



## Islam in Syria in History (634-2016)

Mohammed Ahmed Ali

University of Damascus

### Abstract

**Islam in Syria** is the most practiced religion in Syria, constituting approximately 89% of the population and forming a majority in all districts of the country.<sup>[1]</sup> The Muslims in Syria follow various different sects of Islam and are from various ethnic and linguistic groups.

The Sunni Muslims make up the majority of Muslims in the country (68% of Syria's total population<sup>[2]</sup>). The Alawites are the predominant non-Sunni group (15% of the country's population<sup>[3]</sup>), followed by Shia Ismailis (3%<sup>[4]</sup>) and orthodox Shia Twelvers (2%<sup>[4]</sup>). There are also some Kurdish and Turkmen Alevi in northern Syria.<sup>[5]</sup> Christians, the main non-Muslim group in the country, comprise 11%.<sup>[3]</sup>

The Sunnis are mainly of the Shafi'i madhhab with pockets of Hanafi and Hanbali. Several large Sufi orders are active in the country, including the Naqshbandi and Qadiriyya. Although not traditionally considered as Muslims, the Druze make up 4% of the total population.<sup>[6]</sup>

### History

In 634–640, as part of the Muslim conquest of the Levant, Syria was conquered by the Muslim Arabs in the form of the Rashidun army led by Khalid ibn al-Walid, under the overall leadership of Abu Bakr, resulting in the region becoming part of the Islamic empire. In 635 Damascus surrendered, its inhabitants being promised security for their lives, property, and churches, on payment of a poll tax. It led to Muslim Rashidun control over the entire Levant and brought about major changes to Levantine religious, cultural and social fabric that continue to this day.<sup>[7]</sup> Until then, Syria was the main center of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Conversion to Islam had scarcely begun prior to the invasion, apart from Arab tribes already settled in Syria; except for the tribe of Ghassan, these all became Muslim. The loyalty of his new subjects was paramount to the success of Muslim rule in the region, therefore excessive taxation or oppression was avoided.<sup>[8]</sup> In the mid-7th century, the Umayyad dynasty, then rulers of the empire, placed the capital of the empire in Damascus.

As in other areas conquered by the Arabs, the spread of Islam was also accompanied with the spread of Arab culture, which culminated in the Arabization of the Levant and the replacement of Aramaic with Arabic.<sup>[9]</sup>

Throughout Syria's Islamic history, the region was a province of many Islamic empires, formed of various ethnic and Islamic sects. The first successors to the Sunni Umayyad rulers were also Arabs,

including the Iraq-centered [Abassids](#) (Sunni rulers) followed by the Egypt-centered [Fatimids](#) (Shia rulers). Several non-Arab Islamic empires also ruled Syria whilst centered in Egypt (particularly in [Cairo](#)), including the [Ayyubids](#) (Sunni rulers of Kurdish origin), and the [Mamluks](#) (Sunni and Shia rulers of Turkic and Circassian origin). The last Islamic empires in Syria were centered firstly in [Iran](#), namely the [Seljuks](#) (Sunni rulers of Turkic origin), and finally the [Ottomans](#) (Sunni rulers of Turkish origin) who were centered in the [Constantinople](#) (modern-day [Istanbul](#)), which straddles both [Europe](#) and [Asia](#) (i.e. [Anatolia](#)).

## Sunni Islam

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The largest religious group in Syria is the [Sunni Muslims](#). The majority are formed of indigenous [Syrian](#) but there is also a significant number of Sunni [Kurds](#), [Turkmen/Turkoman](#), and [Circassians](#), as well as refugees who have arrived in the country, such as [Iraqis](#) and [Palestinians](#). Sunnis follow nearly all occupations, belong to all social groups and nearly every political party, and live in all parts of the country. All the largest cities and thirteen out of the fourteen governorates' capitals of the country had a Sunni majority, except for the governorate and city of [Suwayda](#).<sup>[12]</sup>

## Kurds

The [Kurds in Syria](#) are the second largest ethnic group in the country (forming around 10.6% of the population) and are mainly Sunni Muslims.<sup>[10]</sup> The majority live in the northeast, bordering on [Iraq](#) and [Turkey](#). There are also smaller Kurdish communities in central Syria, followed by [Kobani](#) and [Afrin](#). In the capital of Damascus they are [Arabized](#) and do not speak [Kurdish](#) very well.<sup>[15]</sup> There is also a small minority of [Yazidis](#) (est. 40,000) who are [Kurdish](#)-speaking but they do not practice Sunni Islam.<sup>[15]</sup>

## Turkmen

The [Turkish](#)-speaking [Turkmen](#) are the third largest ethnic group in the country (approximately 4% of the country's population) and are mainly Sunni Muslims.<sup>[15]</sup> They mainly live in the urban centres and countryside of the following six governorates: the [Aleppo Governorate](#), the [Damascus Governorate](#), the [Homs Governorate](#), the [Hama Governorate](#), the [Latakia Governorate](#) and the [Quneitra Governorate](#).<sup>[15]</sup>

## Circassians

Most [Circassians in Syria](#) are Sunni Muslims.<sup>[11]</sup> They form the fifth largest ethnic group in the country but the fourth largest Sunni Muslim community in Syria. They live mostly in three Syrian governorates: [Hama](#), [Homs](#), and [Quneitra](#).<sup>[15]</sup>

In 1991 Professor [Alasdair Drysdale](#) and Professor Raymond Hinnebusch said that less than 1% of the country was formed of Sunni Muslim Circassians.<sup>[13]</sup> In recent decades, the population of other religious minorities (particularly Christians and Jews) has decreased, therefore, estimates on the proportion of Sunni Circassians has increased. For example, a more recent estimate suggested that Sunni Circassians formed 1.5% of Syria's population.<sup>[15]</sup>

## Alawites

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The [Alawites](#) are the second largest religious group in Syria, after the [Sunni Muslims](#).<sup>[12]</sup> [Hafez al-Assad](#) and his son, President [Bashar al-Assad](#), belong to the Alawite sect.<sup>[12]</sup>

Alawites are divided into two main groups: traditional Alawites, who form the majority, and the minority [Murshid Alawites](#) (which rose from a modern schism in the Alawite sect at the beginning of the 20th century).<sup>[12]</sup>

In 1991 Professor [Alasdair Drysdale](#) and Professor Raymond Hinnebusch said that Alawites formed approximately 11.5% of the country's population.<sup>[13]</sup> More recently, Dr. Pierre Beckouche said that 11%

of the country's population was Alawite before 2011.<sup>[14]</sup> The CIA has estimated Alawites at 15% of the Syria's population.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Alevis

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In northern Syria there are some Kurdish and Turkmen [Alevi](#). The town of [Maabatli](#) in [Afrin district](#) is majority inhabited by Kurdish Alevis.<sup>[19]</sup> In 2014 [Hêvî Îbrahîm](#), an Alevi, became the Prime Minister of the Kurdish-controlled [Afrin Canton](#). Thousands of Turkmen Alevis are living in Aleppo, though many of them fled to Turkey.<sup>[20]</sup>

## Shia Islam

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The third largest sect of Islam practiced in the country is the [Shia](#) branch; this includes Ismailis and orthodox Twelvers. Before 2011, they formed a sizeable minority.<sup>[14]</sup> These Muslim sects also include diverse ethnic groups, which included: the Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, and other smaller communities.

### Ismailis

The Shia [Ismailis](#) form the largest branch of [Shia Islam](#) in Syria, forming 3% of Syria's population.<sup>[6]</sup> The split from the greater branch occurred over the recognition of the Seventh Imam. Shia Ismailis believe that [Ja'far al-Sadiq](#), the Sixth Imam, appointed [Isma'il](#) to be the Seventh Imam, a line that continues unbroken to the present day, the office currently sitting with His Highness the [Aga Khan](#). The Shia [Ithna Asharia](#), however, believe that Jafar appointed [Isma'il](#)'s brother [Musa al Kadhim](#) to be the Seventh Imam, a line of Imamatus that ended with the 12th Imam of the Ithna Asharia. Little is known of the early history of the sect, but it was firmly established by the end of the ninth century. From 969 to 1171, an Ismaili dynasty, the [Fatimids](#), ruled as caliphs in Egypt. The Ismaili power in Syria was stamped out by the [Mamluk dynasty](#) of Egypt, after the former offered the Crusaders their allegiance and conversion to Christianity – which were rejected by the [Knights Templar](#).<sup>[21]</sup>

### Twelver

Forming the smallest of the Islamic sects in Syria at 2%,<sup>[6]</sup> the [Twelver Shia](#) play only a minor role in Syrian politics. In religious affairs, they look to Shia centers in [Iraq](#), especially [Karbala](#) and [Najaf](#), and to [Iran](#). However, [Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution](#) and Syria's alliance with Iran in its war with Iraq, have elevated the prestige of Syria's Shia minority. As hundreds of Iranian tourists began to visit Damascus each week, the Shia shrine of the [tomb of Sayyida Zaynab](#), granddaughter of Muhammad, located in Al-Ghutah outside Damascus, became a major pilgrimage destination, replacing those areas no longer accessible in Iraq. Moreover, the Syrian Shia Twelvers have close links to the [Shia Twelvers in Lebanon](#).<sup>[23]</sup>

## Druze

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The [Syrian Druze](#) community constitute the third largest Islamic sect in the country, forming approximately 4% of the population of Syria.<sup>[6]</sup> The main centre of the Druze population is in [As-Suwayda](#); the small towns and villages under its authority is called the [Jabal al-Druze](#) (the "Mountain of the Druze"). The rest of the community mainly live in the [Quneitra Governorate](#), the [Rif Dimashq Governorate](#), and the [Idlib Governorate](#).<sup>[24]</sup>

There are many Syrian Druze also living abroad, particularly in [Latin America](#), who have been living there for over the past hundred years.<sup>[24]</sup> In [Venezuela](#) alone there are approximately half a million Druze of Syrian origin.<sup>[24]</sup>

## Ahmadiyya

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Ahmadiyya is a small Islamic movement in Syria. The history of the movement in Syria begins in the 1920s, when the second caliph of the Community, Mirza Basheer-ud-Din Mahmood Ahmad visited Damascus, as part of his tour of Europe and the Middle East. The caliph appointed Sayyid Zayn al'Abidin Waliullah Shah and Jalal al-Din Shams to be sent for missionary work in Damascus. Along with Maulvi Abu'l-'Ata Jalandhari, who arrived for a mission in Jerusalem, the three missionaries spent their time spreading Ahmadi teachings in major towns and cities across the Middle East, including Haifa, Beirut and Cairo.<sup>[25]</sup>

## References

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