

# Syria 101

A Brief Introduction to History, Language, & Culture

# Agenda

1. Sign-in, Enjoy tea and baklava
2. “People of Nowhere” Short Film
3. Presentation
  - a. Video by Vox - Syria’s War: Who is Fighting and Why
  - b. What are your challenges? Solution Brainstorm with Articles
4. Webquest: <https://www.rcsdk12.org/Page/50876>
5. Class Survey & Material Review



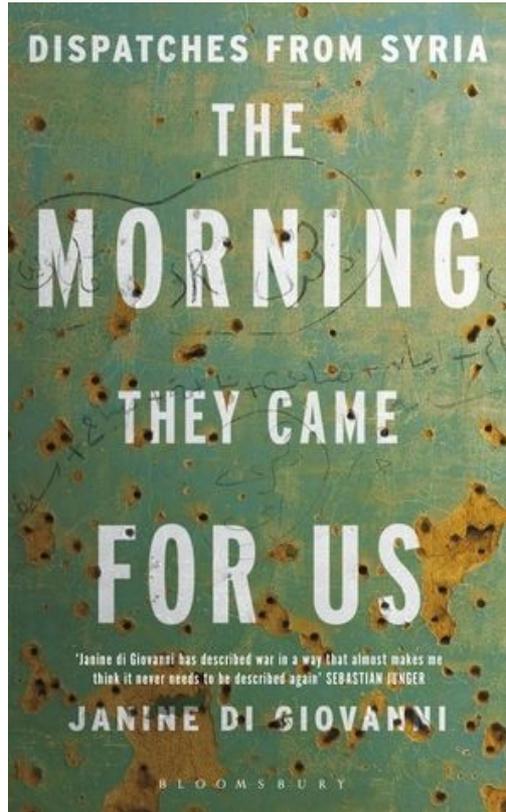
People of Nowhere  
Short Film by Lior Sperandeo  
Chosen as a Short Film Showcase by National Geographic

## To Keep In Mind...



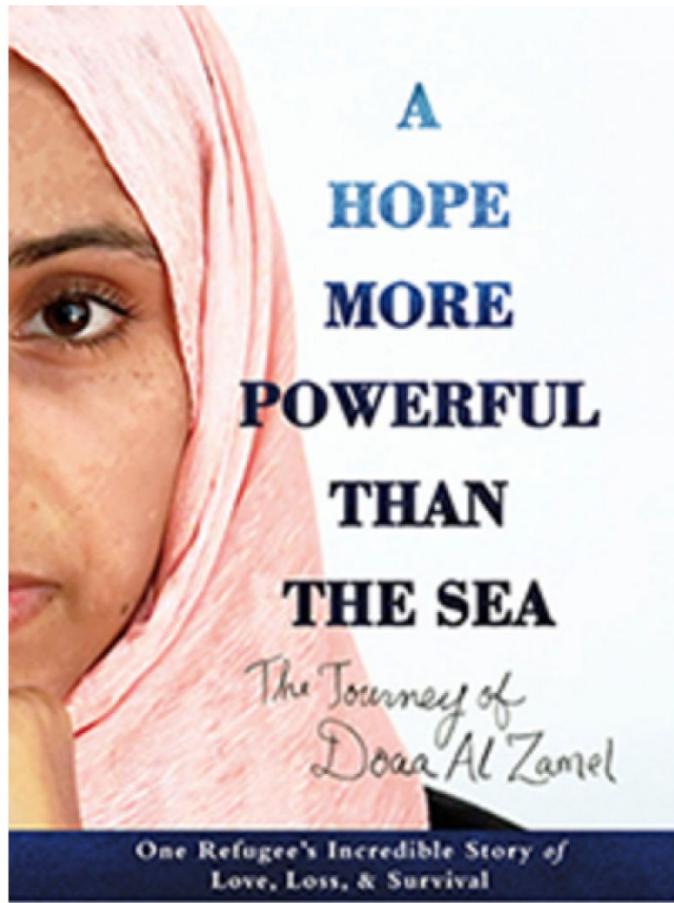
**“The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” - Chimamanda Adichie**

Source: [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story)



“It was about freedom and rights at first...then came the bullets.”

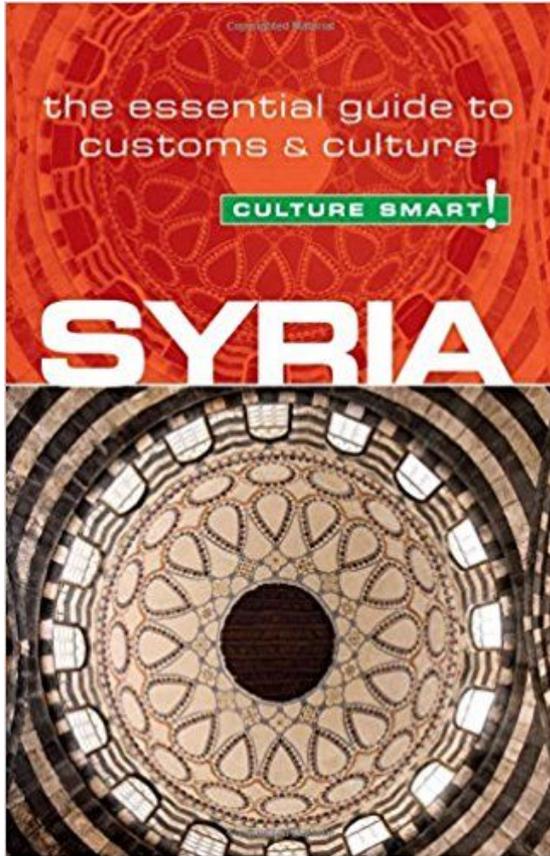
An American journalist’s take on Syrian conflict, and her experiences in Syria interviewing people of many perspectives.



MELISSA FLEMING

Memoir of Doaa Al Zamel and her struggle in leaving Syria, living in Egypt, and then trying to reach the safety of Europe.

Extremely moving, shows the trauma that many families have endured in searching for safety.



Overview of Syria's customs and traditions, cultural values, and explanation of multiple ethnic and religious groups.

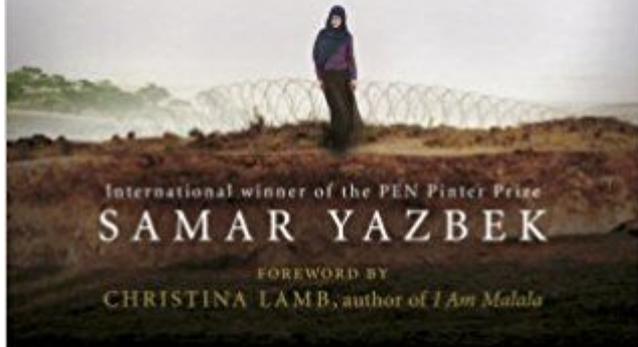
Originally penned as a travel guide, and a useful perspective of cultural immersion.

'Powerful and moving...may be one of the  
first political classics of the 21st century'

*Observer*

THE  
*Crossing*

My journey to the  
shattered heart of Syria



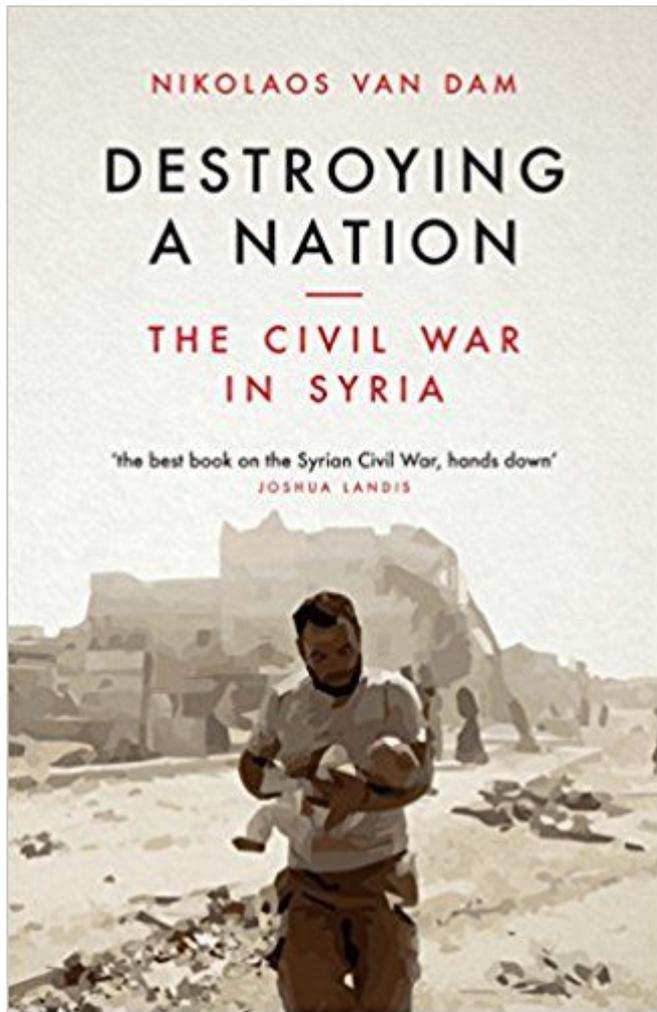
International winner of the PEN Pinter Prize

**SAMAR YAZBEK**

FOREWORD BY

CHRISTINA LAMB, author of *I Am Malala*

Written by a woman who is both journalist and Syrian, about her secret crossings into Syria to testament the horror of war and the struggle for survival of the Syrian people.



Written by former Dutch Special Envoy for Syria - Explains the recent history of Syria including how the revolution against the al-Asad regime came about from the Arab Spring, all the way to the present day. Published in 2017.

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JOHN MCHUGO

# SYRIA

A RECENT HISTORY

*'Provides a real insight into the political fragility that underpins much of what caused the current civil war ... enlightening, insightful and timely' Sunday Herald*



History of Syria from the First World War to the present (published 2014), including effects of French colonialism, sectarian tension, rule of the Assad family, and rise of ISIS.

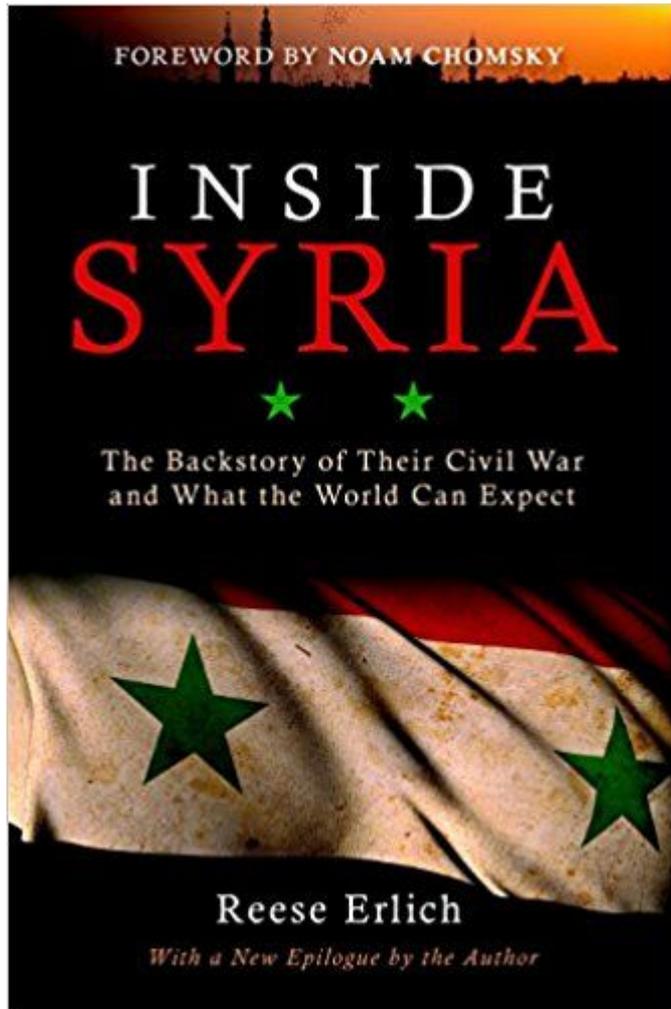
WE  
CROSSED  
A BRIDGE  
AND IT  
TREMBLED

VOICES FROM SYRIA

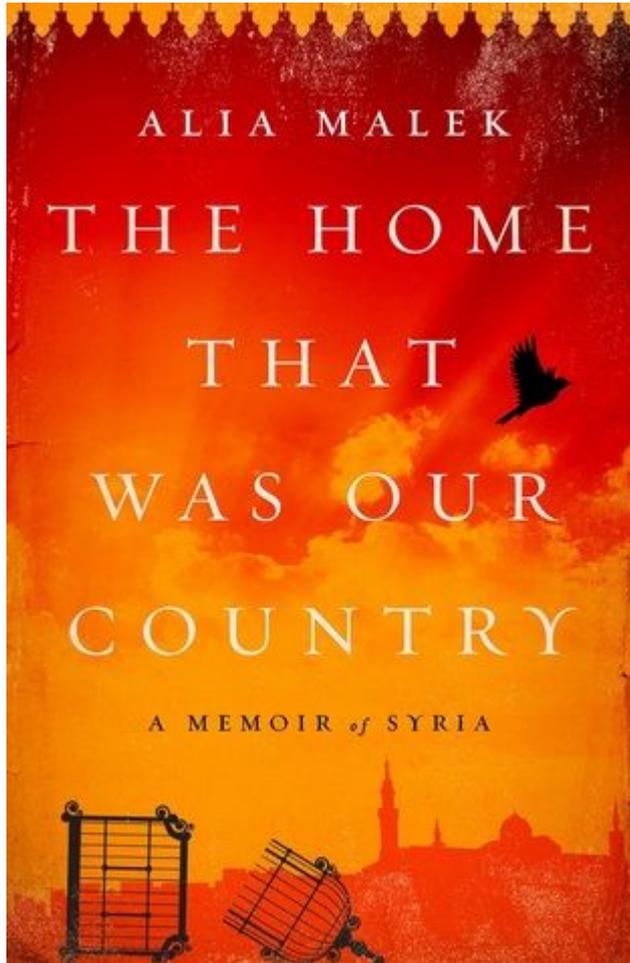
—

WENDY PEARLMAN

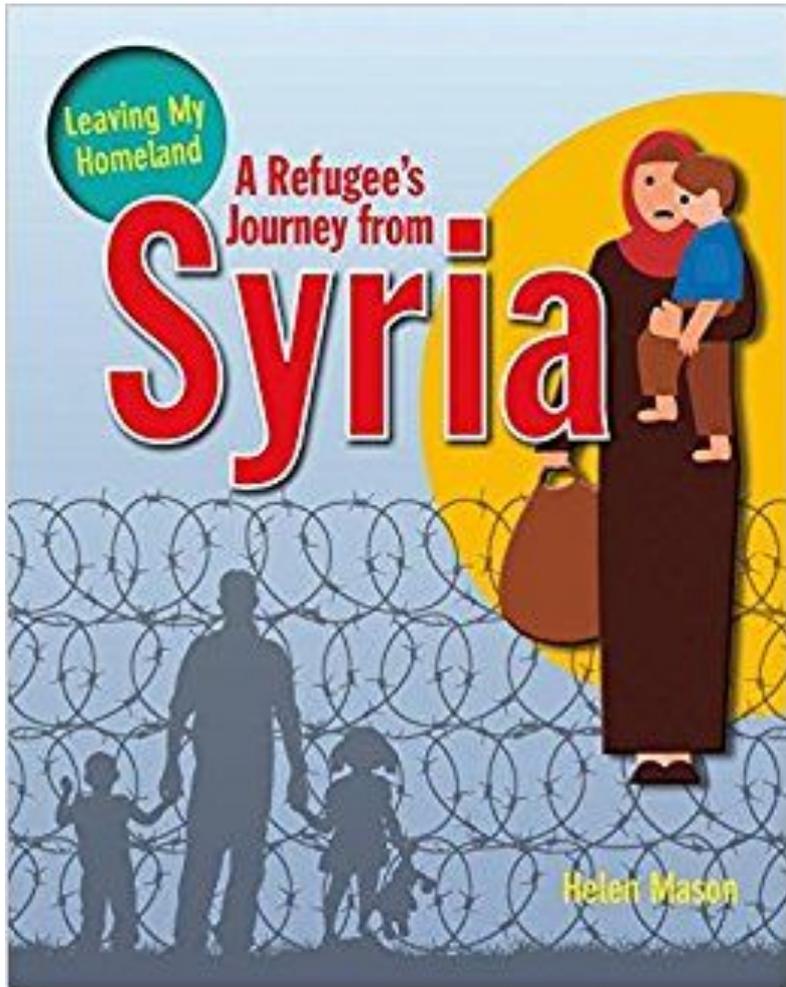
Interviews with hundreds of Syrians over the course of 4 years show a variety of perspectives and voices.



Written by a journalist, based on first hand reporting from Syria, each chapter is sectioned by topics such as “Who Supports Assad?” and “The Uprising Begins.”



A Syrian-American journalist returns to Syria and tells both the story of her own family line, as well as Syria's political history.



Children's non-fiction text that tells the story of a Syrian child refugee, along with explanations of why Syrian people leave their homeland, what it's like in refugee camps, and challenges they face.

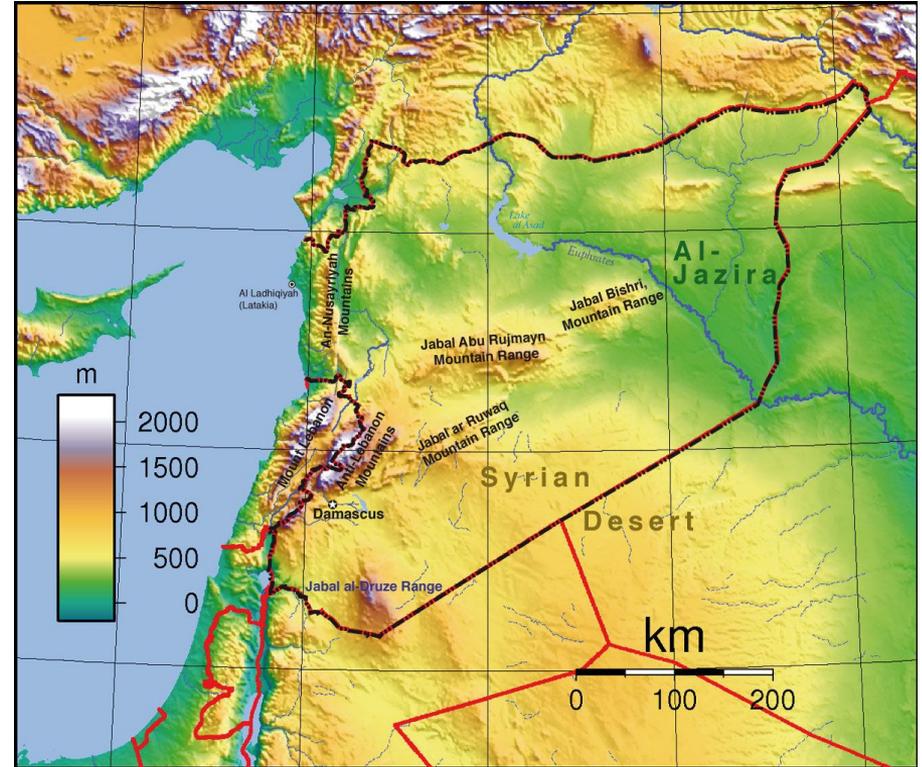
# Where is Syria?

- Asia, “Middle East”
- Capital is Damascus
- Bordered by Iraq, Jordan, Israeli occupied Golan Heights, Lebanon, Turkey, and the Mediterranean Sea
- Major Cities: Aleppo, Latakia



# Geography & Climate

- 1/5 desert...Does not fit the Western idea of “Middle East” filled with desert
- Fertile land, Euphrates river gives 80% of the country’s water supply
- Semi-arid plateau with mountains
- Coastal plain along Mediterranean
- Hot, dry summers
- Mild, rainy winters
- Inland desert is dry



# Why are Syrians refugees?

## How are they coming to the United States?

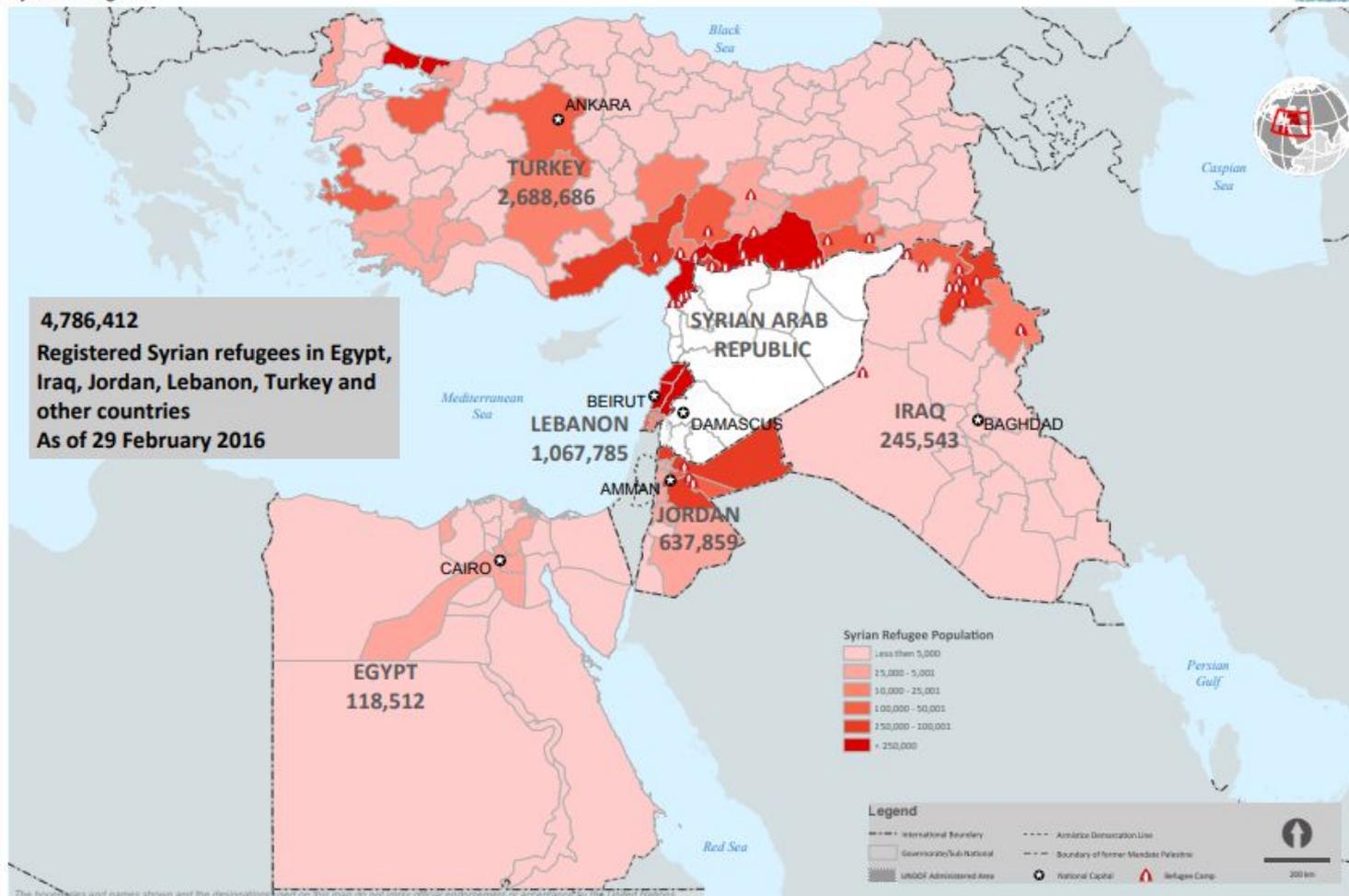
- Brutal violence of the Syrian civil war & what is being called the Cold War of the Middle East. According to the 1951 Refugee Convention (under the UN High Commissioner for Refugees) defines a refugee as “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.”
- Most Syrians fleeing their country go to the surrounding countries of Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, or Jordan (some to Egypt as well). From there they may register as a refugee with UNHCR, and will be considered for resettlement. They will have an I-94 card in the USA that identifies them as a refugee.
- UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees) screening, US Dept. of Homeland Security screening, Resettlement Agency assistance - in Rochester, Catholic Family Center - they receive assistance for 3 months.

# Syrian Refugees, By the Numbers

- Over 11 million people displaced by the conflict
- 900,000 headed to Europe to claim asylum
- In 2015, the United States really opened its doors to Syrian resettlement
- Obama administration overall refugee resettlement ceiling:
  - 2015: 70,000
  - 2016: 85,000
  - 2017: 110,000 (announced), with 12,500 estimated for Syrians
- 18,007 Syrian accepted from Oct 1, 2011- Dec 31, 2016
- 98% of Syrians settled in USA are Muslim
- 96% of Syrians settled in USA speak Arabic
- Almost 50% of Syrian refugees in USA are children
- In 2016, Rochester received 80 Syrians.

# Syria Situation Map

## Syrian Refugees



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

## Total Persons of Concern

[JSON](#)

# 5,636,302

Last updated 07 Apr 2018

Source - UNHCR, Government of Turkey

## Total Persons of Concern by Country of Asylum

[JSON](#)

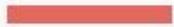
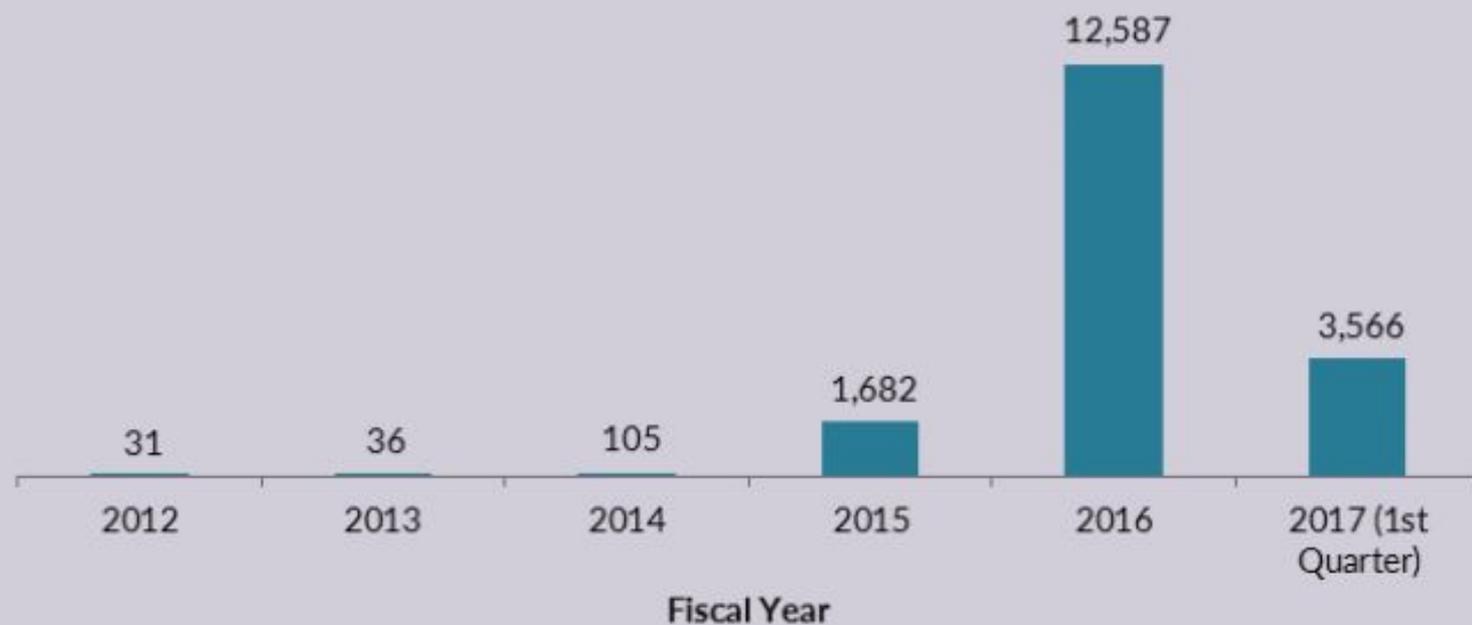
Location name	Source	Data date	Population
<a href="#">Turkey</a>	<i>Government of Turkey, UNHCR</i>	5 Apr 2018	 63.4% <b>3,572,565</b>
<a href="#">Lebanon</a>	<i>UNHCR</i>	28 Feb 2018	 17.6% <b>991,917</b>
<a href="#">Jordan</a>	<i>UNHCR</i>	7 Apr 2018	 11.7% <b>661,859</b>
<a href="#">Iraq</a>	<i>UNHCR</i>	31 Mar 2018	 4.4% <b>248,382</b>
<a href="#">Egypt</a>	<i>UNHCR</i>	28 Feb 2018	 2.3% <b>128,034</b>
<a href="#">Other (North Africa)</a>	<i>UNHCR</i>	15 Mar 2018	 0.6% <b>33,545</b>

Figure 1. Syrian Refugees Resettled in the United States, FY 2012-17\*



\* 2017 data are for the first quarter of 2017.

Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of data from the U.S. Department of State Refugee Processing Center, "Admissions & Arrivals" database, accessed January 4, 2017, available online.



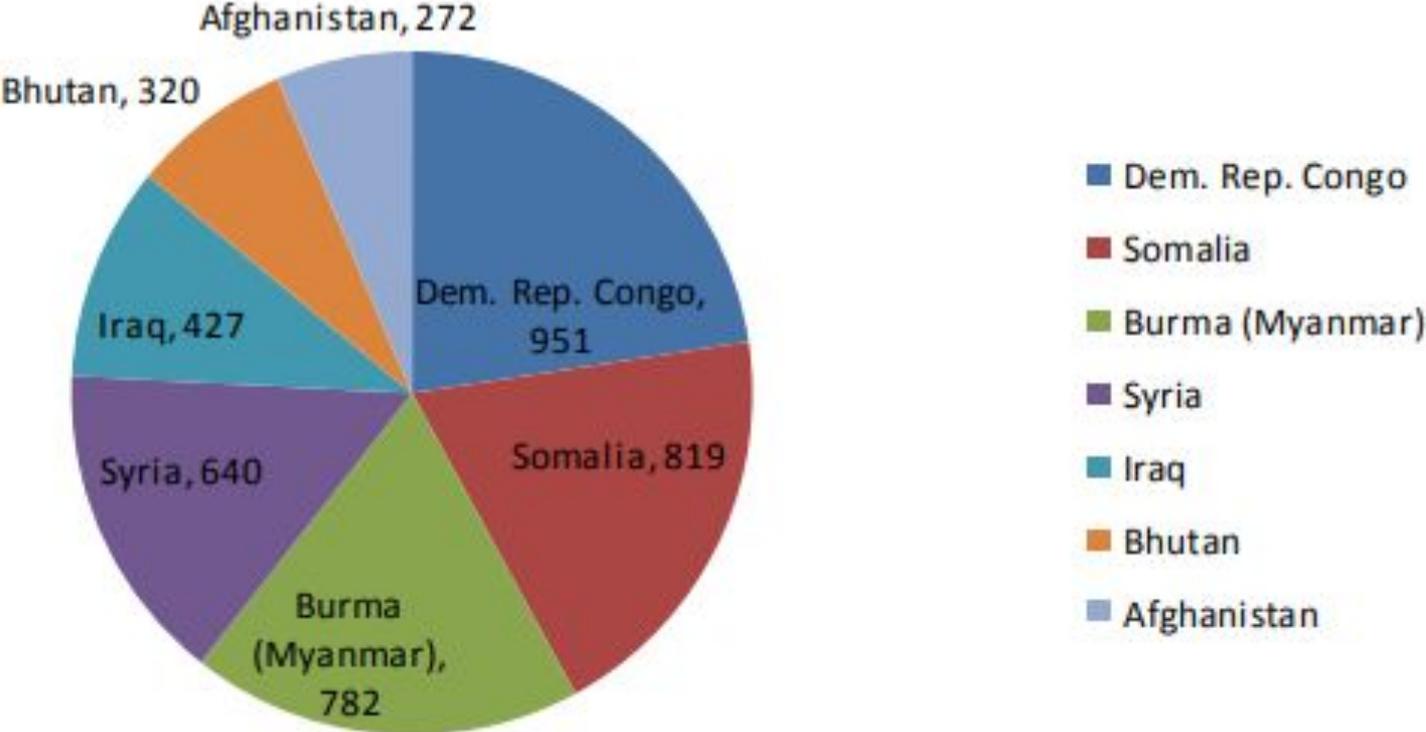
**Table 2. Age Distribution of Syrian Refugees Resettled Since October 2011 and Comparison with Overall Immigrant and Native-Born Populations**

<b>Age Group</b>	<b>All Immigrants (%)</b>	<b>Syrian Refugees (%)</b>	<b>Native Born (%)</b>
Under 14	3	47	20
14 to 20	5	12	10
21 to 30	14	12	14
31 to 40	21	16	12
41 to 50	21	8	12
51 to 64	21	3	18
65 and Over	15	1	15

*Notes:* The data for the overall immigrant and native-born populations are from 2015, while the refugee data span the period from October 1, 2011 through December 31, 2016.

*Source:* MPI tabulations of data from the U.S. Department of State Refugee Processing Center and the U.S. Census Bureau 2015 American Community Survey (ACS).

New York State Refugee Resettlement by Country of Origin, FY 2016 (Source: BRIA)



# Ancient History

- Damascus (capital) is the oldest continually inhabited urban community in the world
- Syria's geographic location has always put it in a place of significance, with Mediterranean trading ports and Asian trade routes
- Syria was a place of ancient civilization, as a part of Mesopotamia
- 333 BCE Alexander the Great conquered Syria and it fell under dynastic rule
- 64 BCE Rome annexed Syria, and it was connected to empire trade routes
- As the Roman empire transitioned to the Byzantine empire (and strength of this empire weakened) it became possible for foreign powers to invade
- Changed hands to Arabs in 640CE

# Islamic Era - Ottoman Rule

- 640-1516 Islamic Era, controlled by Arabs
- Arabs changed their capital from Mecca to Damascus. The Arab empire expanded but did not attempt to convert Syrians to Islam - Christians at the time actually welcomed the Arab empire, who established Islamic (sharia) law for Muslims, while Christians and Jews paid a tax to the empire and were allowed to follow their own customary laws and traditions
- Syria stayed under the Islamic caliphate for centuries, with invasions and counter-invasions along the way (the Crusades, Mongol invasion)
- From 1516-1918 Syria was under Ottoman Rule

# French Control/Independence/Assad Regime

- 1918-1920 Short time of independence
- 1920-1946 League of Nations mandated French control of Syria, as Britain and France created spheres of influence. Only after WWII did Syria gain independence from France, who ruled with very strict control.
- In 1946 a parliamentary government was established, but soon after a series of coups and a surge of pan-Arab nationalism caused Syria to be absorbed temporarily by Egypt, under President Nasser.
- In early 1960s the socialist Ba'ath party staged a takeover, and during their 7 year control, a state of emergency was declared that still stands today.
- Hafez Al- Assad took power in 1970 and he and his son have held the Assad regime ever since. The Assads are Alawites (Shi'a) which is a minority group that accounts for about 12% of the population. The regime has held control for decades through strict control, secret police, and restrictions on people's freedom.

# Current Conflict

- Arab Spring in 2011 led to protests in Syria against the Assad regime
- Rebel groups against Assad combined to form the Free Syrian Army
- Original conflict for more democratic rights and freedom of speech has now devolved into a multi-party conflict for power/control, including ISIS, Kurds, multiple rebel factions, and the Assad regime.
- Iran and Saudi Arabia are fighting a Middle Eastern “Cold War” for area control and influence that is being enacted in smaller, less stable countries, such as Syria.

# Vox: Syria's War - Who is fighting and why

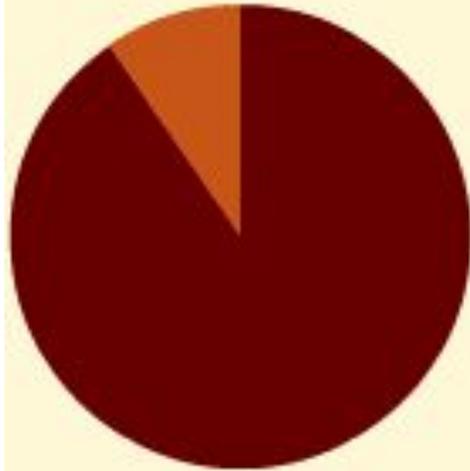


# Population Demographics: Ethnicity & Religion

- Most Syrians are ethnically Arabs, but some minority groups are Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians, Syrian Turkmen, Alawites, and Druze
- -Religion is as varied as the people
- mainly Sunni Muslims (~74%)
- -MANY minorities
  - Shi'a Muslims (and within this sect, Ismailis)
  - Yazidis
  - 13 different Christian sects (~10% of the population)
  - 16 Muslim minority sects
  - Jewish

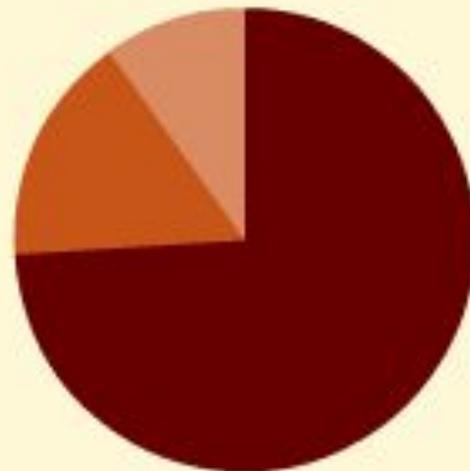
## Syria

Ethnic Groups



■ Arab: 90%  
■ Kurdish, Armenian, other: 10%

Religions



■ Sunni Muslim: 74%  
■ Alawite, Druze, other: 16%  
■ Christian: 10%

Jewish: <1%

# Cultural Values

- Syrians have a history of pluralism with tolerance and respect towards others. Even with all of today's sectarian divides, this still holds true for the majority of Syrians, who resent how war has divided the people of their country.
- Hospitality/Honor - Syrians are known for this and it is part of upholding one's honor to act hospitably towards visitors. An individual family member's reputation reflects on the entire family's name, so individual actions are considered with shame & honor of the family in mind.
- Loyalty to family, friends, and social groups - a very people-focused lifestyle.
- Privacy - Personal details and information are usually not shared outside the family and if information is shared with you, be very careful about sharing it as doing so may break trust.

# Gender & Familial Roles

- Family is the most important aspect in Syrians' lives - this includes not just the nuclear family but the extended family as well. Connections through family network are a huge part of advancement in society - getting a job, favors, etc.
- Highly patriarchal society - boys are seen to hold more value than girls because girls leave the home when they marry. Oldest male holds authority.
- Women often do not work, but stay at home and take care of the house and children. This role has shifted with refugee status of families and the break-up of some families due to war - often after fleeing to a neighboring country, all family members must work to survive and make ends meet.
- Children are seen as blessings from God - the more you have, the more blessed you are - many Syrians tend to have large families.
- Marriage is usually arranged. Although society is slowly changing, dowry system still exists.

# Education in Syria, Pre-Arab Spring

- Before the Arab Spring, 93% of children were enrolled in school.
- All public education is free and funded by the government (51% GDP allocated)
- 12 year system of basic and secondary education. Basic education, grades 1-9 are compulsory and has two cycles - four years and five years.
- Pre-primary education for ages 3-5
- Secondary education is three years, either general education or technical/vocational studies.
- Academic year runs from September to June (two semesters) and classes are in Arabic.
- Teachers at all levels required to have a four year degree.

# Interrupted Education

- MANY children out of school after fleeing Syria
- Level of education in refugee camps and ability of host countries to absorb the influx of refugees is low/struggling. Even students that are enrolled in school in Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan may be receiving a lower level or inconsistent education.
- Many children are dropping out and working at a young age to survive/support their families
- Even in Syria, many children didn't attend school because of violence and safety issues. Schooling was interrupted while fleeing war.
- Students with Interrupted/Inconsistent Formal Education (SIFE) are behind in schooling and have gaps in knowledge and skills

# Refugee Education: By the Numbers

Jordan (April 7, 2018)

661,859 Total Refugees

131,666 in camps

More than 50% of Syrian refugees are children. 40% are not in school.

101,268 out of school

Turkey (April 5, 2018)

3,572,565 Total Refugees

448,215 in camps

392,375 out of school



# Traditional Dress

- Varies by individual
- Many dress in Western clothes, but conservatively
- Women may wear abaya or hijab
- Long dress for males is called kaftan. Men may also wear a traditional headdress/scarf.



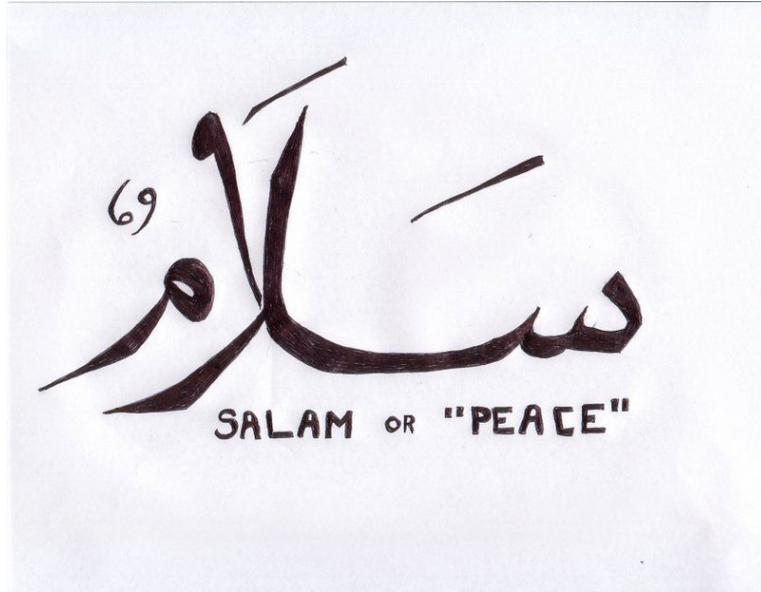
# Syrian Food

- Middle Eastern/Mediterranean
- Tea and coffee
- Hummus, baba ganoush
- Pita bread
- Stuffed grape leaves
- Beans and lentils
- Rice
- Yogurt
- Falafel
- Meat - not many vegetarians
- Muslims - No alcohol, no pork



# Language

- The official language is Arabic (MSA - Modern Standard Arabic).
- Spoken language used for Arabic speakers is often referred to as Levantine Arabic, used in countries along the Eastern Mediterranean coast. There are two dialects, Southern and Northern - Syrians speak Northern.



# Cultural Norms

- LOTS of time with family and friends. Extremely communal culture, even individual activities are done surrounded by other people.
- Some gender separation (i.e., may not shake hands with opposite sex)
- women often greet with a kiss on the cheek with handshake
- eye contact is important
- right hand used for eating and using left hand to eat is considered dirty
- parents may seem laid back or uninvolved as far as education but this does not indicate lack of caring

# Arabic Phrases

Hello. [Marhaban](#)

How are you? [Kaifa halik?](#) [Kaifa haliki?](#)

I'm good. [Ana bakhair.](#)

Thank you. [Shookraan.](#)

Goodbye. [Masalam!](#)

My name is... [Ana ismail...](#)

School [madraser](#)

# Arabic Phrases

0	sefr	6	seta	Sunday	al-ahad
1	wahed	7	saba'a	Monday	al-ithnin
2	athnaan	8	thamania	Tuesday	al-thulatha
3	thelatha	9	tisa'a	Wednesday	al-arbua
4	arba'a	10	asher	Thursday	al-khamis
5	hamza			Friday	al-jama'a
				Saturday	al-sabat