



Syria Risk Rating **4**

(Risk Rating 1-4)

General Information:

Capital: Damascus

Language: Arabic

Religion: Sunni Muslim 74%, Alawite, Druze, and other Muslim sects 16%, Christian (various denominations) 10%, Jewish (tiny communities in Damascus, Al Qamishli, and Aleppo)

Currency: Syrian Pound (SYP)

GMT: (+) 2

Country Overview

WARNING: Travel to Syria is **VERY STRONGLY DISCOURAGED** due to **ONGOING CIVIL WAR**. Since 2011, unrest within the country has continued to intensify and nearly **300,000** people have been killed. Government security forces and various rebel groups are engaged in open warfare in many rural and urban areas. It is **EXTREMELY DANGEROUS** to be a foreigner in Syria, as the control between rebel and government forces could be just a matter of city blocks, and anyone on the open is at risk of being killed by either side. If you are caught, you may be suspected to be an agent of the other side and possibly detained or executed. If you insist on going, go with armed guides who are aware of the situation on the ground, but note you will generally be picking a side when you do this, which may unavoidably draw you into the conflict.

Please note that even humanitarian workers need a special authorization to get there, and journalists get captured or killed frequently. In Syria, the best advice is to **GET OUT**. If possible, contact your embassy via phone or internet, as the situation in Damascus is very dangerous and the level of fighting can escalate quickly and unpredictably. Some countries have issued travel warnings, so consult your foreign office before traveling to Syria.

Syria is one of the larger states of the Middle East and has its capital in Damascus. Syria is bordered to the north by Turkey, to the east by Iraq, by Jordan and Israel to the south, and by Lebanon to the south-west. In addition, the country has a short coastline on the east Mediterranean Sea.

Syria had a population of 21,906,000 people (UN, 2009 estimate), of which 6 million used to be concentrated in the capital Damascus but currently, more than 3,249,000 (Dec 2014) Syrians live as refugees abroad. A moderately large country (185,180 sq km or 72,150 sq miles), Syria is situated north within the Middle East region and has land borders with Turkey in the north, with



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Israel in the south, Lebanon in the west and the south, and with Iraq and Jordan in the east and south-east respectively.

The population of Syria is predominately Arab (90%), with large minorities from other ethnic groups: Kurds, Armenians, Circassians and Turks. The official language is Arabic, but other tongues that are occasionally understood include Kurdish, Armenian, Turkish, French and English. The Syrian Republic is officially secular. Nonetheless, it is greatly influenced by the majority religion of Islam (90% of the population, split between 74% Sunni Muslim and 16% other Muslim, Alawites and Druze). There is a large Christian minority that amounts to about 10% of the population.

The President of Syria is Bashar al-Assad, who replaced his father Hafez al-Assad soon after his death on 10 June 2000. Having studied to become an ophthalmologist (eye doctor) in Damascus and London, Bashar was groomed for the presidency after the 1994 car accident of his elder brother Basil. As a consequence, he joined the army and became colonel in 1999. Bashar's modernising credentials were somewhat boosted by his role in a domestic anti-corruption drive. More recently, however, after an initial period of increased openness, Bashar's position as head of the Syrian state rests on his presidency of the Baath Party and his command-in-chief of the army.

Assad's regime and the Baath Party own or control the vast majority of Syria's media. Criticism of the president and his family is not permitted and the press (both foreign and domestic) is heavily censored for material deemed threatening or embarrassing to the government. A brief period of relative press freedom arose after Bashar became president in 2000 and saw the licensing of the first private publications in almost 40 years. A later crackdown, however, imposed a range of restrictions regarding licensing and content. In a more relaxed manner (perhaps owing more to the fact that these matters are largely beyond possible government control), many Syrians have gained access to foreign television broadcasts (usually via satellite) as well as the three state-run networks. In 2002 the government set out conditions for licensing private, commercial FM radio stations, ruling at the same time, however, that radio stations could not broadcast news or political content.

Civil Unrest/Political Tension

The situation remains extremely volatile and dangerous. There is widespread fighting throughout Syria, including in Damascus and its suburbs. Full scale military operations involving the use of small arms, tanks, artillery and aircraft are ongoing. The Syrian government no longer exercises control of large parts of Syria, notably in the north, south and east of the country, as well as parts of Damascus. Areas of eastern Syria are under effective control of the Daesh (formerly referred to as ISIL), which is fiercely hostile to the United Kingdom. On 30 September, Russia embarked on a concerted military campaign of aerial bombardment, using indiscriminate



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weapons in Syria backing an offensive launched by troops loyal to the Asad regime. From 3 December, the UK joined the Coalition air strike effort in Syria against Daesh.

There is a reduced number commercial flights due to the implementation of sanctions, the security situation and the high level of violence. This severely limits options for air travel and seat availability. Fighting in the vicinity of airports has caused the temporary suspension of flights. Road networks have been blocked without warning. Several major highways including Tartous-Latakia, Tartous-Homs, Latakia-Aleppo, Homs-Hama, Homs-Damascus and Damascus-Jordan continue to be intermittently closed. There are security force checkpoints on major road routes.

Fighting and road closures have affected access to some land border crossing points. Some border crossings are in the hands of opposition groups, vulnerable to attack, and/or closed. If you or your dependents travel to Syria against MASC EXECUTIVE advice then you should check the status of all routes before travelling. Don't attempt to enter Iraq via the Syrian border, which is subject to restrictions on both sides.

Be particularly vigilant in public places and keep a low profile. Don't film or take photographs of public gatherings, military activity or any other sensitive matter.

All foreign journalists entering Syria need special permission from the Syrian authorities. Those journalists and other foreigners in opposition-held areas are vulnerable to mistreatment by the armed groups there. A number of foreign journalists have been killed. Others have been detained by the Syrian security forces or other armed groups during the crisis. The security forces have confiscated phones, cameras and video cameras.

There are severe restrictions on unlicensed political and religious activity in Syria. The Syrian authorities have detained and deported several British nationals for unauthorised activity. Activity in opposition-held areas will also attract attention. If you are deported by the local authorities, you will not be able to return to Syria.

Crime

The escalating conflict has led to a rise in crime in most areas, including violent robbery, carjacking and kidnapping.

Road travel

Road travel remains very dangerous in many parts of the country due to fighting. Driving standards and traffic systems are poor, and the accident rate is high. When there is a car accident with a pedestrian, the car driver is always legally responsible. You should avoid driving at night.



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Humanitarian crisis

Humanitarian needs in Syria have increased significantly since the beginning of the crisis with over 13.5 million people in dire need of humanitarian aid and 4.9 million refugees in the region. The ongoing conflict has seriously affected public infrastructure and services. This widespread destruction has led to high unemployment, scarcity/prohibitive cost of food, lack of water, sanitation, health services and fuel.

Terrorism

There is a high threat from terrorism. There are daily attacks across Syria including in major cities, leaving large numbers of people dead or injured.

These groups target a wide range of places, including official installations, airports, border crossings, public transport and civilian spaces like public squares, hospitals, places of worship and learning institutions. Areas visited by foreigners are at high risk of being deliberately targeted.

Methods of attack have included shootings, bombings, suicide bombs and vehicle bombs. Terrorist groups have also claimed responsibility for kidnappings in Syria.

There is considered to be a heightened threat of terrorist attack globally against UK interests and British nationals, from groups or individuals motivated by the conflict in Iraq and Syria. You should be vigilant at this time.

If you travel to Syria to fight, and your activities amount to offences against UK terrorism legislation, you could be prosecuted on return to the UK.

Kidnapping

There is a very high threat of kidnapping throughout Syria. Kidnappings can be for financial or political gain, and can be motivated by criminality or terrorism. There have been a number of kidnappings, including of British nationals and other westerners. Some hostages have been killed.

Terrorist groups operating in Syria routinely use kidnapping as a tactic. Westerners continue to be targeted and any western presence in Syria would be at high risk. Many terrorists in Syria view those engaged in humanitarian aid work or journalism as legitimate targets. If you're detained by a terrorist group, there's no guarantee that explaining the reason for your presence in Syria will serve as protection or secure your safe release.



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The long standing policy of the British government is not to make substantive concessions to hostage takers. The British government considers that paying ransoms and releasing prisoners increases the risk of further hostage-taking.

Local laws and customs

Syria is a multi-faith country. Alongside the majority Sunni population, there are large practicing Shia, Christian, Druze and Alawite communities, as well as other smaller sects and religions. As the conflict continues, divisions along sectarian lines have increased, communities have been displaced and levels of religious tolerance can vary considerably. There are restrictions on unlicensed political and religious activity, particularly political Islam.

The punishment for possession of drugs is life imprisonment. For drug trafficking, the death penalty applies.

If you choose to travel to Syria against MASC EXECUTIVE advice carry a photocopy of your passport (the information page and the page displaying your visa and entry stamp) as proof of identity at all times.

Entry requirements

In June 2013, the Syrian government issued a new law stating that individuals who enter Syrian territories illegally will be punished by a prison sentence of 5 to 10 years and/or a fine of 5 to 10 million Syrian pounds.

Visas

If you choose to travel to Syria against MASC EXECUTIVE advice, you will need to get a visa before you travel. If you intend staying for more than 15 days you must have your visa extended at the immigration office, otherwise you may face difficulties when trying to leave the country.

Passport validity

If you choose to travel to Syria against MASC EXECUTIVE advice, your passport should be valid for a minimum period of 3 months from the date of entry into Syria.

Yellow fever

Yellow Fever vaccination is required for travellers who are arriving from, or have transited



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through, countries with risk of yellow fever transmission.

Previous travel to Israel

If you have an Israeli stamp in your passport or Emergency Travel Document it is highly likely that you will be refused entry into Syria, regardless of your nationality.

Health

If you choose to travel to Syria against MASC EXECUTIVE advice visit your health professional at least 4 to 6 weeks before your trip to check whether you need any vaccinations or other preventive measures.

The quality of health care has deteriorated significantly during the conflict with many hospitals no longer operating and shortages of even the most basic medicines and medical supplies. The destruction of infrastructure means there are regular outbreaks of infectious diseases across the country.

Money

As a result of the ongoing political and security instability, there have been a number of restrictions placed on financial transactions in Syria. Some of these restrictions are the decision of the Syrian Government, while others are the result of international businesses and banks being unwilling to invest or trade with Syria in the current environment.

The situation is unclear, but the information below may help you to manage your own finances more effectively.

- it is no longer possible to use internationally issued credit and debit cards to withdraw money from cash machines or to pay for goods and services in Syria: some card issuers have stated that they will still process transactions in high end hotels and restaurants, but this is subject to change and some service providers, including a 5-star hotel, have already refused to accept payment by international credit card
- it has become very difficult to obtain US dollars or Euros in Syria: it may be possible to make cash withdrawals at a bank in Syrian pounds and you may be able to make euro withdrawals depending on the availability of currency on the day
- most international banks are now refusing to transfer funds direct to banks located in Syria, however, it may be possible to route funding through Dubai or Jordan: you should speak to your bank to check their individual policy
- some international banks are closing down personal accounts held by individuals resident in Syria: in most cases it is not possible to change your place of residence to an



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address outside Syria because of anti-fraud and audit requirements, however, you may be able to close your account and open a new one using an address outside Syria: you should contact your bank to check their latest advice

Currency exchange bureaux are no longer able to exchange dollars or receive transactions on your behalf, but exchange offices and money transfer offices like Western Union (telephone: +963 11 334 5555) may be able to help depending on the circumstances.

Travellers' cheques are not accepted at most banks in Syria. In the rare cases where they are accepted, the handling process is complicated and time-consuming.

It is illegal to change money on the street. Only change money in recognised exchange shops, banks and hotels.

Vaccinations/ Medications

Recommended: Diphtheria, Tetanus, Polio, Hepatitis A

To Be Considered: Typhoid Fever, Hepatitis B, Rabies

Malaria is present and antimalarials may be recommended for travel to Syria please seek medical advice 4-6 weeks before travel.

- **Hepatitis A:** spread through consuming contaminated food and water or person to person through the faecal-oral route. Risk is higher where personal hygiene and sanitation are poor.
- **Hepatitis B:** spread through infected blood and blood products, contaminated needles and medical instruments and sexual intercourse. Risk is higher for those at occupational risk, long stays or frequent travel, children (exposed through cuts and scratches) and individuals who may need, or request, surgical procedures abroad.
- **Rabies:** spread through the saliva of an infected animal, usually through a bite, scratch or lick on broken skin. Particularly dogs and related species, but also bats. Risk is higher for those going to remote areas (who may not be able to promptly access appropriate treatment in the event of a bite), long stays, those at higher risk of contact with animals and bats, and children. Even when pre-exposure vaccine has been received, urgent medical advice should be sought after any animal or bat bite.
- **Tetanus:** spread through contamination of cuts, burns and wounds with tetanus spores. Spores are found in soil worldwide. A total of 5 doses of tetanus vaccine are recommended for life in the UK. Boosters are usually recommended in a country or



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situation where the correct treatment of an injury may not be readily available.

- **Typhoid:** spread mainly through consumption of contaminated food and drink. Risk is higher where access to adequate sanitation and safe water is limited.
- untreated, active form of tuberculosis coughs, speaks, sneezes, spits, laughs or sings. Although tuberculosis is contagious, it's not easy to catch.

Current Travel Advice

MASC Executive advise against all travel to Syria. British nationals in Syria should leave now by any practical means. MASC Executive is not able to provide consular services, and won't be able to help your evacuation from the country.

The situation remains extremely volatile and dangerous. There is widespread fighting throughout Syria, including in Damascus and its suburbs. Full scale military operations involving the use of small arms, tanks, artillery and aircraft are ongoing. The Syrian government no longer exercises control of large parts of Syria, notably the north, south and east of the country. Areas of eastern Syria are under the effective control of the Daesh (formerly referred to as ISIL), which is fiercely hostile to the United Kingdom. Beginning on 30 September, Russia embarked on a concerted military campaign of aerial bombardment, using indiscriminate weapons in Syria backing an offensive launched by troops loyal to the Asad regime. From 3 December, UK joined the Coalition air strike effort in Syria against Daesh.

In Aleppo and elsewhere, the regime has been undertaking an indiscriminate campaign of aerial bombardment since mid-December 2013, using so called 'barrel' bombs – huge containers packed with explosives and shards of metal dropped by helicopter – against largely civilian targets. A number of chemical weapons attacks have taken place across Syria, most notably on 21 August 2013, where a major attack took place in the suburbs of Damascus. Latest estimates are of over 250,000 dead, including well over 10,000 children.

Fighting has caused the temporary suspension of commercial flights, closed roads, impeded access to land border crossing points and led to the closure of some border crossings.

There is a high threat from terrorism. There are continued attacks across Syria including in major cities, leaving large numbers of people dead or injured.

There is a very high threat of kidnapping throughout Syria. There have been a number of kidnappings, including of British nationals and other Westerners, including by Daesh (formerly referred to as ISIL).

If you choose to travel to Syria against MASC EXECUTIVE advice, you should make sure you



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and any dependents have valid exit stamps on your travel documents if you need one and take out comprehensive travel and medical insurance.

As a result of the ongoing political and security instability and the implementation of sanctions against some Syrian institutions, financial transactions have become significantly more difficult.

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