

Syria

Ethnicity in Syria

Group selection

Ethnic and religious diversity as well as intense social cleavages characterized modern Syria after it declared independence from France in April 1946. The country was subject to numerous coup d'états within the first decades of its existence, led by military officials of different ethnic backgrounds. Especially minorities, first and foremost Druze and Alawis, regarded a career in the military as their only way to surmount class structures and reach social recognition (⁵⁰⁵⁰, 143; ⁵⁰⁵¹, 148). As a result, the military apparatus emerged as a crucial pillar in the political system. Relative stability came when Hafez al-Assad rose to power in 1970 and consolidated Alawi rule under the regime of the Baath Party (⁵⁰⁵², 109), which is in power until today.

We identify the **Sunni Arabs**, **Alawis**, **Christians**, **Kurds**, and **Druze** as politically relevant groups. The group sizes refer to the CIA World Factbook 2014 (⁵⁰⁵³) and correspond to an article written by the Harvard Institute of Politics (⁵⁰⁵⁴). Thus, there are 65% Sunni Arabs, 13% Alawis, 10% Christians, 8% Kurds, and 3% Druze.

In 2011, protests inspired by the Arab Spring demanded economic and political reform. They soon turned violent and developed into a full-fledged civil war in course of which divisions along sectarian and ethnic lines became more pronounced (⁵⁰⁵⁵). At the time of the last review in 2017, the ongoing civil war had caused more than 400'000 deaths and 4.8 million refugees abroad (⁵⁰⁵⁶). In spite of possible demographic changes related to the conflict, the group sizes mentioned above are retained here, since no reliable figures are available to update these numbers.

Power relations

Sunni Arabs

With a size of 65% the Sunni Arabs constitute the largest ethnic group in Syria. Historically, they were the political and societal elite in Syria (⁵⁰⁵⁷, 141) and traditionally rejected military careers as being “not suitable to their status” (⁵⁰⁵⁸, 119; ⁵⁰⁵⁹, 143). Before the military emerged as the dominant political power organ of the state, Sunni Arabs enjoyed Senior Partner status (with the exception of 1949-1954, when the government was Kurdish dominated).

⁵⁰⁵⁰ [Faksh, 1984]

⁵⁰⁵¹ [Perthes, 1995]

⁵⁰⁵² [Hinnebusch, 2001]

⁵⁰⁵³ [Central Intelligence Agency, 2014]

⁵⁰⁵⁴ [Harvard University, 2014]

⁵⁰⁵⁵ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016]

⁵⁰⁵⁶ [US Department of State, 2016]

⁵⁰⁵⁷ [Faksh, 1984]

⁵⁰⁵⁸ [Klaff, 1993]

⁵⁰⁵⁹ [Faksh, 1984]

During the period of the Arab Union (1958-1960) the Sunni Arabs are coded as Dominant due to their strong promotion of Arab Nationalism. The military coup of 1966 started the Alawi capture of power in Syria (⁵⁰⁶⁰) and rendered the Sunnis Junior Partner. By 1970, they became politically marginalized and their coding changes to Powerless. In order to appease the Sunni Arab majority, Assad included distinct members of the Sunni Arab community into the political elite surrounding him (⁵⁰⁶¹, 207), which “constructed a facade of Sunnis in high positions” (⁵⁰⁶², 184). Yet, they were never given any executive power. When Assad’s son Bashar took over the presidential office in 2000, he started substituting Sunni officials with Alawi counterparts (⁵⁰⁶³, 52), thereby further marginalizing Sunnis in politics.

In the ensuing civil war, the Sunnis initially formed the main opposition group to the authoritarian government. However, they did not act as a unified group and continued to be represented in the cabinet and the parliament in Damascus as well (⁵⁰⁶⁴). During the war, the Sunni ethnic group has suffered most from the violence, and Sunni extremist rebel groups such as the “Islamic State” and “Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham” emerged and gained increasing power, displaying the sectarian dynamics of the conflict (⁵⁰⁶⁵). At the center, however, the Sunnis were still not sufficiently involved in executive decision-making under Assad’s regime and neither were they discriminated. In fact, the regime actively sought proximity to Sunni religious authorities and their approval for some of its atrocities to counter the notion that it specifically targeted Sunnis (⁵⁰⁶⁶). Therefore, their coding remains “Powerless.”

Alawis

As a heritage of the French Mandate (they had divided both the Alawi north-west and the Druze south-east of Syria into regional substates), the Alawis are coded with regional autonomy from 1946-1948. Before they took over the military apparatus and the ruling Baath Party, the Alawi community of Syria was among the poorest and most disadvantaged groups in Syria (⁵⁰⁶⁷, 114; ⁵⁰⁶⁸, 133; ⁵⁰⁶⁹). The decisive turning point was the coup d’etat of 1966 after which 700 Sunni Arab Officers were replaced with Alawis. Previously coded as Junior Partner, they then become Senior Partner. After fully establishing military rule under Hafez al-Assad in 1970, the Alawis are coded Dominant (⁵⁰⁷⁰, 121). In 2000, after Hafez al-Assad’s death, power was transitioned to his son Bashar, keeping the power balance in place.

Since the outbreak of the civil war, the Syrian Arab Republic and the Assad regime in Damascus formally still exist but the country is de facto divided into four kinds of areas: “areas controlled by the regime (Damascus, the coastal area and the corridor in between), areas controlled by IS (mainly eastern Syria, Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor), areas controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (Partiya

⁵⁰⁶⁰ [Pipes, 1989]

⁵⁰⁶¹ [Lobmeyer, 1995]

⁵⁰⁶² [Pipes, 1990]

⁵⁰⁶³ [Rubin, 2007]

⁵⁰⁶⁴ [US Department of State, 2016]

⁵⁰⁶⁵ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020]

⁵⁰⁶⁶ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020]

⁵⁰⁶⁷ [Klaß, 1993]

⁵⁰⁶⁸ [Faksh, 1984]

⁵⁰⁶⁹ [Zisser, 1999]

⁵⁰⁷⁰ [Klaß, 1993]

Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD) (north-eastern Syria around Qamishli and Hassakeh), and territories controlled by other rebel factions (north-western and southern Syria, Aleppo and the area around Dara'a and Sweida)" (⁵⁰⁷¹). Therefore, the 2014 presidential election - won by Assad - and the 2016 parliamentary elections - won by the ruling Baath Party - took place with limited geographic reach and in "an environment of widespread government coercion" (⁵⁰⁷²). In government-controlled areas, Assad continued to make key decisions with counsel from a small number of military and security advisors, ministers, and senior members of the Baath Party, predominantly members of the Alawi sect (⁵⁰⁷³). Alawites keep their political status because they still represent the legitimate government. An alternative opposition government, the Syrian National Coalition, was recognized in 2012 by many countries as representation of the Syrian people, but became marginalized soon after and was not able to establish a power base inside Syria (⁵⁰⁷⁴).

⁵⁰⁷¹ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016]

⁵⁰⁷² [US Department of State, 2016]

⁵⁰⁷³ [US Department of State, 2016]

⁵⁰⁷⁴ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016]

Bolstered by Russian and Iranian military support, the regime regained control over most of the Syrian territory by 2020. The Alawite community continued to enjoy "privileged status throughout the regime and dominated the state security apparatus and military leadership" (⁵⁰⁷⁵). They also held "greater political power in the cabinet than other minorities, as well as more authority than the majority Sunni population" (⁵⁰⁷⁶). Thus, their coding as "dominant" is retained.

⁵⁰⁷⁵ [US Department of State, 2019a]

⁵⁰⁷⁶ [US Department of State, 2019b]

Christians

In the history of the Syrian Arab Republic, Christians held several senior positions in government and are thus coded Junior Partner until 1970 except for the period of the Arab Union. Subsequently, Christians in Syria perceived the Baath regime as their protector (⁵⁰⁷⁷). Syrian Christians are predominantly Arabs. Due to the promotion of Arab values by the Baath Party and the Syrian government, Christians were not targeted as long as they upheld their Arab ancestry. For the time period from 1970, Christians are coded "Powerless."

⁵⁰⁷⁷ [Mouawad, 2001]

During the civil war, the Christian minority suffered from violence and displacement at the hand of the regime and of other warring parties (⁵⁰⁷⁸). Yet, some reportedly viewed the government as their protector against violent Sunni extremists and the parliament continued to include Christian members (⁵⁰⁷⁹). Overall, no general shift in their access to power can be detected and their coding remains "powerless."

⁵⁰⁷⁸ [Hamou & Christou, 2019]

⁵⁰⁷⁹ [US Department of State, 2019b]

Kurds

Before the rise of Arab Nationalism, the Kurds enjoyed some political power, especially between 1949 and 1954 due to the Kurdish Colonel Hossni al-Zaim staging the first of Syria's numerous coup d'états (⁵⁰⁸⁰, 48). During this period they are coded Senior Partner

⁵⁰⁸⁰ [Woog, 2009]

and otherwise Junior Partner. In the aftermath of the Arab Union, Kurds became marginalized and discriminated against by successive Syrian governments that promoted Arab Nationalism (⁵⁰⁸¹). The Kurdish part of the population was geographically isolated in the areas bordering Iraq and Turkey and protests were repressed. The group is therefore coded “discriminated.”

⁵⁰⁸¹ [Human Rights Watch, 2009]

The government granted all Kurds in Syria citizenship in 2011 hoping that they would support the Assad regime in the emerging conflict. While the Kurds are coded “discriminated” before 2011, they are therefore termed “powerless” afterwards. It should be mentioned that the Kurdish population, citizens and non-citizens, faced “official and societal discrimination and repression as well as government-sponsored violence in the conflict” (⁵⁰⁸²). However, they were represented in parliament alongside other minorities which is here valued higher in regards to their political rights.

⁵⁰⁸² [US Department of State, 2016]

Parties representing this group are the Kurdish National Council (KNC) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD). Even though these two groups are political allies, they have a history of mutual distrust. In the Kurdish areas, the PYD successfully established itself as the most powerful party since 2013 and set up a local government. Apart from the infamous “Islamic State”-rule in some parts of the country, this marks “the closest approximation of formal political institutions and a legal system” (⁵⁰⁸³) in the protracted Syrian conflict. Tolerated by the regime in Damascus, the Kurds held de facto power over three main areas that made up the administrative architecture of Rojava or western Kurdistan, as it was called. In 2016, the local authorities replaced a provisional charter by an updated version, the ‘Federal Democratic Rojava Social Contract’, which acted as a provisional constitution for Rojava and was based on international human rights principles (⁵⁰⁸⁴, 11). A report by Chatham House about the stance of the Syrian government’s ruling elite towards this development states: “[...] some believe that the new model in Rojava can work in parallel with the Syrian government, and that convergence between the two will be a natural result of their simultaneous survival. Hardliners continue to insist that the accommodation with the PYD is a temporary measure, arguing that power will be centralized again once the war the government is waging in other parts of Syria winds down, and warning of the potential for future confrontation” (⁵⁰⁸⁵, 11). Both opinions strongly indicate a tacit agreement about Kurdish autonomy in the regions concerned for the time being. Kurdish de facto autonomy and the Rojava charter were still in place in 2017 (⁵⁰⁸⁶). With regards to the implementation of their new provisional constitution in 2016 and in line with the 1st of January coding rule, the Kurds are coded as self-exclusionist starting in 2017. In the following years, the Kurdish Autonomous Administration consolidated its power in the country’s Northeast and continued to build political institutions (⁵⁰⁸⁷, ⁵⁰⁸⁸). Thus, their status remained unchanged as “self-exclusionist.”

⁵⁰⁸³ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016]

⁵⁰⁸⁴ [Sary, 2016]

⁵⁰⁸⁵ [Sary, 2016]

⁵⁰⁸⁶ [Drott, 2017]

⁵⁰⁸⁷ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020]

⁵⁰⁸⁸ [US Department of State, 2019b]

Druze

As the Alawi, Druze are coded as regional autonomous from 1946-1948. Likewise, members of the Druze ethnic group also used the military to climb the social ladder. However, the few Druze officers that had still been in charge after the coup of 1966 were replaced by Hafez al-Assad. Thus, they are coded Junior Partner until 1970 - except for the period of the Arab Union. After 1970 the Druze are coded Powerless.

The Druze enjoy regional power in an area named Suwaida in the south of Syria; however, this does not account to executive power on the national level nor regional autonomy. It is rather decisive power related to community matters and their everyday life.

This minority group was sought out by the president in 2011 after the influential leader of the Lebanese Druze, Walid Jumblatt, berated the Druze in Syria for not being more supportive of the protests. "Shame on the Druze of Syria; they have always been at the forefront of all revolutions," he stated. President Bashar Al-Assad travelled to Suwaida to speak with the elders of the Druze in order to persuade them to support the regime in the civil war. This proved to be successful as the majority has supported the regime since. The Druze are also represented in parliament, despite their lack of executive power (⁵⁰⁸⁹). They are coded "powerless" throughout.

⁵⁰⁸⁹ [US Department of State, 2019b]

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Political status of ethnic groups in Syria

From 1946 until 1948

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Sunni Arabs	0.65	SENIOR PARTNER
Alawi	0.13	POWERLESS
Christians	0.1	JUNIOR PARTNER
Kurds	0.08	JUNIOR PARTNER
Druze	0.03	POWERLESS

From 1949 until 1954

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Sunni Arabs	0.65	JUNIOR PARTNER
Alawi	0.13	JUNIOR PARTNER
Christians	0.1	JUNIOR PARTNER
Kurds	0.08	SENIOR PARTNER
Druze	0.03	JUNIOR PARTNER

From 1955 until 1957

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Sunni Arabs	0.65	SENIOR PARTNER
Alawi	0.13	JUNIOR PARTNER
Christians	0.1	JUNIOR PARTNER
Kurds	0.08	JUNIOR PARTNER
Druze	0.03	JUNIOR PARTNER

From 1958 until 1960

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Sunni Arabs	0.65	DOMINANT
Alawi	0.13	POWERLESS
Christians	0.1	POWERLESS
Kurds	0.08	POWERLESS
Druze	0.03	POWERLESS

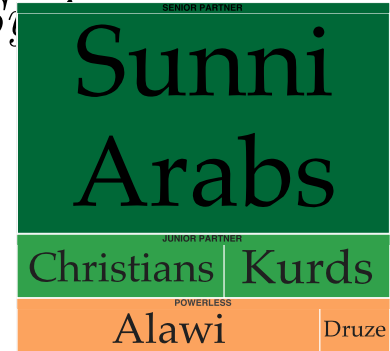


Figure 988: Political status of ethnic groups in Syria during 1946-1948.

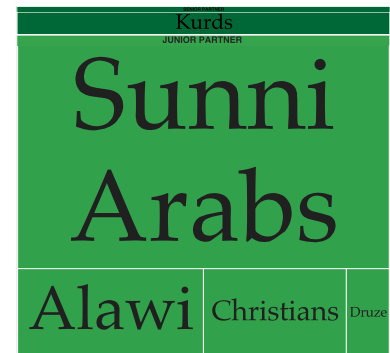


Figure 989: Political status of ethnic groups in Syria during 1949-1954.

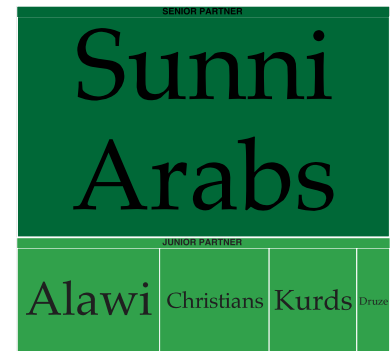


Figure 990: Political status of ethnic groups in Syria during 1955-1957.

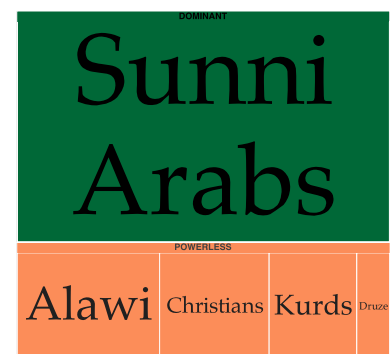


Figure 991: Political status of ethnic groups in Syria during 1958-1960.

From 1961 until 1965

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Sunni Arabs	0.65	SENIOR PARTNER
Alawi	0.13	JUNIOR PARTNER
Christians	0.1	JUNIOR PARTNER
Kurds	0.08	DISCRIMINATED
Druze	0.03	JUNIOR PARTNER

From 1966 until 1969

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Sunni Arabs	0.65	JUNIOR PARTNER
Alawi	0.13	SENIOR PARTNER
Christians	0.1	JUNIOR PARTNER
Kurds	0.08	DISCRIMINATED
Druze	0.03	JUNIOR PARTNER

From 1970 until 2011

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Sunni Arabs	0.65	POWERLESS
Alawi	0.13	DOMINANT
Christians	0.1	POWERLESS
Kurds	0.08	DISCRIMINATED
Druze	0.03	POWERLESS

From 2012 until 2016

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Sunni Arabs	0.65	POWERLESS
Alawi	0.13	DOMINANT
Christians	0.1	POWERLESS
Kurds	0.08	POWERLESS
Druze	0.03	POWERLESS

From 2017 until 2021

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Sunni Arabs	0.65	POWERLESS
Alawi	0.13	DOMINANT
Christians	0.1	POWERLESS
Kurds	0.08	SELF-EXCLUSION
Druze	0.03	POWERLESS

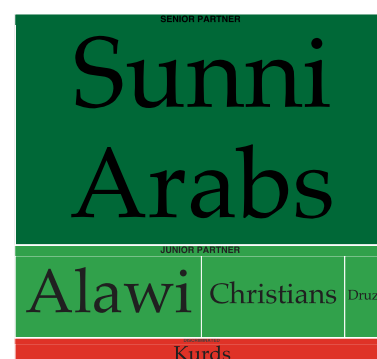


Figure 992: Political status of ethnic groups in Syria during 1961-1965.

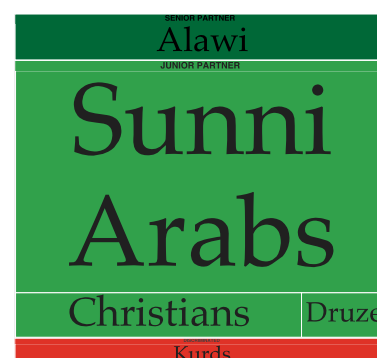


Figure 993: Political status of ethnic groups in Syria during 1966-1969.

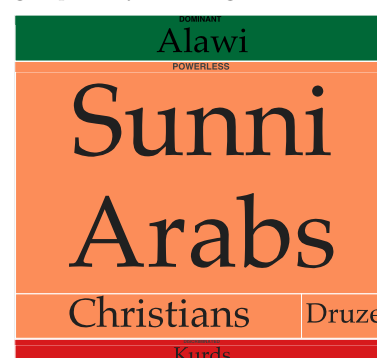


Figure 994: Political status of ethnic groups in Syria during 1970-2011.

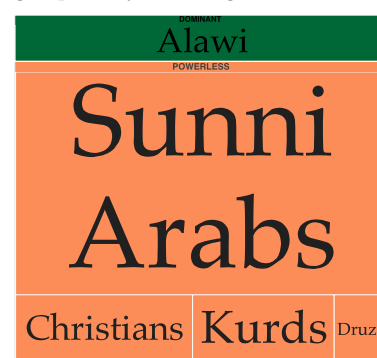
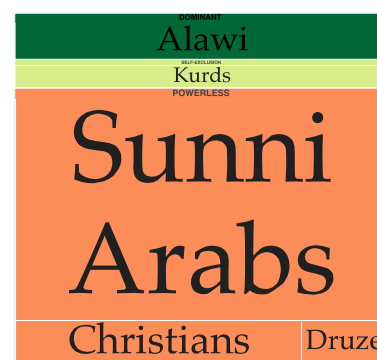


Figure 995: Political status of ethnic groups in Syria during 2012-2016.



Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Syria

From 1946 until 1966

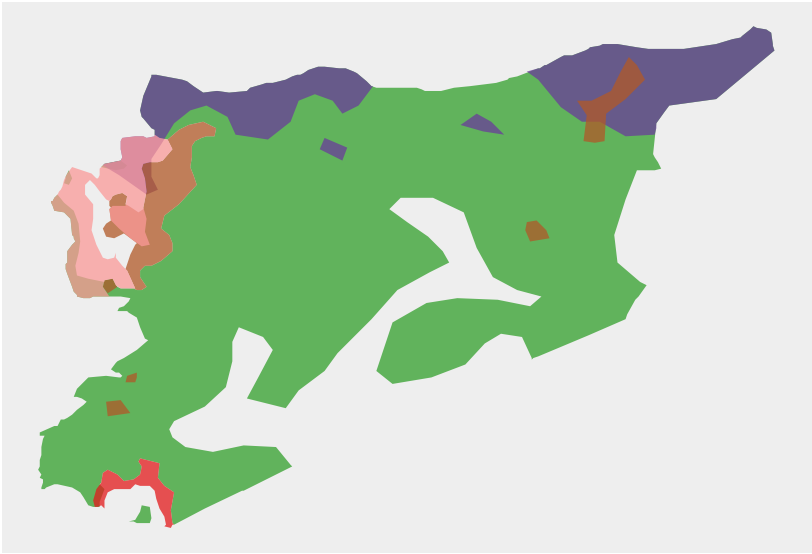


Figure 997: Map of ethnic groups in Syria during 1946-1966.

Group name		Area in km ²	Type
■	Sunni Arabs	143 248	Regionally based
■	Kurds	22 007	Regionally based
■	Christians	8230	Regionally based
■	Alawi	7649	Regionally based
■	Druze	1640	Regionally based

Table 362: List of ethnic groups in Syria during 1946-1966.

From 1967 until 1967

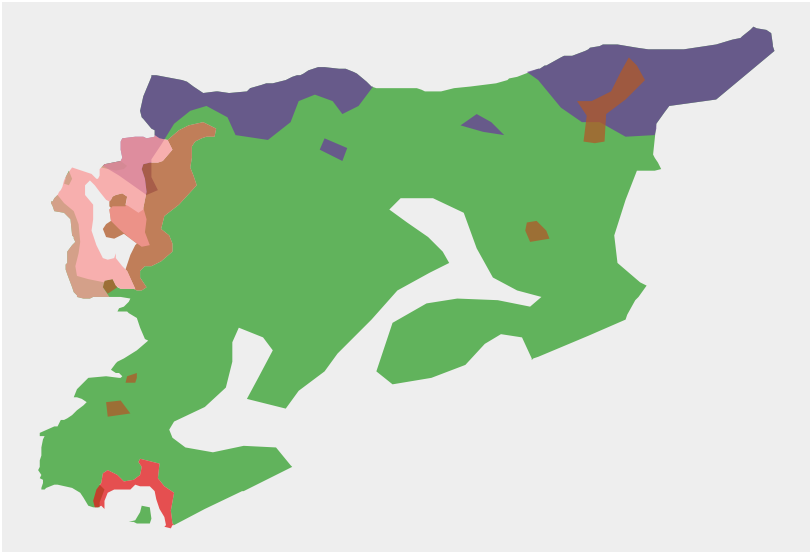


Figure 998: Map of ethnic groups in Syria during 1967-1967.

Group name		Area in km ²	Type
■	Sunni Arabs	143 248	Regionally based
■	Kurds	22 007	Regionally based
■	Christians	8230	Regionally based
■	Alawi	7649	Regionally based
■	Druze	1640	Regionally based

Table 363: List of ethnic groups in Syria during 1967-1967.

From 1968 until 2021

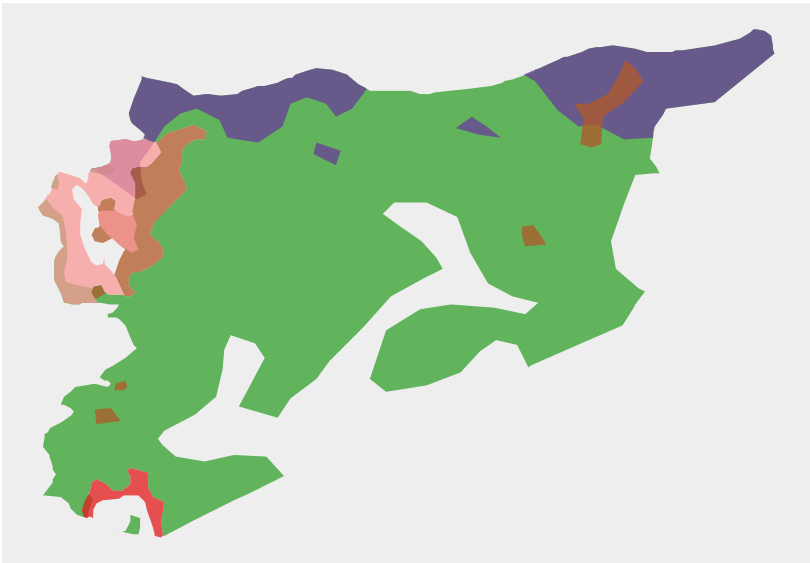


Figure 999: Map of ethnic groups in Syria during 1968-2021.






	Group name	Area in km ²	Type
	Sunni Arabs	142 138	Regionally based
	Kurds	22 007	Regionally based
	Christians	8230	Regionally based
	Alawi	7649	Regionally based
	Druze	1640	Regionally based

Table 364: List of ethnic groups in Syria during 1968-2021.

Conflicts in Syria

Starting on 1948-04-14

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Egypt	Government of Israel		1948-04-14			
Government of Iraq	Government of Israel		1948-04-14			
Government of Jordan	Government of Israel		1948-04-14			
Government of Lebanon	Government of Israel		1948-04-14			
Government of Syria	Government of Israel		1948-04-14			

Starting on 1966-02-22

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Syria	Military faction (forces loyal to Nureddin Atassi and Youssef Zeayen)		1966-02-22			
Government of Syria	Muslim Brotherhood	Sunni Arabs	1979-06-15	Explicit	Yes	No
Government of Syria	Syrian insurgents	Kurds	2011-07-29			Split
Government of Syria	Syrian insurgents	Sunni Arabs	2011-07-29	Explicit	Yes	Yes

Starting on 1967-06-04

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Israel	Government of Syria		1967-06-04			

Starting on 2011-09-09

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Syria	PYD	Kurds	2011-09-09	Explicit	Yes	Split

Starting on 2013-05-12

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Syria	IS	Sunni Arabs	2013-05-12	Explicit	Yes	Split

Starting on 2015-12-05

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Syria	SDF	Kurds	2015-12-05	No	Yes	
Government of Syria	SDF	Sunni Arabs	2015-12-05	No	Yes	