations with a fantastic database of birds is www.birdlife.net

Threatened bird species in Syria are the Houbara bustard, Griffon vulture, black francolin/partridge and the Syrian woodpecker.

Threatened mammals in Syria are the striped hyena, fallow deer and the roe deer.

CAN YOUR HAMSTER SPEAK ARABIC?

It's hard to believe, but nearly every cute little *Mesocricetus auratus* (golden or Syrian hamster) you'll see in the window of a pet shop is a descendent of a pregnant female trapped near Aleppo in 1930. The pups were bred in a laboratory and then released into the British pet market in the 1940s. Breeding as they do (a female can produce a litter of up to 20 pups), they're now tugging at kids' heartstrings all over the world. The irony is that the hamster is almost extinct in the wild in Syria.

PLANTS

Heavy clearing has all but destroyed the once plentiful forests of the mountain belt along the coast of Syria, although some small areas are still protected. Yew, lime and fir trees predominate in areas where vegetation has not been reduced to scrub. Elsewhere, agriculture dominates, and there's little or no plant life in the unforgiving stretches of the Syrian desert.

NATIONAL PARKS & RESERVES

Syria has one of the lowest ratios of protected areas to total land area of any country in the Mediterranean region. However, Syria has a significant protected wetland, the Sabkhat al-Jabbul Nature Reserve. This large, permanent saline lake is located in Halap province, 30km east-southeast of Aleppo. The area is important for a large number of water birds, including the greater flamingo.

A new reserve near Palmyra, Al-Talila, is being developed to protect the region's biodiversity.

Three of a small group of the critically endangered northern bald ibises have been tagged in Syria. Satellites so far have tracked Sultan, Salam and Zenobia on a 3100km journey to Ethiopia.

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