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# Caring for Unaccompanied Migrant Children

## Syrian Arab Republic



ARSIS, ASSOCIATION FOR THE SOCIAL SUPPORT OF YOUTH



## INTRODUCTION

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Foster parents are one of the most important people in the life of unaccompanied migrant children – children who have had to leave their homes and embark on perilous journeys, and who have no adult to take responsibility for them.

If your child has grown up in the Syrian Arab Republic (hereinafter referred to as: Syria) or spent a significant part of their life in that country, this information leaflet will help you prepare to welcome and care for them. This leaflet is an educational tool that is designed to give you a first insight and basic introduction to Syria. It is recommended that you build your knowledge further through research by, for example, consulting the resources listed at the end of the leaflet, exchanges with the Syrian community (diaspora/migrant organizations) and the interactions with the child you are looking after.

## WHY DO CHILDREN LEAVE SYRIA?

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Unaccompanied migrant children and young people from Syria may have left their country for several different reasons, which are complex and likely unique to each child. It is important to not make assumptions on why a child has left, but instead engage in dialogue (if appropriate, and not upsetting to the child) to understand the child's perspective. Be mindful that the child may already have had to re-tell their story to several people before you, and they may not wish to do so again.

The war in Syria has in many cases led to the disintegration of families, with more than 3,700 children living in Jordan and Lebanon without one or both of their parents or even without any adult caregivers. In some cases, parents died, were detained, or sent their children to other countries fearing for their own safety. The war has also displaced many people, including children: according to UNICEF, out of 6.7 million people internally displaced 2.5 million are children.

Millions of Syrians have escaped across borders. Turkey hosts the largest number of registered Syrian refugees – currently more than 3.6 million. The vast majority of Syrian refugees in the neighboring countries live in urban areas, with only one out of 20 accommodated in a refugee camp. In all neighboring countries, life is a daily struggle for more than a million Syrian refugees, who have little or no financial resources.

Since the beginning of the civil war in Syria, nearly 585,000 people were killed, including more than 21,900 children, as reported by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (data Jan.2020). At the same time, only 53% of hospitals and 51% of healthcare facilities are fully operational and more than eight million people lack access to safe water. An estimated 2.5 million children are out of school. Conflict has devastated the economy and more than 80% of the population lives in poverty.

The children of Syria - the nation's hope for a better future - have lost their loved ones, suffered injuries, lost years of schooling and experienced unutterable violence. For millions of these children the conflict has robbed them of their childhood and affected their long-term physical and mental health as well as their future prospects. Many children trapped in this crisis have lost family members and friends to violence, suffered physical and psychological trauma, and had to drop out of school.

In Syria, the war reversed two decades of educational progress. One third of the school-age population is out of school, and many schools have been destroyed or occupied by military groups.



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The lack of access to services, such as schooling, but also the absence of breadwinners may lead to an increase in child labor, including by refugee and internally displaced children who have to work to support their families. They often work in dangerous or degrading conditions for little pay. Some children are forced to become child soldiers acting as fighters or as human shields.

Children from Syria are also vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation as they live in precarious conditions in refugee camps and informal settlements. With insufficient income to support their families and fearing that their daughters are being abused, parents may choose to arrange a marriage.

## ABOUT SYRIA



Syrian Arab Republic is a country located on the Eastern shore of the Mediterranean in South-West Asia. Syria is bordered by Turkey to the north, by Iraq to the east and southeast, by Jordan to the south, and by Lebanon and Israel to the southwest. The capital city is Damascus, which is one of the oldest cities in the Middle East (founded in the third millennium BC) and one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities.

The climate in Syria is dry and hot in summer and cold in winter. The coast and the western mountains have a Mediterranean climate characterized by two seasons, the hot and dry summer between May and October and the relatively cool and wet season between November and April. The average temperature ranges from 12 °C in January to 27 °C in August, which is, albeit slightly, the warmest month on the coast (but often also in the interior).

The various UNESCO World Heritage sites in Syria testify the incredibly rich history of the country. Even though some sites have been (partially) destroyed during the Syrian Civil War, the monuments showcase the grandeur and importance of Syria and Damascus in ancient times at a crossroads of civilizations (Greek, Roman, Persian, Byzantine, Arab, Ottoman).

Ever since Syria gained its independence in 1946, political life in the country has been extremely unstable due to tensions between the country's social, religious and political groups.

## LANGUAGE

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The vast majority of Syria's population speaks Arabic. Other languages spoken in Syria are Kurdish, which is spoken in the northeast and northwest, Armenian, spoken in Aleppo and other major cities, and Turkish, spoken in villages east of the Euphrates and along the borders with Turkey. Adyghian, a Circassian language, is also spoken by a minority of the population. Only in urban centers English and French are spoken by highly educated Syrians.

## FAITH AND RELIGION

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Historically, Syria has been a melting pot of different religious communities, faiths and sects. The majority of Syrians are Muslims.

Sunni Muslims make up 69% to 74% of Syria's population, of whom Arabic-speaking Sunni make up the majority (59-60%), followed by Kurds (10%) and Turkomans (4%) who are predominately Sunni. 13% of Syrians are Shia (particularly Alawites and Ismailis), 10% Christians (the majority are Antioch Greek Orthodox) and 3% are Druze.

It is important to take time to find out what matters to the child you are looking after, rather than assume that they will observe certain practices or hold certain values and beliefs.

## FAMILY LIFE

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As in any other country, family life across the country is shaped by different cultural, economic, social and other characteristics. The family plays an important role in the life of Syrians. It includes not only the nuclear family, but also grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. The ties with the extended family play a central role, as they function as the main system of emotional, economic and social support for its members. Moreover, whenever this is possible, many generations live together. Usually, many households are also supported by relatives who work in other countries and send money.



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The families in Syria are predominantly patriarchal and patrilineal; the father or older male has the greatest power in the household and is financially responsible for the family. His opinion is usually dominant and often only men can inherit assets or pass on the family name. Outside the cities, women apart from household chores often work in agricultural activities.

In Syria, the reputation, status and honor of a family determine all its members. Therefore, people worry about dishonoring their family and often put their family reputation before their own needs. One person's achievement or action can affect the perception of the whole family by others. The privacy of the family (especially its female members) is closely guarded to protect their honor. If a person deviates from social conventions or norms, his relatives can deny the guilt of the individual, but they can also decide to expel the individual from the family.

However, it is hard to assess the structure of the Syrian family at the moment, due to the many years of war. Remember that each family is different: do not make assumptions on the child's views or behaviors around family or societal values, but ask questions (if appropriate).

## CULTURE AND TRADITIONS

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Syria is a traditional society with a long history of civilization. A typical sample of Syria's tradition are the dances like "al-Samah", "Dabkeh" and the dance of the sword. Wedding ceremonies are occasions for the display of folk customs. Syrians have contributed to the Arabic literature for centuries, with prominent contemporary Syrian writers including Adonis, Muhammad Maghout, Haidar Haidar, Ghada al-Samman, Nizar Qabbani, and Zakariyya Tamer. In poetry, Syria has always been one of the innovative centers of Arabic poetry and has a proud tradition of oral and written poetry. It has contributed to Arabic poetry mainly in classical and traditional Arabic genres with an influence from the French Romanticism brought to the country while under the French rule.

The capital of Syria, Damascus, has long been one of the centers of cultural and artistic innovation in the Arab world, especially in the field of classical Arabic music. Syrian folk music is mainly based on the string instrument "oud", drums, with little or no vocals. In nomadic areas Bedouin music is popular based on instruments like "mizmar" and "rebab".

The most popular sports in Syria are football, basketball, swimming and tennis. Damascus hosted the fifth and the seventh Pan-Arab Games, while Latakia, the main port of Syria, hosted the tenth Mediterranean Games.



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Islamic principles prescribe that the left hand should be used for hygiene purposes. Therefore, it is considered more unclean and should not be used for functions such as waving, eating, or offering items. Always use the right hand to gesture, touch people or offer items.

## FOOD

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In Syria, wheat is the main crop and one of the staple foods. Vegetables, fruits and dairy products are also consumed. Lamb is popular, while Islam forbids the consumption of pork and other meats must be specially prepared by the method called halal, meaning the animal was slaughtered and prepared as described and accepted by Islamic law.

The meals are similar to those eaten in other Middle Eastern countries, i.e. grilled chicken or lamb with rice, chickpeas, yogurt and vegetables. The mezzeh is a lunch consisting of up to twenty or thirty small dishes. These dishes may include hummus (dish made up of mashed chickpeas and tahini), eggplant puree, grape leaves, tabbouleh (a salad of parsley, grains and vegetables), falafel and pastries.

Olives, lemon, parsley, onion and garlic are used as flavorings. The most popular fruits grown in Syria are dates, figs, plums and watermelons.

Alcohol consumption is rare, as it is forbidden by Islam, but beer and wine are available, as well as arak, a drink of anise that is popular in many Middle Eastern countries.

Preparing the right meals can help a child feel welcome in your home. It is best not to assume and instead find out what they like to eat. One thing is likely – most children from the Middle East will find it strange to be given cold food for their midday meal.



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## ADAPTATION TO A NEW ENVIRONMENT

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Arriving in a new country may involve a significant culture shock and take a great deal of adjustment. The child you are caring for will need your support as they come to terms with their new surroundings, difficult experiences, losses, and uncertain future.

For Syrian children who arrive in Europe, differences may be overwhelming: although they now are in a place of relative peace and security, the lifestyle and values of your country can be disturbing and confusing. For example, Syrian young people may experience for the first-time media and advertising featuring nudity, romance and sex.

Young people may experience conflicting emotions. Some might embrace their new culture and reject the traditions of their elders; other may strongly identify with their existing cultural/religious values as means of keeping a connection with their country and community. Neither approach is right or wrong, and both should be respected.

It is important to keep communication open with your child to understand their needs, being aware of how your own culture also underpins your behavior. It is vital to engage in dialogue with your child (if appropriate and not upsetting for the child) to help them settle into your home.

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*References used for compiling this leaflet and recommended for further research: Britannica: Syria; CIA World Fact Book: Syria; Cultural Atlas, Syrian culture; History of Syria; Lonely Planet: Syria; Reliefweb 2021, 10 years on: 10 Facts that explain Syria's conflict; UNESCO: Syrian Arab Republic; UNHCR, Syria emergency; Syrian Observatory For Human Rights; UNICEF 2018, Press release: No end in sight to seven years of war in Syria: children with disabilities at risk of exclusion; World Climate Guide: Syria; World Vision, Syrian refugee crisis: Facts, FAQs, and how to help.*



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