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# Syria

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## Introduction

Syria occupies a uniquely significant place on the world stage, not just for its strategic location at the heart of the ancient and modern Middle East, but also for its enduring influence as one of humanity's oldest continuously inhabited regions. For millennia, its cities—Damascus, Aleppo, Palmyra—echoed with the stories of conquerors, traders, inventors, and pilgrims. The land between the mountains and the desert, between the Mediterranean and the great rivers, became both a crossroads and a melting pot, where civilizations met, clashed, and merged to form a society that was both distinctly Syrian and part of a broader human narrative.

Yet Syria is more than its remembered past. The country's recent decades have seen turmoil and transformation at a pace and scale rarely matched in contemporary history. What began as hopeful calls for reform swept the country into a devastating and protracted conflict—one that reshaped not only Syria but also the region and the wider world. Images of suffering and resilience have flashed across the globe, rendering the name "Syria" synonymous with both tragedy and the resolve of its people to endure hardships with steadfast dignity.

This book, *Syria: Portrait of a Country*, aims to go beyond newspaper headlines and fleeting impressions. It is an exploration of geography and society, of history and daily life, of struggle and resilience. Here, readers will find the deep-rooted historical context that explains the present, as well as the variety and richness of Syrian culture that persists despite devastation. From the bustling streets of Damascus and the ruins of Palmyra to the dusty villages and green valleys, Syria's landscapes and communities are revealed in all their diversity.

We journey through the chapters of Syria's story: its early civilizations and empires, the evolution of its cities, the complex interplay between ethnic and religious groups, and the marks left by waves of conquerors and revolutionaries. The book highlights not only the major events and figures that have shaped Syrian history, but also the daily realities faced by ordinary Syrians: their customs, food, family life, and artistic expression.

Syria's present is one of challenges and uncertainty—the legacy of war, the struggle to rebuild, ongoing humanitarian needs, and the hopes of millions for reconciliation and renewal. But the country's future, while fraught with difficulties, is not devoid of promise. The transitional period that began after the fall of the Assad regime is an opportunity for rebuilding and redefining what it means to be Syrian in the modern world. This book tries to capture the country as it was, as it is, and, as many hope, as it might be again—a vibrant, diverse, and resilient mosaic at the heart of the Middle

East.

May this portrait help deepen understanding, inspire empathy, and foster hope for a country whose fate is tied not only to its people, but also to the shared heritage of us all.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Geography and Climate of Syria

Syria, officially known as the Syrian Arab Republic, occupies a strategic position in West Asia, nestled in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Levant. It shares its northern border with Turkey, while Iraq lies to its east and southeast, and Jordan to the south. To the southwest, it meets Israel and Lebanon, with the azure waters of the Mediterranean Sea defining its western edge. This geographical embrace by land and sea has profoundly shaped Syria's history, culture, and very identity, making it a pivotal crossroads throughout millennia.

Stretching over approximately 185,180 square kilometers (71,500 square miles), Syria ranks as the 87th-largest country globally. Despite its seemingly modest size, it boasts an astonishing diversity of landscapes, encompassing fertile plains that have sustained civilizations for millennia, towering mountains that carve distinct climatic zones, and vast desert expanses that hold the secrets of ancient trade routes. This geographical tapestry is not merely picturesque; it has dictated patterns of settlement, facilitated trade, and, at times, served as a formidable barrier against invaders.

The westernmost part of Syria is defined by a narrow, fertile coastal plain that hugs the Mediterranean Sea. This strip of land is Syria's window to the sea, characterized by a climate distinctly different from the rest of the country. Here, higher humidity tempers both the heat of summer and the chill of winter, creating a milder, more temperate environment. This coastal zone, blessed with abundant water and fertile soil, has historically been a hub for trade and maritime activity, connecting Syria to the wider Mediterranean world.

East of this inviting coastal plain, the landscape gently gives way to the Orontes River Valley. This valley is a verdant agricultural heartland, a testament to the life-giving properties of the river that flows through it. The Orontes River, often considered one of the most important rivers in the Levant, has carved a fertile corridor extending south into the Bekaa Valley, a region known for its rich agricultural output. For centuries, this valley has been the breadbasket of Syria, providing sustenance for its people and supporting thriving communities.

Venturing further east from the Orontes River Valley, the landscape undergoes a dramatic transformation, transitioning into a vast desert region. This arid expanse, seemingly barren at first glance, holds hidden treasures, most notably the ancient oasis city of Palmyra. Palmyra, often referred to as the "Pearl of the Desert," is a testament to human ingenuity and resilience, a city that thrived for centuries as a vital caravanserai on the ancient Silk Road. Its existence in the heart of the desert

underscores the strategic importance of water sources and the ability of ancient civilizations to adapt and flourish in challenging environments.

The northeastern part of Syria is dominated by the Jazira Valley, a region whose fertility is owed almost entirely to the mighty Euphrates River. This great river, one of the longest and most historically significant in West Asia, meanders through the Jazira, transforming what would otherwise be a dry land into a vital agricultural zone. The Jazira Valley is renowned as a significant grain-producing area, contributing substantially to Syria's agricultural output. Beyond its agricultural bounty, this region also holds important oil fields, adding another layer to its economic significance. The presence of both fertile land and valuable natural resources has made the Jazira a coveted region throughout history, attracting settlers and empires alike.

To the northeast, forming a natural boundary with Turkey and Iraq, lie the Anatolian Mountains. These rugged peaks rise majestically, creating a formidable barrier that has historically influenced migration patterns and military campaigns. The mountains contribute to the diverse climatic conditions found within Syria, influencing rainfall patterns and creating cooler microclimates compared to the plains and deserts below. They are a testament to Syria's varied topography, showcasing that the country is far from a monolithic landscape.

Syria generally experiences a hot, dry desert climate, especially during the summer months, from June to August. During this period, clear, sunny skies are the norm, and temperatures can soar, often exceeding 30°C in most parts of the country. This intense summer heat is a defining characteristic of the Syrian climate, shaping daily life and agricultural practices. However, the coastal regions offer a reprieve, with milder temperatures due to the moderating influence of the Mediterranean Sea.

In contrast to the scorching summers, winters along the coast are typically mild and rainy, extending from December to February. This rainfall is crucial for the agricultural prosperity of the coastal plain and provides much-needed water resources for the country. As one moves inland, away from the tempering effect of the sea, winter temperatures tend to drop. Damascus, the capital city, located further inland and at a higher elevation, can experience significantly colder weather, with occasional occurrences of snow or sleet, adding a touch of wintry charm to the ancient city.

The variation in annual rainfall across Syria is quite remarkable, directly reflecting the country's diverse geographic zones. The arid desert regions, as one might expect, receive the least amount of precipitation, with annual rainfall ranging from a meager 20 millimeters to 370 millimeters. This scarcity of water underscores the importance of oases, rivers, and ancient irrigation systems in supporting life and human activity in these areas. Conversely, the mountainous regions, acting as natural rain traps, receive significantly more rainfall, with annual figures ranging from a generous 500 millimeters to a remarkable 1820 millimeters. This disparity in rainfall profoundly

impacts the types of agriculture that can be practiced in different regions, influencing everything from crop selection to the reliance on irrigation.

The interplay of these geographical features—from the Mediterranean coast to the desert heartland, from fertile river valleys to rugged mountains—creates a land of striking contrasts. This rich tapestry of landscapes has not only dictated the flow of water and the suitability of land for agriculture but has also influenced trade routes, defense strategies, and the distribution of its diverse population. Understanding Syria's physical environment is the first step in comprehending its long and complex history, its vibrant culture, and the challenges and opportunities it faces today. The land itself tells a story, and in Syria, that story is one of enduring connection between people and their varied, often challenging, but ultimately life-giving, surroundings.

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