

# **Syria (Syrian Arab Republic) (al-Jumhuriyah al-Arabiyyah as-Suriyah)**

**Last updated: 31-01-2004**

## **Location and area**

Syria is a republic in the Middle East, bordered to the north by Turkey, to the east by Iraq, to the south by Jordan and Israel, and to the west by Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea. Syria has an area of about 185,180 km<sup>2</sup>. (Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2002).

## **Topography**

Along the Mediterranean coast, which is about 160 km long, is a narrow plain extending inland as far as 30 km. Parallel to this plain is the Jabal an Nusayriyah, a narrow range of mountains and hills, south of which, along the border of Syria and Lebanon, are the Anti-Lebanon Mountains, the site of Mount Hermon, the highest point in the country at 2,814 m. The Anti-Lebanon range tapers off into a hilly region called the Golan Heights (captured by Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War) in the south-western corner of Syria. Much of the rest of the country consists of a plateau, which is bisected in the northeast by the valley of the River Euphrates (known in Syria as Al Furat). The plateau area north of the Euphrates is called the plain of al-Jazirah. The semicircular plateau area in the southeast is in the Syrian Desert. (Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2002).

The Euphrates, the longest river in Syria, flows diagonally across the country from Turkey in the north to Iraq in the east. The second longest river, the Orontes, originates in the Lebanese portion of the Anti-Lebanon Mountains and flows north through western Syria to Turkey. (Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2002).

## **Climate**

West of the Jabal an Nusayriyah, Syria has a Mediterranean climate, characterized by hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters. Yearly rainfall ranges from about 500 to 1,000 mm in the coastal area, from about 250 to 500 mm between Aleppo and Damascus, and from 125 mm to less than 25 mm in the desert area in the southeast. Regional variations in temperature are comparatively slight. At Aleppo, in the northwest, the average August temperature is about 30° C and the average January temperature is about 4° C. At Tudmur, in the central region at the edge of the Syrian Desert, the corresponding temperatures are about 31° C and about 6° C. (Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2002).

## **Land use**

On the whole the non-arable areas are too dry to support extensive plant life, and virtually all of the arable areas have been stripped of natural cover.

Syria's agriculture depends on irrigation. The country has 4.7 million hectares of arable land and about 8.3 million hectares of permanent meadows and pastureland. Much of the tilled land is irrigated, but extensive areas lie unused due to lack of water. Irrigation is necessary even in many regions that receive substantial annual rainfall, because most of the rainfall occurs during the winter rather than during the growing season. A major irrigation project in the Euphrates valley is designed to bring an additional 0.6 million hectares under cultivation.

(Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2002).

### **Peatlands**

The occurrence of peat “on many places” has been reported from the Ghab valley in northwestern Syria through which the Orontes River (Nahr-el-Assi) flows (Van Liere 1960/1961, Niklewski & Van Zeist 1970). Lakes and swamps covered the greater part of the valley, over an area of possibly 250 km<sup>2</sup>, but the total valley was drained in 1953-1955 (Niklewski & Van Zeist 1970).

According to the interpreted World Soil Map (Van Engelen & Huting 2002) no histosols exist in Syria and 1,087 km<sup>2</sup> of gley soils.

### **Mire and peatland losses**

Most of the wetlands that did exist have been degraded or destroyed by drainage for agriculture and diversion of water supplies for irrigation purposes. (Spiers 1999)