



## Syria 2010 Crime & Safety Report

Other

Near East; Near East > Syria

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### **Overall Crime and Safety Situation**

The Syrian Arab Republic Government (SARG) is controlled by the secular-oriented Ba'ath party. Political power is largely concentrated among members of the minority Alawite sect, which is not directly associated with Islamic extremism. While the SARG tolerates the presence of terrorist organizations and is vocal in its support for groups like HAMAS and Hezbollah, the SARG maintains a strong national security apparatus designed in part to monitor and neutralize extremist threats to the regime. The SARG recognizes that terrorist operations against U.S. and/or western targets on Syrian soil run contrary to Syria's interests, especially given its efforts to expand ties to the West and develop its tourism industry. Syria works to deter and counter threats of anti-western terrorist acts in Syria.

Events in the past few years have demonstrated the danger of Syria emerging as a victim as well as a sponsor of terrorism. Attacks by Sunni extremists against SARG targets in Damascus and beyond, significant crackdowns by SARG security forces against local Islamists, and calls by senior Al-Qa'ida leaders and other Sunni extremists to expand violence into the Levant all call into question prior assumptions that terror organizations could find safe haven in return for not conducting operations within Syria.

### *Crime Threat Environment*

Syria enjoys a relatively low crime rate due to strong cultural mores against property crime and to the pervasive police and security presence throughout the country. Visitors should be aware, however, that "low crime" does not mean "crime-free." There has been an increase in the past few years in reported crimes against U.S. citizens and Westerners in Damascus

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compared to the early 2000s. Examples of these incidents include:

- In late 2007 to early 2008, there was a string of acid attacks against women wearing western-style jeans. While no Westerners reported being victims of an acid attack, U.S. citizens and Westerners fit the demographic that was targeted for wearing "un-Islamic" attire.
- Throughout 2008, several U.S. Embassy staff and employees reported being harassed, followed or assaulted. Embassy employees also reported their vehicles being broken into and electronics stolen.
- In April 2009, a female Embassy employee riding in a taxi was groped by the taxi driver. Several months later another female Embassy employee reported that a taxi driver had attempted to reach into the back seat to touch her.
- In July 2009, a Western female was sexually assaulted by three men in an apartment in Damascus. One of the men was an acquaintance who had lured her to an apartment where the assault took place.
- In August 2009, a tourist was reportedly followed and then sexually assaulted in Palmyra.
- In September 2009, an American female reported an attempted sexual assault after being followed into an empty area of the Bosra ruins south of Damascus.
- In October 2009, an elderly American tourist was knocked to the ground and bruised during a purse snatching incident in the old city. The perpetrators approached her from behind on a motorcycle and grabbed her purse as they rode by. A similar incident was reported near Embassy housing in the Kafer Souseh district a few weeks later.
- In October 2009, an expatriate woman was surprised in her home during the night by an intruder who had entered through an unlocked patio door. Several other instances of residential burglaries in expatriate neighborhoods were reported throughout the year.

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- In December 2009, a group of young Syrian males attempted to enter the vehicle of a female Embassy employee while she was sitting in it in the Abu Roumaneh area.
- In December 2009, two western female students were walking on Straight Street in the early morning hours when they were attacked by several Syrian men in a car. The men used a stun gun-like device to disable one of the females and forced the other female into their car. The men drove her to a warehouse where she was sexually assaulted. The prepositioning of a mattress in the warehouse indicates the crime was premeditated and may not have been the only instance of it occurring. They also displayed a handgun during the assault.
- In December 2009, a State Department employee visiting Damascus reported she was robbed at a luxury store near the Four Seasons hotel. She believes it occurred while her purse was open after making a purchase and she was forcefully bumped by a veiled woman. She made eye contact with the woman who bumped her, now believing the bump was a purposeful distraction that allowed the woman to take the wallet from her purse.

Furthermore, Syria is currently home to several U.S. citizen children who have been abducted by Syrian parents who do not have legal custody in the United States. Syria is a non-signatory to the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction.

### *Road Safety*

Driving in Syria can be a harrowing experience. Many drivers are aggressive and there is only sporadic enforcement of traffic laws. Rights-of-way are confusing and traffic signs, lane markers, one-way streets, and even the directions of traffic policemen are routinely ignored. Most Americans assigned to Damascus for two years or longer usually experience some sort of minor vehicle accident. Incidents involving injuries to vehicle occupants are relatively rare in the city, largely because Damascus' heavy traffic prevents cars from achieving high speeds. Accidents involving pedestrians occur frequently, however, and have resulted in serious injuries and occasional fatalities.

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Outside Damascus vehicles routinely travel at high speed, and road construction areas are poorly marked. Many vehicles in rural areas are not roadworthy, and overcrowded public transport vehicles are frequently involved in accidents involving multiple fatalities. Medical services and emergency response services in the rural areas are limited. Driving outside of Damascus at night is strongly discouraged.

Defensive driving is absolutely required throughout Syria, and seat belts should be worn at all times. Motorists should not use cell phones while driving, although it is important to keep a cell phone in the car to call for help in case of an accident or breakdown.

Occasional incidents of road rage have been reported in which cars are followed and harassed due to perceived “wrongs” on the road. If this occurs, motorists should solicit intervention from police.

If riding in a taxi which is involved in a vehicle accident, passengers should pay the fare and leave the area to avoid getting involved in any arguments over accidents.

Fog can be a major hazard during the winter months, most famously being the cause of the fatal accident of the older brother of Syrian president Bashar Al-Asad. Motorists should exercise extreme caution and activate their hazard lights when encountering fog banks.

## **Political Violence**

### *Historical Perspective*

Syria has been designated as a State Sponsor of Terrorism since 1979 yet it is the only such country that maintains full diplomatic relations with the United States. Syria continues to actively support and host terrorist organizations such as HAMAS, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PLFP-GC), and others within its borders. Syria also provides support to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Syria has remained in a state of declared war with Israel since 1948, and it continues to demand the return of the Golan Heights, occupied by Israel during the 1967 war. Any escalation of tensions between Israel and Syria into armed conflict would likely have a direct

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and immediate impact on the safety and security environment for U.S. citizens in Syria. In 2008, the SARG and Israel participated in indirect talks through Turkish intermediaries, which were brought to a halt upon the resumption of violence between Israel and Gaza militants in late 2008/early 2009. There have, however, been recent discussions of re-energizing talks with Israel with Turkey serving as an intermediary, but the return of the Golan Heights and the issue of Palestinian statehood continue to be roadblocks.

An upswing in Syria's relationship with Iran has recently been seen by a number of high-level visits between both countries. President Al-Asad continued to be a staunch defender of Iran's policies and its rights to a peaceful civilian nuclear program. An armed conflict between Iran and Israel could draw in Syria, willingly or unwillingly, and pose a direct and immediate impact on the safety and security environment for U.S. citizens in Syria.

The August 19, 2009 bombing attacks in Baghdad resulted in both Iraq and Syria withdrawing their respective ambassadors. The Iraqi government accused Syria of harboring Ba'athists involved in the bombings; Syria denies the Ba'athists have had any involvement in the violence.

The security environment in Syria is also closely tied to ongoing political developments in Lebanon. In February 2005, Rafik Hariri, the Prime Minister of Lebanon, was assassinated in Beirut. Public unrest following this attack, which was widely blamed on Syria, prompted the U.S. to recall its ambassador to Syria, and a United Nations investigation was launched. In time, Syria withdrew its forces from Lebanon in accordance with UN Security Council resolutions. The late 2009 visit of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, son of Rafik Hariri, to Damascus signaled hope of the easing of political instability between Lebanon and Syria.

Also having the potential to raise SARG defensiveness is the ongoing International Atomic Energy Commission investigation into the suspected Syrian nuclear facility bombed by Israel in 2007 and the November 2009 Israeli seizure of a ship loaded with weapons reportedly bound for a Syrian port and destined for Hezbollah.

Syrian allegations that the U.S. military carried out an incursion into eastern Syria in late 2008 sparked a series of backlashes from the Syrian government against U.S. affiliated entities in Syria that continued thorough out 2009. A large, SARG-organized demonstration featured

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thousands of civil servants and students dragooned by the regime to participate in a morning of anti-American speeches. The SARG and government-controlled media issued statements and "news" regarding the incident designed to inflame public opinion against the United States. The U.S.-affiliated Damascus Community School was ordered closed and all teachers deported within a week. The American Cultural Center and American Language Center were also closed by the SARG. In mid-2009, the American Language Center was allowed to reopen, but the American Cultural Center and Damascus Community School remain closed.

### *Regional Terrorism and Organized Crime*

On December 3, 2009, a tourist bus for Iranian pilgrims exploded at a gas station in the Sayeda al-Zaineb district of southern Damascus near a popular Shiite shrine. The official SARG explanation was the explosion was due to a tire repair mishap. However, eyewitness accounts and the damage to the bus appear to be consistent with a small explosive device. Three persons were killed due to the explosion.

On September 27, 2008 a large car bomb detonated at a Syrian government building in southern Damascus. Seventeen people were killed and many more injured. The bombing may have been "retaliation" by militants against the security services' more aggressive posture towards Sunni extremist activities, which the SARG views as a threat to the regime. The weeks following the bombing saw a large-scale crackdown during which several raids against suspected militants were reported throughout Syria.

The most recent direct attack on U.S. Government facilities in Syria was on September 12, 2006, when four terrorists armed with automatic weapons, hand grenades and crude vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED) attacked the U.S. Embassy in Damascus. The terrorists, a Syrian police officer, and at least two bystanders were killed in the ensuing 30-minute firefight between the attackers and local authorities.

### *International Terrorism or Transnational Terrorism*

Two recent high-profile assassinations further illustrate Syria's unpredictable political violence environment. In February 2008, Hezbollah operative and internationally pursued terrorist Imad Mughinyeh was killed in a car bomb blast in Damascus' Kafer Souseh neighborhood within a

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few hundred meters of several U.S. Embassy residences. He was suspected of masterminding attacks on the U.S. Marine barracks and U.S. Embassy in Beirut, along with several other incidents in the 1980s. In August 2008, senior Syrian Presidential advisor Mohamed Suleiman was shot dead outside a beach villa near the coastal city of Tartous; the culprit has not been identified. The high profile presence of the leadership of several international terror organizations in Syria leads to the possibility of future similar incidents.

### *Civil Unrest*

Protest demonstrations are rare in Syria, unless organized by the government, and are subject to tight controls when permitted. Late 2008/early 2009 SARG-organized demonstrations against an alleged U.S. military incursion in Syria, as well as protests against the U.S.-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement and the situation in Gaza were all staged well away from the U.S. Embassy, with extensive security coverage provided for diplomatic facilities. However, In February 2006 mobs protesting the publication of cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed caused significant damage to four western embassies. Large, violent demonstrations against the U.S. Embassy also occurred in 1998 and 2000.

### **Post-Specific Concerns**

Visitors to Damascus should scrupulously avoid illegal activities. Failure to comply with local laws can result in arrest and detention for indeterminate lengths of time with no legal representation. Though Syria is a signatory to the treaty on consular notification, Syrian police rarely notify the Embassy in a timely manner when they arrest U.S. citizens. Local authorities aggressively prosecute drug offenses. While alcoholic beverages can be legally bought and consumed in Syria, visitors should bear in mind that public intoxication is not well regarded by the local population and police forces.

Military areas or refugee camps should not be entered without clear official approval. Photographing military installations, bridges, harbors, or other sensitive sites or infrastructure is strictly prohibited. Failure to follow restrictions against photography may result in a visitor being detained or deported.

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Entry into Syria without the proper visas and entry inspection is not tolerated. In October 2008, two journalists who entered Syria without permission were detained for a week prior to being expelled.

There have also been several recent reports of harassment of female Americans and other Westerners in Damascus. The victims reported being the object of loud taunting and whistling from groups of young men. Women have often reported unwanted sexual advances from taxi drivers or other passengers on public transportation. Visitors are advised to ride in the rear of taxicabs, on the far side from the driver. Female visitors are advised to dress conservatively in public and to travel in pairs when visiting shopping areas or crowded commercial districts where young males tend to loiter. Shorts, for example, are not appropriate attire for men or women except in private settings with close associates.

#### *Environmental Hazards*

Syria has experienced several severe earthquakes throughout its several millennia of inhabited history. The last one occurred in the 1940s. Though not a high risk earthquake zone, visitors to Syria should have a personal "Emergency Plan" for any type of disaster.

#### *Industrial and Transportation Accidents*

Road transportation in Syria is hazardous. The U.S. Embassy advises employees not to use Syrian Airlines due to a lack of spare parts available to this airline as a result of economic sanctions in place on Syria. Statistics on industrial accidents are not available as negative publicity is shunned in the state-controlled press, though they likely occur frequently due to a lack of precautionary safeguards.

#### *Kidnappings*

Two instances of kidnapping were reported to the U.S. Embassy in 2009. The first was the incident involving the sexual assault described in the Crime Section. The other was a kidnapping for ransom of an Iraqi refugee who was scheduled to join her family already in the U.S.

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### *Drug and Narcoterrorism*

Information on drug-related violence is not available, and such violence is not thought to be widespread.

### **Police Response**

Despite a relatively high police-to-population ratio, Syrian law enforcement officers are generally ill-equipped and not trained to western standards of policing. A primary reason for the lack of effectiveness is that their role differs from western police forces in that their primary objective is preservation of the regime. Response time varies and can be lengthy depending on the type of incident; especially in rural areas, police may lack transport to crime scenes. Few police officers speak English.

Partly because many police officers subsist on less than a living wage, corruption has been reported among a number of Syrian law enforcement agencies. Officers have repeatedly demanded payment for routine services and may be susceptible to bribery.

### *How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment*

If you are arrested for any reason, make every effort to ensure that the U.S. Embassy is contacted on your behalf; the police and security services do not notify the U.S. Embassy of U.S. Citizens who are in custody in a timely manner.

### *For Victims of a Crime*

If you are the victim of a crime, in addition to reporting to local police, contact the U.S. Embassy for assistance; the local number is 3391-4444. Local Emergency dispatch numbers are:

110 Ambulance.

112 Police emergency

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113 Fire  
115 Traffic Police (if an accident)  
116 Military police (if an accident)

### **Medical Emergencies**

The quality of medical care varies widely in Syria. Physicians and facilities offered by some of Damascus' private hospitals and clinics may approach U.S. standards, but public hospitals and rural facilities generally lack the resources to provide a western standard of care.

#### *Contact Information for Local Hospitals and Clinics*

Private Hospitals and clinics (all numbers preceded by country/city codes 963-11)

Shami Hospital (ambulance service provided)	373-5090
Shifa Hospital	446-5340
Italian Hospital	332-6030
Sinan Hospital	224-1640
Razi Hospital	611-8445

Government Hospitals (all numbers preceded by country/citycodes 963-11)

Assad Hospital	212-650
Children's Hospital	224-5400
Damascus Hospital	221-3502
Mouassat Hospital	223-7800

Government Ambulance: Dial 110 (transport to the nearest government hospital)  
Syrian Red Crescent: 333-1441  
Ministry of Health: 331-1115

#### *Air Ambulance Services*

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There are no local air ambulance companies in Syria. Services would have to be brought in from another country.

### **Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim**

General precautions useful in any large city will help one from becoming a victim of crime in Damascus. Because newcomers are more susceptible to crime when they are still getting their bearings in a foreign environment, visitors should maintain a high level of personal security awareness at all times.

- The best practice to avoid being a victim is to be aware of your surroundings. Criminals typically target distracted individuals as the element of surprise works in their favor. If something doesn't seem right about a situation, leave the area.
- Property crimes like pick-pocketing and purse-snatching are more likely to take place in shopping areas and other high-traffic locations where foreign visitors congregate. Maximum awareness is recommended in these areas.
- Carry only as much cash as is required for the day's business, and store the remainder (along with passports, non-used credit cards and other valuables) in a secure location. If you must carry a large amount of cash, break it up in different pockets so you don't display it all when making a purchase.
- Keep a low profile and avoid obvious displays of wealth or nationality.
- To the extent possible, vary your travel routes and times for your morning commute and your other activities around town.
- Avoid demonstrations and large gatherings of people.
- Women considering marrying a Syrian man should be aware that once a marriage takes place, he may legally bar her from leaving the country, even though she's a foreign citizen.

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- Women should never sit in the front seat of a taxi as this is considered by the drivers as an invitation for sexual advances.
- Unless you have business in the areas, U.S. citizens should avoid refugee settlements.

### **Further Information**

#### *Embassy Contact Numbers*

- Working Hours (963 11) 3391-4444
- After Hours Emergency (963 11) 3391-3333
- Regional Security Office (963 11) 3391-3908

### **OSAC Country Council**

Syria has a small OSAC Country Council which meets regularly in Damascus. The website can be accessed at <http://damascus.osac.gov>. Anyone interested in joining the Damascus Country Council can directly contact the Regional Security Office.