

of great civilizations

bestowed a sense of unity upon the land. For nearly 100 years, as the early Arab Empire was rapidly expanding eastward to the borders of China and westward to the French Pyrenees, it was ruled by the Umayyad dynasty from Syria's capital Damascus. From 762 A.D. on, Syria became part of the Arab Abbasid rule with its capital in Baghdad. The Umayyads moved westward to establish in Spain the magnificent Andalucian civilization deeply rooted in the culture and heritage of Syria. Meanwhile, Syria itself was dominated by the Seljuk 'Turkmen'. The Ayyubite and then the Mamluk dynasties subsequently gained control of Syria and had to put up a ferocious fight against the European crusaders who tried in vain for almost 200 years, starting in 1095 A.D, to establish a foothold in the holy land. In 1516 A.D, the Ottoman Turks seized Syria from the Mamluks and it remained part of the Ottoman Empire until the end of the First World War.

The late 19th century and the early 20th century marked the start of the "Arab Awakening" in Syria. However, dreams of Arab independence were shattered in 1920 when, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the defeat by the French troops of the nascent Arab Kingdom of Syria, the League of Nations granted France a mandate for the Syrian region north of Palestine. This ultimately led to the dismantling of Greater Syria and independent present day Syria emerged in 1946, after a relentless war of independence.

The great obstacle to peace and regional prosperity that still lies ahead is the unresolved conflict with Israel. Israel continues to unlawfully occupy the Palestinian territories, the Syrian Golan and the Lebanese Chabaa farms and Kfarchuba hills, in obstinate defiance of international law and United Nations resolutions

Economy

With an economic growth of over 5 % per annum in the last three years, Syria has the potential to become once again one of the region's most important economic hubs and tourist destinations

In the past five years, the country has undergone an economic transformation, shifting away from central planning toward social market economy and reducing dependence on oil. The Gross Domestic Product was estimated at 60 billion dollars in 2008. In recent years, Syria has begun to focus more on exporting materials with higher added value.

The private sector in Syria now counts for 65% of the GDP. Both the budget deficit and public debt levels have been kept under close control at low level. Syria is moving fast towards becoming an investment haven with many advantages for foreign investors.



This investment friendly environment includes favourable investment laws and regulations in addition to relatively cheap labour and services. The financial sector is starting to boom with the establishment of a modern stock exchange and the opening up of many private banks and insurance companies.

Agriculture is traditionally of prime importance. It provides job opportunities for more than 20% of the population. Syria is the only Middle Eastern Arab country that has achieved food self-sufficiency.

Tourism is on the rise in Syria, with a 20% yearly increase in the number of tourists and the growing number of hotels and resorts becoming increasingly popular and of boutique hotels that are mushrooming for the select traveller.

Some of the major sectors enjoying evident success are education, tourism, textiles, garments, pharmaceuticals, food industries and construction.

Syria is looking forward to form with Turkey the corridor of gas and oil of the entire region to the Mediterranean Sea. The country plans to heavily invest in a modern infrastructure in order to position itself properly for this strategic endeavour.

Culture

The country's cultural life is witnessing a dynamic resurgence intertwining a rich cultural heritage with a vibrant and promising modern movement.



Damascus and Aleppo have been famous centres for Arab music and singing for long centuries, and they continue to be home to many famous performers and artists. The Dar Al Assad Opera House, inaugurated in 2004, represents a cultural crossroads of East and West, combining a unique fusion of classical, symphonic and Levantine music genres. Hence music is the domain that is seeing rapid development, and musicians and composers from Syria are competing internationally. In addition, three important institutions were established and have had a very positive impact on recent Syrian music life. These are the Higher Institute of Music, which teaches both Arab and European music; the National Philharmonic Orchestra and the Arab Music Orchestra.

Syrian drama series (soap operas) have become increasingly popular across the Arab world expressing the richness of Syrian social life and its historical heritage. The extent of the attractiveness of these drama series is demonstrated by the fact that the now very popular Turkish drama series are dubbed in Syrian dialect to appeal to the wider Arab audience.

Modern Syrian painters have also established their reputation as pioneers in the fine arts, while the splendour of the Syrian landscape has inspired artists from all over the world.

Syria's investment in education has made its capital, Damascus, an internationally renowned centre for Arabic studies and there has been a recent growth in the number of private colleges and faculties specialised in teaching Arabic language for foreign students.