

Syria

Ethnicity in Syria

Group selection

Ethnic and religious diversity as well as intense social cleavages characterized modern Syria after its declaration of independence from France in April 1946. The country 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 (⁴³²¹, 143; ⁴³²², 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 the regime of the Baath Party under Alawi rule (⁴³²³, 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 (⁴³²⁴) and correspond to an article written by the Harvard Institute of Politics (⁴³²⁵). 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 (⁴³²⁶). 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 (⁴³²⁷). 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.

⁴³²¹ [Faksh, 1984]

⁴³²² [Perthes, 1995]

⁴³²³ [Hinnebusch, 2001]

⁴³²⁴ [Central Intelligence Agency, 2014]

⁴³²⁵ [Harvard University, 2014]

⁴³²⁶ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016]

⁴³²⁷ [US Department of State, 2016]

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 (⁴³²⁸, 141) and traditionally rejected military careers as being “not suitable to their status” (⁴³²⁹, 119; ⁴³³⁰, 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). 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 (⁴³³¹) 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 (⁴³³², 207), which “constructed a facade of Sunnis in high positions” (⁴³³³, 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 (⁴³³⁴, 52), thereby further marginalizing Sunnis in politics.

⁴³²⁸ [Faksh, 1984]

⁴³²⁹ [Klaff, 1993]

⁴³³⁰ [Faksh, 1984]

⁴³³¹ [Pipes, 1989]

⁴³³² [Lobmeyer, 1995]

In the ongoing civil war, the Sunnis initially formed the main opposition group to the authoritarian government. However, they did not act as a unified group and were also represented in the cabinet and the parliament in Damascus (⁴³³⁵). While they were still not able to execute any effective power under Assads regime, they were not officially discriminated either. Therefore, their coding remains Powerless.

⁴³³⁵ [US Department of State, 2016]

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 (⁴³³⁶, 114; ⁴³³⁷, 133; ⁴³³⁸). 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 (⁴³³⁹, 121). In 2000, after Hafez al-Assad’s death, power was transitioned to his son Bashar, keeping the power balance in place.

⁴³³⁶ [Klaff, 1993]

⁴³³⁷ [Faksh, 1984]

⁴³³⁸ [Zisser, 1999]

⁴³³⁹ [Klaff, 1993]

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), ar-

areas controlled by IS (mainly eastern Syria, Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor), areas controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (Partiya 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)" (4340). 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" (4341). 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 (4342). 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 (4343).

⁴³⁴⁰ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016]

⁴³⁴¹ [US Department of State, 2016]

⁴³⁴² [US Department of State, 2016]

⁴³⁴³ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016]

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 (4344). 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.

⁴³⁴⁴ [Mouawad, 2001]

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 (4345, 48). During this period they are coded Senior Partner 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 (4346). 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.

⁴³⁴⁵ [Woog, 2009]

⁴³⁴⁶ [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 noncitizens, faced "official and societal discrimination and repression as well as government-sponsored violence in the conflict" (4347). However, they were repre-

⁴³⁴⁷ [US Department of State, 2016]

sented in parliament alongside other minorities which is here valued higher in regards to their political rights.

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” (4348) 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 (4349, 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” (4350, 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 (4351). 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 regional autonomous starting in 2017.

4348 [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016]

4349 [Sary, 2016]

4350 [Sary, 2016]

4351 [Drott, 2017]

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 up 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.

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. Thus, the coding remains 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.

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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

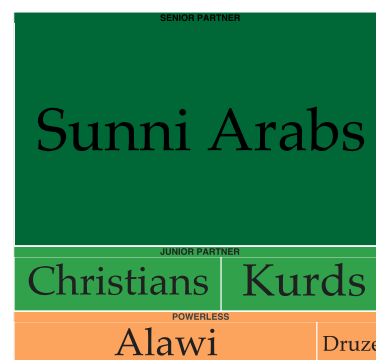


Figure 871: Political status of ethnic groups in Syria during 1946-1948.

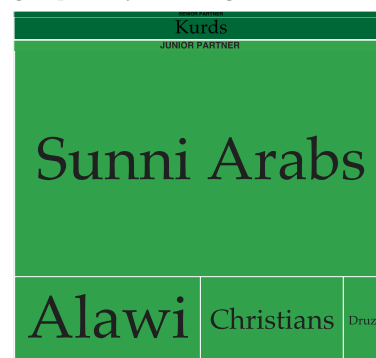


Figure 872: Political status of ethnic groups in Syria during 1949-1954.

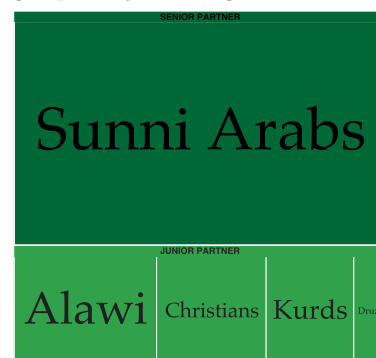


Figure 873: Political status of ethnic groups in Syria during 1955-1957.

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

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



Figure 874: Political status of ethnic groups in Syria during 1958-1960.

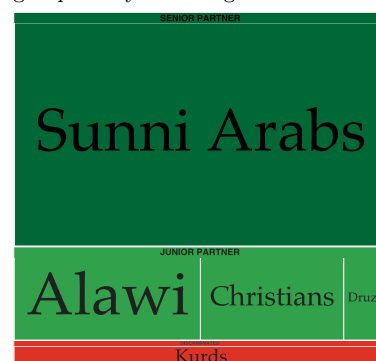


Figure 875: Political status of ethnic groups in Syria during 1961-1965.

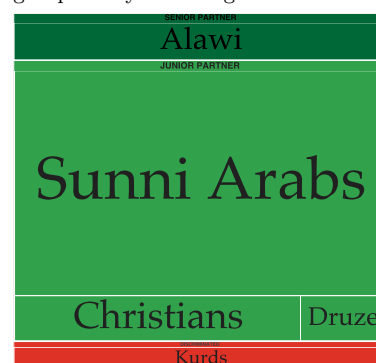


Figure 876: Political status of ethnic groups in Syria during 1966-1969.

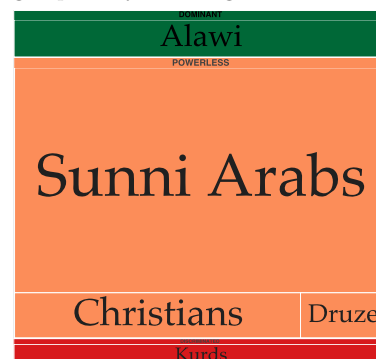


Figure 877: Political status of ethnic groups in Syria during 1970-2011.

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 2017

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

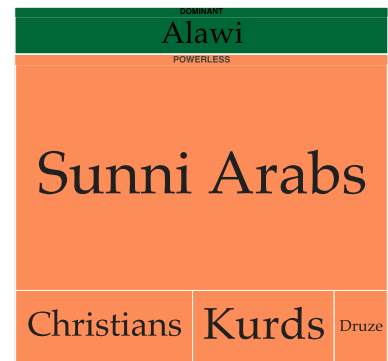


Figure 878: Political status of ethnic groups in Syria during 2012-2016.

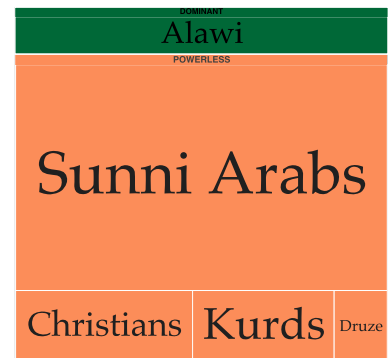


Figure 879: Political status of ethnic groups in Syria during 2017-2017.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Syria

From 1946 until 1966

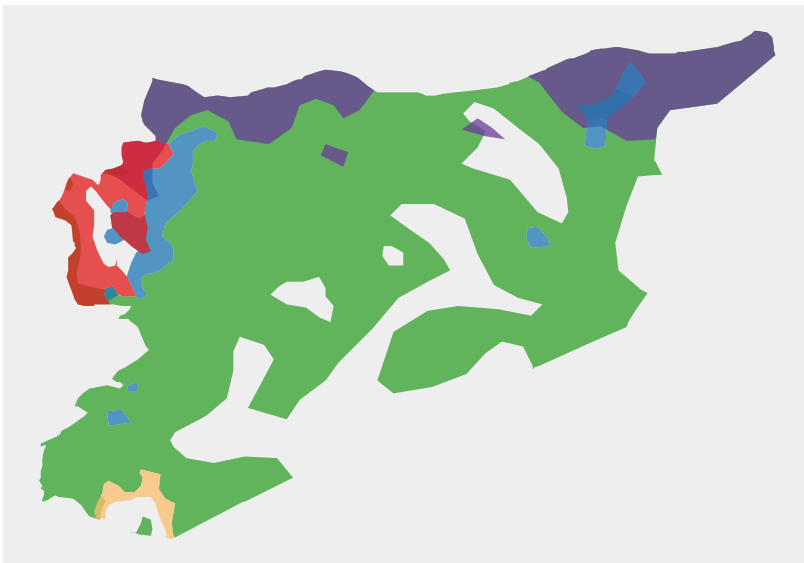


Figure 880: Map of ethnic groups in Syria during 1946-1966.

Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■ Sunni Arabs	134 828	Regionally based
■ Kurds	22 000	Regionally based
■ Christians	8 230	Regionally based
■ Alawi	7 648	Regionally based
■ Druze	1 640	Regionally based

Table 295: List of ethnic groups in Syria during 1946-1966.

From 1967 until 1967

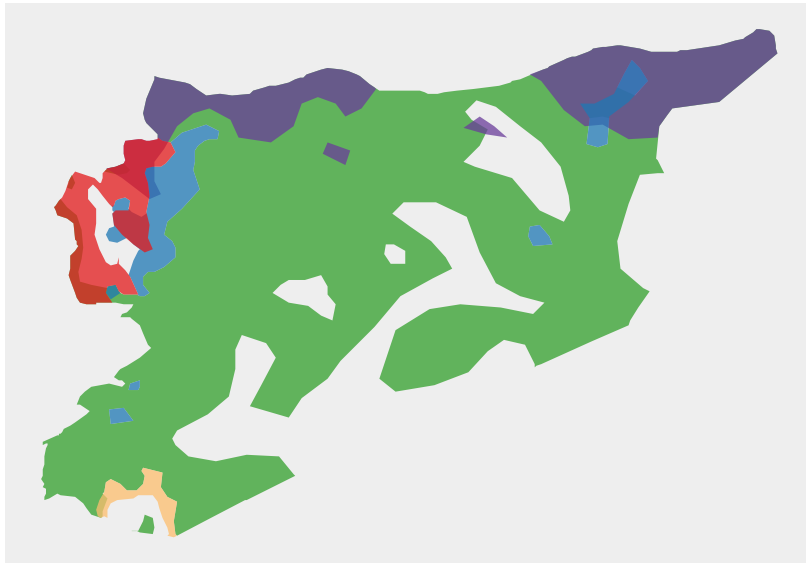


Figure 881: Map of ethnic groups in Syria during 1967-1967.

Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■ Sunni Arabs	134 828	Regionally based
■ Kurds	22 000	Regionally based
■ Christians	8 230	Regionally based
■ Alawi	7 648	Regionally based
■ Druze	1 640	Regionally based

Table 296: List of ethnic groups in Syria during 1967-1967.

From 1968 until 2017

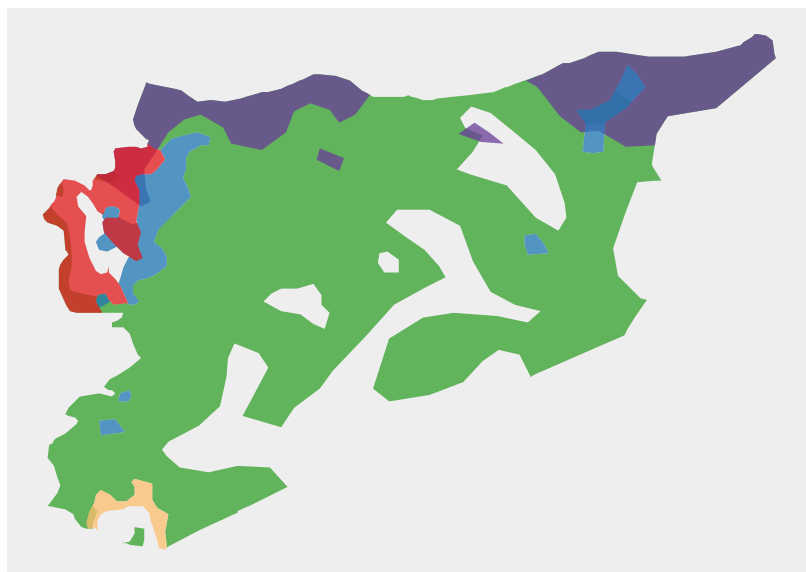


Figure 882: Map of ethnic groups in Syria during 1968-2017.

	Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■	Sunni Arabs	133 718	Regionally based
■	Kurds	22 000	Regionally based
■	Christians	8 230	Regionally based
■	Alawi	7 648	Regionally based
■	Druze	1 640	Regionally based

Table 297: List of ethnic groups in Syria during 1968-2017.

Conflicts in Syria

Starting on 1948-04-14

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, 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 2013-05-13

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Syria	IS		2013-05-13			

Starting on 2015-12-05

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