



Assessment of Syrian Diaspora Voting in the 2021 Presidential Election

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Executive Summary

Executive Summary

The legal framework and operational practices used for Syrian diaspora voting do not meet international standards for elections, as established in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other human rights treaties to which the Syrian Arab Republic has committed. The electoral process for the 2021 presidential election excluded the vast majority of Syrians living outside of Syria, particularly those displaced by conflict, and lacked all basic electoral transparency and accountability measures. There was a comprehensive lack of data on the most basic matters, such as where polling took place, how many people registered and voted and what the diaspora results were. Some diaspora members were subject to pressure and intimidation, compromising their ability to make free choices. Thus, the diaspora voting process lacks fundamental credibility. In effect, this process may be seen as an exercise of political narrative with elements of theatre rather than the necessary safeguards for a fair election.

The Syrian Arab Republic (hereafter, Syria) has an estimated diaspora of nearly 8.5 million. This is nearly 30 percent of Syria's internationally estimated total population, and the vast majority of the diaspora are refugees. A recent United Nations (UN) survey found that 9 percent of Syrian refugee respondents reported being unable to meet their basic needs in host countries. Security Council Resolution 2254 establishes a Syrian-led, UN-facilitated political process to end the conflict in Syria. This includes holding free and fair elections, pursuant to a new Constitution, to be administered under the supervision of the UN and with all Syrians, including members of the diaspora, eligible to participate. As the 2021 presidential election was organized outside this framework, large parts of the diaspora and the international community denounced it.

The current legal framework for Syrian diaspora participation in elections is highly problematic and does not provide for an inclusive or credible process. It contains multiple exclusionary provisions, with a selective impact on those who fled the regime, and it lacks fundamental electoral safeguards. It applies only to presidential elections, depriving a large proportion of the Syrian electorate of any say regarding their parliamentary representation. Members of the diaspora cannot run as presidential candidates even if they have returned to Syria. Many members of the diaspora are also prevented from voting because they cannot meet the requirement of a valid passport with an exit stamp, which is unlikely for those who have fled their home country. There are no transparency or accountability measures, and no provisions for independent scrutiny or access to remedy. Another exclusionary factor is the fact that diaspora voting is administered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates (MFAE) and generally takes place at embassies, as many Syrian refugees are unwilling to engage with Syrian authorities due to well-founded fear of persecution or reprisal.

Syrian diplomatic premises are not suitable for voting. They lack sufficient space and may be distant from the residences of many members of the diaspora. As voting is administered by embassy staffing premises used and perceived as surveillance hubs, members of the diaspora are required to engage with the Syrian regime if they want to vote. Surveys of Syrian diaspora members find very high levels of mistrust of Syrian embassies and MFAE officials in conducting electoral operations. In keeping with host countries' right to object to embassy voting, Turkey and Germany, which together host more than half of the Syrian diaspora, refused to allow voting for the 2021 presidential election under the current regime framework.

Syria's election administration fundamentally lacks independence from the presidential executive and had no accountability to stake holders regarding its administration of the elections. No public information was provided on procedures for diaspora voting, and even the most basic electoral data was not provided. There was no sign that staff had received training in electoral processes. Voter education was inadequate and inconsistent. It is therefore unsurprising that survey data found that respondents obtained electoral information primarily from other sources: social media, friends and the international media.

Voter registration appears to have been conducted extremely loosely, with the cut-off date overlooked and registration continuing on Election Day. Therefore, it did not serve as a safeguard to ensure only eligible voters took part, that each person was recorded only once and that the total number of potential voters was known in advance of Election Day. The lack of provisions for diaspora data protection or privacy engendered risks of rumors about and actual reprisals. International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) interviewees and survey respondents often mentioned these problems.

In effect, the purpose of the campaign period seemed to be to promote turnout rather than supporting electoral choice. Some noted that this process was an attempt to gain electoral legitimacy through the number of voters and geographical reach rather than through genuine competition. Commentary from official and regime-aligned sources in Syria typically emphasized patriotic duty. In contrast, the voices of opposition groups were rather muted. There were credible reports of enticements, threats of reprisals and intimidation, with most seemingly aimed at increasing voter turnout. These included telling Syrian expatriates they would not receive needed documents from embassies or be able to return to Syria in the future, threatening confiscation of property in Syria and making threats against family members if people did not vote.

Pressure on the diaspora was most pronounced in Lebanon, where human rights organizations reported that three people were abducted and beaten, and superintendents of refugee camps were threatened. Other reports refer to retaliation, including threatened arrest, deportation and dismissal from work; electoral participation was described as "forced voting." Conversely, there were also rumors of reprisals for voting, with some political leaders demanding that Syrians' refugee or equivalent status be withdrawn if they voted, seemingly demonstrating their support for the Syrian regime.

Diaspora polling was held on May 20, 2021, six days before in-country voting. The polling lacked the most basic safeguards and controls necessary for an electoral process. No final information was provided on polling locations. Embassy and state media announcements listed 47 locations (including at honorary consulates) in 44 countries, but no official statement was made. This loose arrangement of polling sites is incompatible with credible electoral management.

There was no evidence that typical and standard polling safeguards were in place during diaspora voting. Legislative requirements were not always adhered to; for example, photographs and reports showed that a pre-compiled list of voters was not used consistently, and passports were not always used or checked to confirm voters' identity and eligibility. Indelible ink was not used to mark the fingers of those who had voted, ballot boxes were not standardized and were typically inadequately sealed, ballot papers were loose and non-standardized, and voters' privacy was not always protected. There was no sign of candidate agents serving as a check on the process, and Syrian law does not provide for independent observation. Given such inadequate procedures, it is unsurprising that there were signs of voting by ineligible people and multiple ballots cast by some individuals.

Polling on Election Day may be characterized as a demonstration of loyalty, with many showing support for President Assad. It is not possible to assess the extent to which voters took part in the election freely—or

if they did so pragmatically, for self-protection. In Lebanon, difficult dynamics were seen among some host-country entities, intensified because the voting process was run by the Syrian regime. Some Lebanese groups attempted to deter voting, arguing that those who vote, and therefore support the Syrian regime, should not be eligible for refugee status. Some scuffles damaged vehicles and reportedly resulted in injuries to at least seven people.

The results process was about narratives rather than numbers; in fact, no data on diaspora participation or results was disseminated. On Election Day, sizable numbers of voters were shown in the media in Lebanon, Egypt, Iran and Iraq, but not elsewhere. While embassy representatives reported consistently large turnouts, they provided no credible information on actual numbers; indeed, the few numbers announced were highly improbable given the time needed to process voters. Various commentators noted that, even if the improbable numbers announced by a few Syrian ambassadors were accurate, they would represent only a very small portion of the adult Syrian diaspora population. For example, the reported turnout of 50,000 voters in Beirut represents only 8 percent of the estimated adult Syrian population residing in Lebanon. This profound lack of data transparency facilitates electoral corruption, undermines credibility in the process and denies citizens their right to information.

The government of Syria appeared to promote the increase in voting locations from 32 countries in 2014 as a normalization of the country's position internationally and a sign of President Assad's popularity. The Syrian government described countries that did not support the process as attacking Syrians' rights and obstructing democracy.

IFES' recommendations include establishing an agreed-upon international framework for diaspora participation under UN supervision and administering elections under the auspices of an independent body. Other recommendations include fundamentally reforming the legal framework, reaching political consensus on key issues, involving diaspora groups, conducting early planning and research and concluding agreements with host countries in good time. IFES also recommends obtaining maximum protection assurances, extending permitted documentation, using neutral venues, and increasing voting locations and hours. Further, IFES recommends the provision of extensive public information and voter education and ensuring appropriate scrutiny of the process.

These recommendations and this report complement IFES' main report on the Syrian presidential election of 2021. The profound legal, operational and security issues identified must be addressed before any electoral processes can be considered credible.

Methodology

Methodology

This remote assessment of Syrian diaspora voting for the 2021 presidential election used a mixed methodology to try to gather comprehensive information and to hear a variety of views on the process. Analysis used a framework of Syria's international commitments from human rights and other treaties, and their authoritative interpretation. Recommendations were formulated based on consultations in countries where diaspora voting took place. IFES has sought to work in accordance with the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation established under the auspices of the United Nations in 2005.¹

IFES conducted a desk review of available material before and during the election process and recruited four researchers, each of whom worked in a different country (three in the region and one in Europe). Stakeholder views were gathered through 17 interviews in four countries, a short survey of 114 respondents in the same countries and two meetings (before and after polling) with members of the Syrian diaspora in a wider range of countries. All were conducted in Arabic, and interviews and survey responses were confidential.

The survey data should be considered indicative rather than representative, given the limitations of the sample. While the research focused on trying to get a varied sample, this was not always possible.² A number of people in the four countries did not want to take part due to concerns that Syrian authorities would have access to the findings, or they saw the election as lacking credibility and wanted no part of it. In total, 86.7 percent of the 114 survey respondents considered that they were forced to leave Syria. Of respondents, 63 were men and 51 were women.

Another limitation of the assessment was the lack of direct observation. However, state media displayed videos and photographs of diaspora voting around the world. The credibility of reports received was questioned based on direct observation or direct review of reports by a researcher, the availability of supporting documentation and triangulation of information from other sources.

Syria is a state party to the human rights treaties that include provisions relevant to elections. It acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1969.³ It is also a state party to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. Syria signed (in 2003) but has not ratified the Convention Against Corruption (CAC), which contains positive provisions regarding transparency in electoral and political processes. The CAC is still referred to, given its near universal recognition; and signing states are obligated to refrain from violating the object and purpose of the treaty.⁴

The word "diaspora" is used in this assessment, given that it is used in UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015) in the context of future Syrian elections. The word can have varied definitions but is generally used to broadly describe people who have an identifiable connection with a homeland but live outside of it.⁵

The Political and Population Context

The Political and Population Context

Current circumstances

The conflict in Syria has caused extensive displacement over the last 10 years. While the exact size of the diaspora is unknown (see Annex 1), it is estimated that approximately 8.2 million Syrians reside out of the country, with the vast majority registered refugees. This is approximately 30 percent of the officially estimated Syrian population.⁶ Syria is the country of origin of more refugees than any other in the world, with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reporting 6.6 million (followed by Venezuela with 3.7 million and Afghanistan with 2.7 million).⁷

The political inclusion of the diaspora is recognized as fundamental to the political process to bring the conflict in Syria to a conclusion. Electoral participation by the diaspora is established in Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015), which lays out a Syrian-led, UN-facilitated political process to end the conflict.⁸ This will culminate in “free and fair elections...administered under supervision of the United Nations... with all Syrians, including members of the diaspora, eligible to participate.”⁹

Some members of the diaspora denounced the election, seeing it as fundamentally lacking political legitimacy and not contributing to ending the crisis.¹⁰ Widespread mistrust is evident. For example, a 2020 survey by the Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity of 500 displaced Syrians (26 percent internally) found that only 7.5 percent of respondents were interested in voting in elections under current conditions.¹¹ In total, 85.5 percent of respondents expressed distrust the elections would be fair.

The US Secretary of State, the UK Foreign Secretary and the foreign ministers of France, Germany and Italy stated in advance of Syria’s Election Day that the process would not be free and fair.¹² They denounced the decision of the Bashar al-Assad regime to organize an election outside the framework of Resolution 2254 and supported condemnation of the process. They also called for elections to be convened under UN supervision with all Syrians, including refugees and members of the diaspora, able to participate in a safe and neutral environment. Similarly, Turkey stated that the elections were incompatible with the road map put forward in Resolution 2254 and “far from being free and fair.”¹³ This opinion was reinforced by post-election statements, including by the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who stated that the election “met none of the criteria of a genuinely democratic vote.”¹⁴

Voting by the Syrian diaspora was introduced for the 2014 presidential election in 32 embassies, with 200,000 registered to vote.¹⁵ While official data on the number of members of the diaspora who turned out to vote is lacking, there is a consistent understanding that the number was low compared to the size

Diaspora data

Syrian authorities have not provided any information on the size or location of Syrian diaspora populations. Such data is fundamental for making appropriate provisions for electoral participation in countries outside of Syria. It also enables electoral contenders to know the size of potential electorates and to plan accordingly, and for the wider public to know the parameters of the electoral process.

Diaspora data is available from various international agencies. The Population Division of the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) reported 8,457,214 Syrian international migrants in mid-2020 (using an inclusive approach, with “migrant” referring to any person residing outside his or her country of origin).¹⁷ This is a dramatic increase from 1,057,322 in 2010, highlighting the impact of the conflict on displacement and correlating with the number of registered refugees recorded by UNHCR. The data shows that nearly two-thirds of all migrants from Syria were living in the neighboring countries of Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey (Annex 1 presents a breakdown by country).

Data on refugees and forced displacement is available from the UNHCR. Global data from the UNHCR Refugee Data app shows a global total of 6,730,317 Syrians having experienced forced displacement to other countries as of mid-2020.¹⁸ The more recent UNHCR Operational Portal for the Syrian Refugee Situation gives data as of April 21, 2021 for Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and North Africa showing a 5,600,039, with the number of registered Syrian refugees leveling off partway through 2018. Adults over the age of 18 are reported to comprise 55.1 percent of this population.¹⁹

Consistently fewer women are recorded in diaspora statistics. The UN DESA data shows that 42.4 percent of migrants are female. Similarly, UNHCR global refugee data reports that 46 percent of those recorded are female, with the gender differential most pronounced in the adult population aged 18 to 59 years. The UNHCR Operational Portal shows 21.4 percent of the total population are female adults and 33.7 percent are male adults. IFES interviewees primarily attributed the smaller number of females to more males leaving Syria to avoid military service. Approximately 5 percent (280,444) of refugees are recorded as living in camps, with that number leveling off since the second half of 2019.

The UNHCR Sixth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees’ Perceptions and Intentions on Return found that 70 percent hope to return to Syria someday, even if not in the near term, with a further 10 percent undecided. Of those who hoped to return, 89 percent intend to return to their area of origin. A small number expressed the intention to return in the next 12 months (2.4 percent, with 7.6 percent undecided). Safety and security, livelihood opportunities, housing and basic services were stated as key factors influencing the decision to return. Around 20 percent indicated that they have no hope of returning to Syria. In total, 90 percent of respondents reported that they cannot meet their basic needs in host countries.

Legal Framework

Legal framework

Syrian law does not provide for the effective exercise of diaspora voting rights.²⁰ The legal framework includes provisions that *de facto* obstruct participation, with a selective impact on those who fled the regime. Furthermore, the law fails to include even minimal safeguards for elections and lacks provisions for transparency, scrutiny and remedy. Diaspora voting was introduced for the 2014 presidential elections, but without consultation with diaspora groups.

There are no provisions for members of the diaspora to run as presidential candidates,²¹ and in effect they are totally excluded given that one eligibility requirement is to have been resident in Syria for not less than 10 years.²² This constitutional exclusion of anyone who has lived abroad in the previous 10 years is an unreasonable restriction on citizens' rights. Similarly, barring people who hold another nationality is problematic in the Syrian context of mass forced migration.²³ There are no provisions for members of the diaspora to vote in legislative elections.

The General Elections Law of 2014 specifies that “[e]ach Syrian citizen not residing on the Syrian land has the right to practice his right in electing the President of the Republic in the Syrian embassies.”²⁴ This specification limits electoral participation to countries that have no Syrian embassy or other consular missions. Further, the use of embassies for voting is restrictive in being geographically centralized, raises safety and protection issues, and requires engagement with the regime (see below). This in effect precludes large segments of the diaspora from taking part and contradicts ICCPR Article 25 requirements for citizens to “have the right and *opportunity*” to vote (emphasis added).

The Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates (MFAE) is charged with administering diaspora voting.²⁵ However, there are no requirements for the electoral administration to be impartial or neutral. IFES diaspora research found that there is extensive concern about a branch of the executive, representing the regime, being responsible for the process. The absence of legislative provisions for independent structural or operational electoral administration is inconsistent with authoritative interpretation of the ICCPR, which states that “an independent electoral authority should be established to supervise the electoral process and to ensure that it is conducted fairly, impartially and in accordance with established laws which are compatible with the Covenant.”²⁶

The election law is overly restrictive for expatriates in requiring that “the voter will vote using his normal valid Syrian passport, which bears the Syrian border exit stamp.”²⁷ This in effect precludes large parts of the diaspora from participating, given that those who have fled typically lack valid passports with exit stamps. In effect this is a selective exclusion, to the benefit of the regime. Voters are denied the right to take part in the election, and universal suffrage is compromised.²⁸ The IFES survey found that nearly 80 percent of respondents thought it would be better for members of the diaspora to be able to vote without needing a valid passport with an exit stamp.

Syrian law stipulates that candidate agents may be present at voting but makes no provision for independent observers or media access for reporting on diaspora voting.²⁹ This is not consistent with authoritative ICCPR interpretation, which states that “[t]here should be independent scrutiny of the voting and counting process.”³⁰

Another fundamental gap is the lack of transparency requirements of any sort, increasing the risk of malpractice and corruption. Information of public interest is not provided, contrary to ICCPR authoritative interpretation and CAC provisions.³¹ There are also no provisions for data protection or privacy rights for diaspora voters.³² This is particularly problematic given the regime's reach, vulnerable diaspora living conditions, widespread mistrust and lack of access to recourse and remedy.

The legislation includes no mechanism for complaints or dispute resolution for the diaspora; therefore, the right to remedy is not provided for.³³ Furthermore, the election legislation limits complaints to candidates, making no provision for voters. Moreover, complaints are lodged with the same body that has supervisory responsibilities for the elections,³⁴ and thus there is no mechanism for independent adjudication.³⁵

Embassy and Host Country Arrangements

Embassy and Host Country Arrangements

Use of embassies for voting

Limiting diaspora voting to embassies is problematic for multiple reasons. First, it is simply not feasible for a sizable number of people to vote at one embassy office on one day. In some countries, it is not possible for a limited number of embassy staff to administer voting (Annex 1 provides diaspora data by country). Furthermore, the political nature of the activity can amplify security risks for such a concentration of people.

A second problem is that diaspora populations are typically dispersed to different parts of a host country, rather than concentrated in a capital city. People who live away from the capital may need to travel long distances that can require not only time and expense but also the security risks. While some travel is inevitable for in-person diaspora voting, the burden can be eased if voting takes place at more than one location in a host country. Centralized provision of services would likely have been problematic had voting taken place in Turkey and Germany, given that only an estimated 10 percent of the diaspora population in Turkey live in Istanbul and a smaller proportion in Berlin.

A third problem is that embassy staff manage polling, and they—and the building itself—are part of the Syrian government. This de facto excludes voters who do not want to engage with the regime. The problem is particularly acute given that the vast majority of the diaspora has fled that regime.

In 2020, the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC) documented the actions of several embassies monitoring and intimidating Syrian expatriates, noting that this research offered “a glimpse into a larger network of embassy-sponsored surveillance.”³⁶ In a 2020 Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity survey, 82.1 percent of respondents reported that they did not feel safe voting at Syrian embassies.³⁷

IFES interviewees and survey respondents reiterated this concern, commenting, for example, that “Syrian embassies are security branches of the regime,” and “there is an absolute distrust of the regime’s apparatus.” IFES research found that “Syrian embassies should not be an intelligence center for the rule of the incumbent president, and if they remain so it is better not to participate in the elections.” Less than 5 percent of IFES survey respondents believed Syrian authorities should administer future voting, and only 10 percent thought voting should occur in embassies.

Finally, limiting diaspora voting to embassies excludes expatriates in countries where Syria has no diplomatic representation. Countries without embassies but with a sizable Syrian diaspora include Canada, Denmark and Saudi Arabia (see Annexes 1 and 2). While the MFAE website does not provide updated information, the latest update identified diplomatic representation in 46 countries and with three international organizations (see Annex 2).³⁸ There remains an unknown number of consulates and honorary consulates, at least some of which had diaspora voting.

Host country agreements

Host countries have the discretion to object to an embassy's request to conduct in-person voting, in accordance with the widely ratified Vienna Convention on Consular Relations. The Vienna Convention describes the functions, rights and duties of consular offices of "sending States" and "receiving States."³⁹ The list of recognized consular functions does not refer to in-person voting. Provisions for "any other functions" are subject to objection by the receiving state.⁴⁰ Diplomatic protocol expects an embassy to inform a host country of its intention to conduct voting in its embassy. The host country is not required to provide explicit approval but may raise an objection.

Turkey and Germany (which together host more than half of the Syrian diaspora) withheld agreement for voting for the 2021 Syrian presidential election under the current regime framework. Canada made clear that it had not received a request for voting in the country—and would not have approved one.⁴¹ Reasons for refusing permission include political objections to a process that lacks credibility and does not align with Security Council Resolution 2254, potential security and protection issues, and the possibility of backlash from the public in the host country. Some other host countries may have had concerns but did not object to avoid undermining reciprocal consular relations and the possibility of future diaspora voting under different arrangements.

The Syrian diplomatic representations in Turkey and Germany announced voter registration (and voting in Germany) on embassy websites. However, polling did not take place⁴² (nor did voting occur in either country for the 2014 presidential election).

The Syrian MFAE took a broad approach to use of the word "embassy" in its legislation and included consulates (such as in Geneva, Switzerland) and some honorary consulates, even in the absence of an embassy in a country (for example, Australia).⁴³ The MFAE website does not provide an updated list of Syrian diplomatic representations that would allow cross-checking of where diaspora voting took place (or did not).

Some inconsistencies were seen in Syrian diaspora voting at embassies in other countries. For example, the embassies in Malaysia and Belarus and honorary consulates in Australia invited Syrians in neighboring countries to vote there. The rationale for this practice is unclear.⁴⁴

Several embassies reported liaising with host country authorities over COVID-19 provisions. For example, the embassy in Venezuela stated that it made arrangements with concerned authorities, and the embassy in Malaysia referred to a letter it sent to police departments to request access and movement.⁴⁵

Election Administration

Election Administration

Electoral management

Syria's legal framework does not provide for an independent electoral administration that can work impartially. Instead, there is a somewhat nominal division of responsibilities between different bodies—none of which operates independently from the government. The absence of structural independence is compounded by the lack of legislative provisions for transparency and other measures to promote functional independence.⁴⁶ A further issue is that a branch of the government, the MFAE, is responsible for diaspora voting, again with insufficient checks in place.

Institutional roles are unclear, as are actions that weaken accountability in the process. The legislation distinguishes between electoral “supervision” and “administration” without elaborating sufficiently on either. In principle, the Constitution mandates the Supreme Constitutional Court to supervise key aspects of the presidential election, such as candidacy requirements and eligibility, results processing and the adjudication of disputes. The Supreme Judicial Elections Committee (SJEC) is responsible for administering presidential elections. Appointments to both of these judicial bodies are made, either directly or indirectly, by the government. The Ministry of Interior also has responsibility for certain election elements, including the voter list, electoral documentation, security, IT support, election materials and logistics.

No legal specifications describe how the MFAE should administer diaspora voting.⁴⁷ There is no reference to embassies' responsibilities vis-à-vis the SJEC and Ministry of Interior. There are no requirements for transparency and only very limited provisions for scrutiny (and only by agents). This framework risks unsatisfactory and unclear arrangements, inconsistencies between countries, corrupt practices and a resulting lack of voter confidence.

In practice, there is no public elaboration of procedures for diaspora voting, which should cover basic matters such as how the list of voters is compiled, how polling should be organized, what public information should be disseminated, and how ballots should be counted and results reported. IFES found no evidence of training for embassy staff serving as election officials.

Public information and voter education

Information obtained from embassies for this assessment was inadequate and inconsistent. No information was provided regarding basics such as the number and locations of polling stations, number of registered voters, the turnout or results data. Voter education was lacking, and information on requirements for registering and voting seemed both inconsistent and incomplete. It is unsurprising, therefore, that online comments from voters express confusion over matters such as the difference between registering and voting, and related procedures. Similarly, IFES survey data found that people did not know basic information such as the date of diaspora voting. Some embassy announcements were extremely brief, saying only, for example, “Thursday at embassy headquarters from 7:00 in the morning,”⁴⁸ without specifying the closing time or the legal requirements to bring a valid passport with an exit stamp or to be included on the list of registered voters.

There was no evidence of efforts to provide information for under-represented groups, such as women or persons with disabilities. Interviewees noted the need for such information to counter traditional practices of leaving women staying at home and male family members making decisions on electoral participation and who to vote for. Only 14.4 percent of respondents to the 2020 Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity survey stated that the election information they received came primarily from official sources; 70.1 percent said they did not trust the information they had about the election process and conditions.⁴⁹ In the absence of trusted official information, the survey also found that people sought information primarily from social media, then friends and then media outlets. Similarly, the IFES survey found that respondents’ main source of information on the election came in descending order, from social media, friends, the media and then from embassies.

Registration Of Voters

Registration of Voters

The framework for the registration of voters

Although adherence to the legal framework for the registration of voters appeared lacking for the 2021 presidential election, its limitations must be considered in light of future elections and necessary reforms. In effect, the general eligibility requirements for Syrians to vote exclude displaced populations. First, the law bars those convicted of a “felony or dishonorable misdemeanor or that which shakes public trust.”⁵⁰ This restriction could particularly impact those who have been forcibly displaced, given that their actual or perceived anti-regime activities or views may have resulted in convictions. A recent paper published by the London School of Economics and Political Science notes that the limitation “applies to many refugees who have been sentenced in absentia, whether according to the provisions of the penal code or the law combating terrorism, which are provisions that will strip them of the ability to exercise their right to vote.”⁵¹

The evident inadequacies and misuse of the Syrian legal system leave citizens at risk of undue convictions and consequent disenfranchisement.⁵² Furthermore, the Minister of Justice has wide discretion to define what qualifies as a felony or dishonorable misdemeanor, creating the potential for arbitrary and selective application. Such a sweeping preclusion, lacking proportional measures, is inconsistent with authoritative ICCPR interpretation. The ICCPR Human Rights Committee has stated that the grounds for deprivation of the right to vote should be “objective and reasonable” and that “[i]f conviction for an offense is a basis for suspending the right to vote, the period of such suspension should be proportionate to the offense and the sentence.”⁵³

Second, while limiting voting to citizens is reasonable, in the Syrian diaspora context there is a risk of selective exclusion.⁵⁴ The Minister of Interior has wide discretion both to grant and to propose deprivation of citizenship. The legal grounds for the latter include acquiring foreign nationality without the minister’s permission; being employed by a foreign state and not complying with a minister’s order to leave that employment; and settling in a non-Arab country for more than three years and failing to respond to a notification to return to Syria.⁵⁵

In principle, members of the Syrian diaspora face the hurdle of being listed on the General Electoral Register (GER) in Syria and then needing to be included on an embassy’s list of registered voters.⁵⁶ The legislative provisions for compilation of the GER do not actually describe the process. In practice, Syria had no voter registration process or voter list prior to the 2021 presidential elections. Any voter data and statistics cited in officials’ statements originated from the civil registry and do not indicate that a large number of Syrians were abroad or in areas outside government control. Further, the civil registry is not considered an accurate record of citizens’ information—particularly for those who left Syria before they were old enough to be included on the civil register or GER. An additional problem is that people fleeing a country often lose their personal identification. The IFES survey found that nearly one in four respondents did not have or know their national identity number. In general, such documentation problems can particularly impact women.

Embassy registration of voters in practice

In practice, the compilation of embassy lists of registered voters was an obscure process, lacking any information that would enable public accountability. No data was published regarding the number of voters registered at each embassy or the number of applications, including rejected applications. There seemed to be no way for voters to confirm their inclusion on the GER or an embassy list.

Interviewees described public information from embassies on diaspora registration for voting as ineffective. Most embassies announced online that registration was open (a few did not, despite having an online presence).⁵⁷ However, they did not communicate basic legal requirements, such as a valid passport, or legal exclusions related to citizenship, felonies and disqualifying intellectual or psychosocial disabilities.⁵⁸ Overall, online engagement was low—a few dozen comments and shares were typical in many places, although engagement in Lebanon was higher.⁵⁹

Information was inconsistent about how to add one's name to the list of registered voters, including what data was required. Google forms were used in 12 cases⁶⁰; members of the diaspora in Iraq were asked to send data via WhatsApp, those in Turkey were instructed to submit copies of passports by email, and a paper form was used in Venezuela.⁶¹ Respondents sometimes mentioned in-person embassy visits.

Despite a standard 14-day window for applications (from April 12 to 25), the deadline appeared flexible and then ultimately nominal and was not actually applied. The embassy to the United Arab Emirates noted that “registration will be extended to the end of the day on 26/04/2021 and the names that will be received after this date will be placed on separate lists for consideration.”⁶² The representation in Switzerland re-opened voter registration on May 18,⁶³ and the embassy in Beirut re-opened registration on May 25 for those wanting to vote in Syria the following day.⁶⁴

Respondents shared a common expectation that voting could take place without advance registration with an embassy. No information was provided to indicate that prepared lists existed; images from diaspora voting show lists being compiled on the spot as people arrived to vote. The *de facto* lack of a requirement to register in advance resulted in ongoing efforts by some to maximize participation rates.

Ambassadors reported large numbers of people being registered on embassy lists but provided no data to support their claims. For example, the ambassador to Iran referred to “60 percent of the total number of the Syrian community in Iran,” and “95 percent” was mentioned for India.⁶⁵

There are no legal provisions for diaspora data protection or privacy. This is inconsistent with ICCPR requirements and authoritative interpretation, which require states to take effective measures to ensure that personal information is not used for purposes incompatible with the Covenant.⁶⁶

The lack of such protections creates the risk of reprisals or rumors of reprisals—a particular concern for forcibly displaced populations who might fear unwanted state reach. Interviewees commented on the lack of information about how data would be stored or shared. One noted, “Syrian citizens are afraid to provide proof that they are living in a European country. They believe they may be held accountable for leaving [Syria] in an informal manner. Consequences could include property being seized or the cancellation of citizenship.”

In the context of the regime administering elections, lack of data protection and inadequate information, rumors circulated, but corrections were not forthcoming. For example, interviewees reported hearing of incentives for voting, pardons for criminal convictions, crimes offered in exchange for voting applications; some also reported intimidation and threats (see below).

The Campaign Period

The Campaign Period

The campaign framework

Syrian law makes no specific campaign provisions for the diaspora. The official start of campaigning coincided with in-country campaigning on May 16, as announced by the Supreme Constitutional Court. This timeframe allowed for only four days of diaspora campaigning, before voting on May 20 (six days earlier than in-country voting). The election law specifies that campaigning should cease 24 hours before Election Day, without clarifying whether, for the presidential election, the halt in campaigning begins 24 hours before May 20 (Election Day for the diaspora) or May 26.⁶⁷ Either way, a campaign period of three or four days leaves voters insufficient time to learn about candidates and their positions and deliberate over their choices.

Syrian legislation prohibits the funding of campaigns with money or in-kind contributions from foreign sources.⁶⁸ If stringently applied, this could be problematic in out-of-country settings, such as a host country providing security for an event, a dual national making a donation or a service provider offering a discount (for example, for printing). This could deprive citizens of the opportunity for political expression and compromise voters' ability to make informed choices.

The campaign period in practice

The campaign period was focused on getting people to vote rather than enabling voters to choose between contenders. Some stakeholders noted that, given the *de facto* lack of competition, the regime was attempting to gain legitimacy through turnout, both in the number of voters and their geographical spread, by demonstrating alleged support across the diaspora.

Messages and commentary from Syria typically emphasized patriotic duty, calling on Syrians to participate in the election. Campaign activities included some organized by business leaders in Lebanon and Egypt; however, questions arose about possible support from the regime.⁶⁹ In Lebanon, regular demonstrations showed support for President Assad.⁷⁰

Interviewees and representatives of human rights groups provided credible reports of enticements, intimidation and reprisals. Most of these were efforts to increase voter turnout, but some were intended to deter participation. Such pressure on diaspora voters, and the absence of actions to overcome these problems, is inconsistent with authoritative ICCPR interpretation, which states, “[p]ersons entitled to vote must be free to vote for any candidate for election...and free to support or to oppose government, without undue influence or coercion of any kind which may distort or inhibit the free expression of the elector’s will. Voters should be able to form opinions independently, free of violence or threat of violence, compulsion, inducement or manipulative interference of any kind.”⁷¹

Interviewees consistently described a range of coercive actions, although these were not verified. IFES heard of prospective voters being asked to hand over their identification documents, provide personal information for use in voting or add their names to the voting register if they wanted to receive documents from the embassy. Some were told they would lose their property in Syria if they did not participate, thereby giving up the opportunity to return and putting family members in Syria at risk of repercussions. IFES interviewees in several countries also noted concerns about surveillance, fearing that failure to show public support for the regime would be reported. Respondents also mentioned pressure from parties and intelligence networks, including Shabiha (state-sponsored Syrian militias). Enticements included promises of return to Syria without harassment and access to papers and documents.

In Lebanon, the Access Center for Human Rights observed members of the diaspora being pressured because of their lack of legal residency, experiencing difficult living conditions and fearing arrest and deportation to Syria.⁷² Reports mentioned three people who were abducted and beaten by Lebanese political parties for refusing to give the names of associates.. Also observed were direct threats against refugee camp superintendents and people engaged in civil society activities in an effort to force them to pressure refugees to add their names to registration lists and to vote. Additional reports described meetings in camps in Lebanon, ostensibly related to aid during Ramadan but actually about voting; intimidation, including attendees being photographed. In the camps, people demanded data from refugees and threatened their security and housing.⁷³ Retaliation included arrest, deportation, evacuation from the area, dismissal from work, kidnapping, beating and the burning of camps.⁷⁴

A media interviewee in Lebanon noted, “many Syrians living in settlements throughout the country would likely vote out of fear that, if they did not, they would be reported to the regime or pro-regime parties by intelligence agents and would face retaliation—even if no one had explicitly threatened them.”⁷⁵ Haya Atassi, of the Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity, stated that Syrians “should be protected not only from forced return, but also from forced voting.”

UNHCR in Lebanon received reports from Syrian refugees that they were being pressured to vote.⁷⁶ On Election Day, the UNHCR spokesperson clarified that voting is a personal choice and does not affect UNHCR humanitarian assistance and protection.⁷⁷

Some rumors circulated about reprisals aimed at deterring voting. Most notable was questioning the refugee or equivalent status of voters whose actions would be seen as supporting the Assad regime. This was most apparent on the eve of the election, when Samir Geagea of the Lebanese Forces party called for the Lebanese interior and defense ministries to obtain lists of those who voted and tell them to leave Lebanon, as the Syrian regime would no longer be a threat to them.⁷⁸

Polling

Polling

Polling lacked the most basic safeguards and controls necessary for an electoral process. Members of the diaspora continued to be subject to pressure and intimidation, primarily to force them to take part in the election. This is not consistent with ICCPR requirements for a “genuine” election or for states that are party to the convention to “guarantee the free expression of the will of the electors.”⁷⁹

Despite these fundamental flaws, the SJEC chairperson stressed that electoral process at embassies proceeded smoothly, transparently and with integrity.⁸⁰ He noted that Syrians abroad proved their sense of belonging and commitment to their motherland.

Procedures

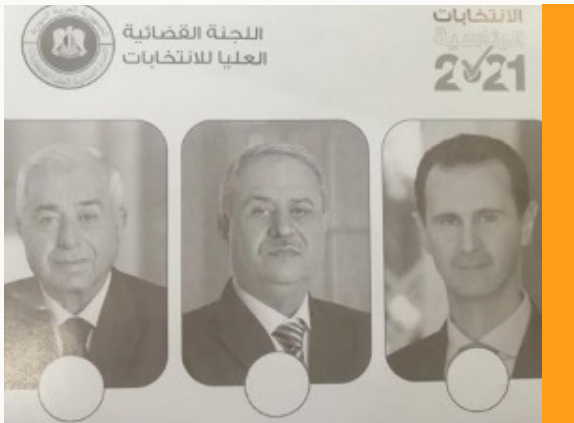
None of the safeguards that are standard parts of polling were in place during diaspora voting. Legislative requirements were not always adhered to. Photographs displayed by the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), the official news agency, and other media outlets, depict a variety of problems including the following:⁸²

- >> It is not clear that pre-compiled lists of voters were used, contrary to legislative requirements. Instead, names were added to a list as people voted. Without a pre-compiled list, there is risk of people voting several times, as their names are not crossed off a list.
- >> Indelible ink was not used to mark the fingers of people who voted to prevent repeat voting. This poses a particular risk in countries with a large diaspora population (e.g., Lebanon) and exacerbates the lack of safeguards in the process.
- >> Passports were not consistently required or checked for validity and an exit stamp, contrary to legislative requirements. At times, personal identification cards were used, but it is not clear these were always checked.
- >> Ballot boxes were not standardized and used different types of seals, with varying effectiveness. In some cases, it could have been possible to lift lids and add ballots to the box (ballot box stuffing).
- >> Ballot papers were loose, lacked security features and were not standardized. Therefore, easy reproduction was possible, enabling ballot box stuffing. Some ballot papers were in color while others were in black and white, and the three candidates were listed in different orders on ballot papers in use at the same time in the same location. Typically, only candidates’ photos were shown, with no names or other information. This was particularly problematic given that voters had no more than four days to become familiar with the candidates, disadvantaging those who were less well-known.
- >> Secrecy was not always protected; at times, people voted openly in front of others.
- >> Candidate agents were not present to provide a basic check on the polling process.

Given such inadequate procedures, it is unsurprising that observers noted voting by ineligible people and individuals casting multiple ballots.⁸³ In Lebanon, people under the age of 18 were seen voting. COVID-19 social distancing measures were not typically practiced. Instead, crowds gathered for voting.

Ahead of Election Day, some embassies and media outlets emphasized social distancing and the wearing of masks, but neither was consistently practiced.⁸⁴

Syrian law specifies that diaspora voting should occur from “7:00 a.m. until 7:00 p.m. according to the local time of the city where the embassy is located.”⁸⁵ In accordance with the law, a blanket extension was announced for all countries for five hours, until midnight, to enable more people to vote.⁸⁶ However, the announcement was made at 3:20p.m. Syria local time; due to time zone differences, some polling locations had already closed (for example, in Australia). In some countries (for example, France), the extension was not possible because of COVID-19 restrictions.



Both photos: Variation in ballot papers (*with candidates in pictured in different order*).

Right: An ID card being used rather than a passport (*note that the voter marked the ballot paper with blood*).

Photo Credit: SANA



Left: A list of voters being compiled on the spot; loose ballot papers (*with candidates depicted in a different order in different piles*).

Right: An unsealed ballot box; the voter's finger is not marked with indelible ink.

Election day environment and dynamics

Polling on election day was characterized as a demonstration of loyalty for many, showing support for President Assad. The process across embassies was regularly described by people interviewed and commentators as being about showing allegiance to the regime. This narrative of devotion dominated, with relatively little contradiction from opposition groups pointing out the profound problems with the electoral process. Only on Election Day did some opposition social media campaigning occur; demonstrations were held in Austria, France, Germany, Sweden and Turkey. As noted in the main IFES report on the 2021 Syrian presidential elections, the vast majority of engagement with campaigning on Facebook originated within Syria (approximately 89 percent of posts), further indicating a low level of engagement in the election among the wider Syrian diaspora.

As with registration, various dynamics compromised voters' decisions about whether to participate in the election. For example, interviewees cited fear that non-participation would result in the withholding of papers from the embassy, cancellation of property ownership in Syria, loss of permission to re-enter Syria and withdrawal citizenship given the Minister of Interior's broad powers.⁸⁷ Interviewees and respondents noted that polling in an environment of harassment and crowding may be particularly detrimental to women's participation. An environment of intimidation, threats and conflict affects voters' ability to make free choices about whether to participate in an election or whom to vote for.⁸⁸

Intimidation was most pronounced in Lebanon, where there were extensive reports of pressure and coercion to participate in the election. Interviewees saw the vulnerable living and legal conditions of the Syrian diaspora in Lebanon and the extent of the Syrian regime's influence in the country as contributors to the highly pressured and intimidating environment for potential voters.⁸⁹ In such circumstances, it is not possible to assess the extent to which voters would have taken part in the election freely—or pragmatically, for self-protection. Crowds of voters were visible, with buses bringing people from different parts of the country. Two queues stretched for approximately three kilometers. The voters in line were predominantly male.

In addition to pressures from Syrian compatriots, dynamics with host country nationals were challenging, intensified because the voting process was run by the regime. Lebanon has the largest Syrian diaspora relative to the host country population, and its relationship with Syria is highly controversial and divisive. In this context, diaspora voting became extremely sensitive; portions of the host country population seemingly supported the Syrian authorities, while others used the voting process to protest against broader Syrian influence in Lebanon. For example, Hezbollah and other Lebanese groups reportedly pressured Syrians to vote, including through fear of arrest and deportation, eviction or threats to camps.

Some Lebanese political groups also attempted to deter Syrians in Lebanon from voting, arguing that those who voted (and therefore supported the regime), should not be eligible for refugee status. Their efforts included altercations that damaged vehicles and reportedly injured at least seven people.⁹⁰ Elsewhere, streets were reported blocked in Tripoli, Libya, to prevent voters from returning to their homes. Such threats and attacks were much publicized in Syrian media, contributing to a questioning by some about the extent to which the Syrian regime or affiliates may have supported them to further a narrative of Syrians being obstructed en masse in their efforts to vote.



SANA photograph of Syrian refugees queuing to vote in Beirut.

Results and the Post-election Period

Results and the Post-election Period

Turnout and results information

Syrian media showed sizable numbers of voters on Election Day in Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Lebanon, but not elsewhere. Embassy representatives reported large turnouts. However, no information was provided on the actual numbers of people who voted. The Syrian embassy in Lebanon announced an approximate turnout that was different from what was seen in the vicinity and did not reflect the time required to process voters. By 10:00 a.m. on Election Day, three hours after polling began, the embassy reported to the media that 10,000 people had voted⁹¹ The approximate figure of 3,300 votes per hour is far above the embassy's operational capacity, given the 20 ballot boxes and 17 polling booths reportedly prepared for Election Day. By 8:00 p.m., the embassy reported 50,000 voters, or 3,846 per hour. Even if this number were accurate, it is less than 8 percent of the adult Syrian diaspora population in Lebanon, according to the UN DESA figure, 1,162,305.⁹²

After counting was scheduled to occur at embassies, the MFAE submitted the diaspora vote counts to the Minister of Justice and the SJEC.⁹³ It is not clear why the Minister of Justice was involved, given that this role is not included in the legally prescribed election architecture.⁹⁴

Lacking functioning voter lists, there was nothing to stop members of the Syrian diaspora from returning to Syria for in-country voting place six days after diaspora voting and thus voting twice. Polling stations were reportedly set up in Jdaidet Yabous on the border between Syria and Lebanon and at an airport. Images on Syrian media showed crowds arriving from Lebanon to cast their votes, reportedly after thugs prevented them from voting in Beirut May 20. Syria's Minister of Foreign Affairs announced that these voters had been denied the right to vote in Beirut due to assaults and attacks.⁹⁵

Election results were announced the day after voting in Syria. Bashar al-Assad won 95.1 percent of the votes.⁹⁶ No information on composite results was provided, so it was not possible to see how the total numbers were calculated. There was no data on diaspora voting, including the number of diaspora voters, where they voted or the number of votes cast for each candidate. Such a profound lack of transparency facilitates electoral corruption and denies citizens their right to information.⁹⁷ The absence of reporting on any numbers reflects a deterioration even from the 2014 presidential election, when approximately 200,000 diaspora voters were reported. The overall figures show an implausibly high turnout, as discussed in IFES' main report on the 2021 presidential elections.

Interlocutors consistently expressed the opinion that the COVID-19 pandemic had no impact on the decision to participate in the election. The IFES survey found that the most common main reason by far for non-participation was that the election was not "real." Other reasons included (in descending order of frequency): lack of trust

in the embassy, fear of persecution by Syrian authorities and concern that participation would endanger one's position in the host country. A few respondents mentioned the lack of the right documents, logistical problems and not knowing about the election. In contrast, the main reasons given for voting (in order of frequency) were to protect property in Syria, avoid negative reports or problems, express a political choice and maintain positive interactions with the embassy.

Host country issues

While the exact number of voters is unclear, voting was reported to take place in 44 countries, a substantial increase from 32 countries in 2014. Voting reportedly occurred for the first time in Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates and, in Europe, in Belgium, Bulgaria, France and Switzerland (see Annex 2). The larger number of countries where members of the diaspora voted was promoted as a normalization of Syria's position internationally and presented as a sign of President Assad's popularity around the world.

In contrast, there was strong criticism of Germany by the Syrian government for refusing to allow diaspora voting, although similar criticism was not evident in Turkey, which also did not permit voting. The MFAE asserted inaccurately that refusing diaspora voting was a flagrant violation of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relation, and stated that it objected to a "blatant assault on the rights and freedoms of Syrians" that exposed a "falsehood of democracy."⁹⁸ The Syrian media alleged that Germany and Turkey were supporting terrorists and plotting against Syria. *Russia Today* noted, "In closing Syrian embassies around the world, the regime-change alliance made very clear that they do not want the Syrian people to exercise their democratic rights... They know that Syrians would come out in masses to vote for their president."⁹⁹

After diaspora voting in Lebanon, tensions with host country populations increased. Reports described campaigns to expel those who voted, of young men in the border area of Wadi Khaled vandalizing shops run by Syrians in the region and pictures on social media of people with guns threatening the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), a regional Syrian Nationalist party.¹⁰⁰ The SSNP organized a rally on May 23 where attendees called for the death of Samir Geagea of the Lebanese Forces. The wife of a Syrian honorary consul in Canada called for the killing of Lebanese people who prevented members of the diaspora from voting.¹⁰¹

International Context for Diaspora Voting

International Context for Diaspora Voting

States are under no international legal obligation to provide electoral participation opportunities to their diaspora populations.¹⁰² However, there is increasing international focus on this issue. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) encourages states to make it possible for migrants to take part in their home country elections.¹⁰³ The compact refers to “enabl[ing] political participation and engagement of migrants in their countries of origin, including in peace and reconciliation processes, in elections and political reforms” (in regard to Objective 19).

The International IDEA Voting from Abroad Database shows that 58.3 percent of 216 countries have provisions for out-of-country voting (OCV) for citizens abroad for legislative elections, and 41.2 percent for presidential elections.¹⁰⁴ Most typically, this is through in-person voting (50.5 percent) or postal voting (24.1 percent). Diasporas have engaged in large-scale OCV for in-person voting following conflict situations in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq, Libya, South Sudan and other places.

Recommendations for future diaspora electoral participation

Profound legal, operational and security issues must be addressed before any electoral processes involving the Syrian diaspora can be considered credible. Without comprehensive political and structural reform, the Syrian diaspora will continue to be excluded from electoral processes and vulnerable to political manipulation. The legacy of current electoral arrangements requires the establishment of a legitimate process to build the trust of the diaspora electorate.

Nearly all respondents to the 2020 Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity survey (97 percent) said that elections that exclude displaced people from voting or running for office could not be considered legitimate. The survey identified the main changes needed are for elections be locally organized with international supervision (80.2 percent), positive changes in the security situation and security forces (79.8 percent) and constitutional and legal reforms (76.6 percent). IFES survey data concurred, finding over 70 percent of respondents believing it would be better for Syrian diaspora to vote under UN supervision (although nearly one in four saying they didn't know and less than 5 percent preferring the current Syrian authorities).

The following recommendations are based on analysis of diaspora participation in the 2021 presidential election.

1. Establish an **agreed international framework for Syrian diaspora electoral participation under the supervision of the United Nations**, as established by Security Council Resolution 2254.
2. **Advocate for administration of elections in Syria, including diaspora voting, by an independent body** under the supervision of the United Nations so embassy officials are not involved in electoral administration.
3. **Undertake fundamental reform of the legal framework** to remove restrictions and provide electoral safeguards, ensuring opportunities for a genuinely fair process whereby the diaspora can participate in all national elections (presidential, parliamentary and referendums) as both voters and candidates. **Amend the Constitution** to remove eligibility criteria that prevent participation and **overhaul the General Elections Law** to remove barriers to participation, establish integrity and accountability measures, and provide opportunities for remedy.
4. **Reach political consensus on key issues** relevant to diaspora voting, such as electoral systems that enable diaspora participation; criteria for and definitions of eligible voters in the diaspora; principles for selecting countries where diaspora voting will be conducted; inclusive registration of voters; measures to protect privacy and personal data; and the scheduling and timeframes for elections that will include diaspora voting.
5. **Involve diaspora groups in developing electoral plans and activities** to increase effectiveness and build trust.
6. **Conduct early planning and research** for diaspora voting, independently gathering information from countries where voting could take place. This should include reviews of diaspora locations, access to identity documents, community concerns, security issues, ability to travel, sources of information and other topics.
7. **Conclude agreements with host countries early enough** so members of the diaspora understand the opportunities they will have, and under what conditions. Maintain dialogue with host country authorities about their non-interference in the process and proactive support, including in regard to security and public safety, and to ensure that participation in elections does not risk legal and residency status, including for refugees.
8. **Provide maximum protection assurances to the diaspora.** This includes data and privacy protections, assurances on independent administration of the electoral process, enhanced security, messaging from authorities and political leadership, reporting and complaint mechanisms, independent scrutiny of all aspects of election processes and security measures to protect against intimidation or threats for participation.
9. **Identify additional documentation that can be used for registration and voting** to provide broader and fairer opportunities for enfranchisement, including consideration of alternative authoritative documentation in cases where members of the diaspora no longer have valid, official Syrian documentation.
10. Conduct all electoral activities in **neutral venues that are separate from Syrian diplomatic representations.**

11. **Increase voting hours for the diaspora; add polling locations beyond capital cities to enable participation; improve electoral safeguards.** Having services available in more locations and extending registration and voting to more than one day (including on weekends) will provide more meaningful opportunities to participate, given the likely geographical disbursement of diaspora populations. Stronger safeguards are needed to ensure the integrity of election processes.
12. **Provide extensive public information on electoral developments, plans, arrangements and activities.** Such transparency is essential to avoid corruption and build trust.
13. **Conduct comprehensive voter education, with a focus on marginalized groups, including women.** This is essential given the Syrian electorate's lack of experience with a legitimate election process.
14. **Ensure scrutiny of the electoral process** through provisions for candidate and party agents in diaspora settings and independent observation by civil society, the media and international groups. **Ensure secure access for all agents and observers** under agreements with host countries.

Annex 1: Population Data

UN DESA reports a total of 8,457,214 Syrian international migrants in mid-2020 (using an inclusive approach, whereby “migrant” refers to any person residing outside his or her country of origin).¹⁰⁵ However, a breakdown of data by country appears to be available only for 2019. UNHCR data is from the UNHCR Refugee Data app.¹⁰⁶

DESA 2019 *(Based on available data)*

Country	Syrian Diaspora
Turkey	3,743,494
Lebanon	1,162,305
Saudi Arabia	802,915
Jordan	724,508
Germany	589,628
Iraq	258,144
Sweden	181,793
Egypt	124,688
United States	91,663
Netherlands	70,713
Canada	56,404
United Arab Emirates	52,142
Libya	44,184
Denmark	37,667
Belgium	26,484
Australia	25,825
Qatar	25,290
Greece	23,319

Country	Syrian Diaspora
Norway	22,603
Kuwait	22,596
Switzerland	18,960
France	18,451
Armenia	17,401
Venezuela	15,311
Bulgaria	14,080
Austria	11,757
Others in Europe	54,749
Others in Middle East and North Africa region	28,104
Others in Americas	6,899
Rest of the World	2,791
Total	8,274,868

Arab Region & Turkey
 Europe
 Americas
 Rest of World

UNHCR 2020

Country	Syrian Diaspora
Turkey	3,580,645
Lebanon	891,802
Jordan	660,382
Germany	600,292
Iraq	249,138
Egypt	130,106
Sweden	115,873
Sudan	93,498
Austria	54,616
Greece	43,533
Netherlands	35,864
France	22,366
Switzerland	20,340
Denmark	20,191
Libya	18,809
Belgium	18,745
Bulgaria	17,996
Spain	16,296
Cyprus	16,017
Norway	14,786
Armenia	14,744
UK	12,881
United States	11,063
Rest of the World	70,334
Total	6,730,317

Arab Region & Turkey
 Europe
 Americas
 Rest of World

Annex 2: Syrian Diplomatic Representation

Country	Embassy/consulate	Diaspora voting reported in 2014	Diaspora voting reported in 2021
Algeria	Algiers	Yes	Yes
Bahrain	Manama		Yes
Egypt	Cairo		Yes
Iraq	Baghdad	Yes	Yes
Jordan	Amman	Yes	Yes
Kuwait	Kuwait City		Yes
Lebanon	Beirut	Yes	Yes
Mauritania	Nouakchott	Yes	Yes
Oman	Muscat	Yes	Yes
Sudan	Khartoum	Yes	Yes
United Arab Emirates	Abu Dhabi		Yes
	Dubai (consulate)		Yes
Armenia	Yerevan	Yes	Yes
Austria	Vienna	Yes	Yes
Belarus	Minsk	Yes	Yes
Belgium	Brussels		Yes
Bulgaria	Sofia		Yes
Cyprus	Nicosia	Yes	Yes
Czech Republic	Prague	Yes	Yes
France	Paris		Yes
Germany	Berlin		No

Country	Embassy/consulate	Diaspora voting reported in 2014	Diaspora voting reported in 2021
Netherlands (Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons)	Hague		No embassy
Poland	Warsaw	Yes	Yes
Romania	Bucharest	Yes	Yes
Russia	Moscow	Yes	Yes
	St Petersburg (consulate)		Yes
Serbia	Belgrade	Yes	Yes
Spain	Madrid	Yes	Yes
Sweden	Stockholm	Yes	Yes
Switzerland (United Nations)	Geneva (consulate)		Yes
Turkey	Istanbul (consulate)		No
Ukraine - closed in 2018	Kiev	Yes	No embassy
China	Beijing	Yes	Yes
India	Delhi	Yes	Yes
Indonesia	Jakarta		Yes
Iran	Tehran	Yes	Yes
Japan	Tokyo	Yes	Yes
Democratic People's Republic of Korea	Pyongyang	Yes	Yes
Malaysia	Kuala Lumpur	Yes	Yes
Pakistan	Islamabad	Yes	Yes
Australia	Sydney (consulate)		Yes
	Melbourne (consulate)		Yes
Argentina	Buenos Aires	Yes	Yes
Brazil	Brasilia	Yes	Yes

Country	Embassy/consulate	Diaspora voting reported in 2014	Diaspora voting reported in 2021
Chile	Santiago		Yes
Cuba	Havana	Yes	Yes
United States (United Nations)	New York		No embassy
Venezuela	Caracas	Yes	Yes
Nigeria	Abuja	Yes	
Senegal	Dakar		Yes
South Africa	Pretoria	Yes	Yes
Tanzania	Dar Es Salaam		Yes

<p>Total: 46 countries and three international organizations (Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in the Netherlands and United Nations locations in Switzerland and the United States). The Syrian embassy in Ukraine has closed.</p>		<p>Total: 32 countries</p>	<p>Total: 47 locations in 44 countries</p>
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Annex 3: List of acronyms

CAC	Convention Against Corruption
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CERD	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
GCM	Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration
GER	General Electoral Register
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
IFES	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
MFAE	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates
OCV	Out-of-Country Voting
SANA	Syrian Arab News Agency
SJAC	Syria Justice and Accountability Centre
SJEC	Supreme Judicial Elections Committee
SSNP	Syrian Social Nationalist Party
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Endnotes

1. IFES was one of the founding endorsing organizations of the [Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation in 2005](#).
2. Researchers attempted to assemble a varied sample according to criteria such as whether people had fled Syria or not, were participating in Syrian elections or not, location of origin in Syria, sex and age.
3. However, Syria is not party to the optional protocol (which would have recognized the treaty body committee's competence to hear individual cases).
4. Syria acceded to the 1969 [Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties](#) in 1970. The convention establishes that a state is "obliged to refrain from acts which would defeat the object and purpose of a treaty" when it has signed but is not yet party to a treaty. [Vienna Convention on Consular Relations](#), Article 18. CAC and 187 states are parties to the treaty.
5. The International Organization for Migration refers to a diaspora as "Migrants or descendants of migrants whose identity and sense of belonging, either real or symbolic, have been shaped by their migration experience and background. They maintain links with their homelands, and to each other, based on a shared sense of history, identity, or mutual experiences in the destination country." [International Organization for Migration Glossary on Migration](#), International Migration Law, International Organization for Migration, 2019.
6. Official data published by the Syrian [Central Bureau of Statistics](#) reports an estimated total population of 26.4 million (2020). However, data published by the [UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs](#) and the [World Bank](#) estimate a total resident population of 17.1 million (2019).
7. UNHCR, [Figures at a Glance, June 2020](#)
8. [Security Council Resolution 2254 \(2015\)](#)
9. This follows the [November 14, 2015 International Support Group statement](#), which stipulated that "Free and fair elections would be held in pursuant... to the highest international standards of transparency and accountability, with all Syrians, including the diaspora, eligible to participate."
10. [Syria holds presidential election dismissed as farce by opposition](#), BBC, May 26, 2021.
11. [Elections are Meaningless if Displaced People Can't Run and Vote: Survey of Displaced Syrians](#), Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity, 2020.
12. [Joint Statement by the Secretary of State of the United States of America, the Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom and the Foreign Ministers of France, Germany, and Italy](#) May 25, 2021.
13. [Statement of the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), April 23, 2021.
14. Statement by [High Representative Josep Borrell on the Presidential Elections](#), EU External Action Service, May 27, 2021.
15. [Syrians abroad elect their president amid high voter turnout](#), SANA, 29 May 29, 2014. See also [2014 Presidential Elections Amid Civil War](#), Fanack, June 25, 2014. [Map of the Syrian Presidential Elections](#), Sky News Arabia, June 3, 2014.
16. [The Syrian Elections in Lebanon Have Upended Concepts](#), Al Arabiya, May 30, 2014..
17. UN DESA [International Migrant Stocks](#), last updated February 5, 2021. An international migrant is defined as "any person who changes his or her country of usual residence."
18. [UNHCR Refugee Data mobile app](#)
19. UNHCR [Operational Portal for the Syrian Refugee Situation](#)
20. "Elections must be conducted fairly and freely... within a framework of laws guaranteeing effective exercise of voting rights." ICCPR Human Rights Committee, [General Comment 25](#), paragraph 19.

21. [ICCPR](#) Article 25 states, “Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity.... without unreasonable restrictions:... To vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections.”
22. To be eligible for president, Article 84.5 of the Constitution specifies that a person must be resident in Syria for no less than 10 years by the time of nomination.
23. “No person carrying another nationality, in addition to the nationality of the Syrian Arab Republic, might occupy the office of President of the Republic, Vice-president, Prime Minister, deputy prime ministers, ministers, members of the People’s Assembly or members of the Supreme Constitutional Court.” Constitution, Article 152. Another barrier that particularly impacts the diaspora is the exclusion of people who have been convicted of a dishonorable felony (Constitution, article 84.3).
24. Elections Law, Article 99.
25. Elections Law, Article 101.
26. ICCPR Human Rights Committee, [General Comment 25](#), paragraph 20.
27. Elections Law, Article 102.
28. [ICCPR](#) Article 25 states “Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity....without unreasonable restrictions:... To vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors.”
29. Elections Law, Article 106.
30. ICCPR Human Rights Committee, [General Comment 25](#), paragraph 20. 31 Elections Law, Article 99.
31. “To give effect to the right of access to information, States parties should proactively put in the public domain Government information of public interest. States parties should make every effort to ensure easy, prompt, effective and practical access to such information.” ICCPR Human Rights Committee, [General Comment 34](#), paragraph 19. Also, “Each State Party shall, in accordance with the fundamental principles of its domestic law, endeavour to adopt, maintain and strengthen systems that promote transparency and prevent conflicts of interest.” [CAC](#) Article 7.4.
32. [ICCPR](#) Article 17 states, “No one shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his privacy.” [General Comment 16](#) notes, “The gathering and holding of personal information... must be regulated by law. Effective measures have to be taken by States to ensure that information concerning a person’s private life does not reach the hands of persons who are not authorized by law to receive, process and use it, and is never used for purposes incompatible with the Covenant.” ICCPR Human Rights Committee, [General Comment 16](#), paragraph 10.
33. [ICCPR](#) Article 2 commits state parties “[t]o ensure that any person whose rights or freedoms as herein recognized are violated shall have an effective remedy, notwithstanding that the violation has been committed by persons acting in an official capacity.” ICCPR Human Rights Committee, [General Comment 25](#), paragraph 20, also refers to “access to judicial review or other equivalent process so that electors have confidence in the security of the ballot and the counting of the votes.”
34. “The Supreme Constitutional Court will handle and decide on the objections related to the soundness of the elections of the Republic President, as follows: a. The candidate who did not win will submit an objection to the Court within 3 days from the announcement date of the elections results; the objection is recorded in a special register. b. The Court will issue its decision within seven days from the closing date of objections submission. Its decision is conclusive.” Elections Law, Article 82.
35. This is not consistent with authoritative interpretation of the [ICCPR](#), which states: “A situation where the functions and competencies of the judiciary and the executive are not clearly distinguishable or where the latter is able to control or direct the former is incompatible with the notion of an independent tribunal.” ICCPR Human Rights Committee, General Comment 32, paragraph 19.
36. [Shadows of Surveillance: Government Documents Confirm Syrian Embassies Monitored Syrians Abroad](#), Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, 2020.
37. [Elections are Meaningless if Displaced People Can’t Run and Vote: Survey of Displaced Syrians](#), Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity, 2020.
38. These are the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in the Netherlands and the United Nations in Switzerland and the United States.
39. [Vienna Convention on Consular Relations](#), adopted in 1963 and in force since 1967. The Convention has been ratified by 180 states.
40. [Vienna Convention on Consular Relations](#), Article 5(m).
41. Commentary on the request was from [Gregory Galligan, Canadian Executive Coordinator for Syria](#). Syria reports it has an [honorary consulate in Vancouver](#).

42. In the case of Germany, the Syrian embassy announced on May 19, 2021 that the embassy “regrets having to apologize to the members of the honorable Syrian community in the Federal Republic of Germany for not being able to receive them to participate in the elections.... due to the German authorities’ failure to hold these elections in our embassy in Berlin.” [Announcement that presidential elections will not be held in Germany](#), accessed May 19, 2021.
43. [Countries where there is no diplomatic representation](#), MFAE, accessed May 17, 2021.
44. While the embassy in Malaysia had referred to Syrian expatriates in neighboring countries coming to register, there was no mention of members of the diaspora in third countries coming to Kuala Lumpur to vote, although this could be attributed to increasing levels of COVID-19 and related restrictions. The Syrian embassy in Belarus called on members of the diaspora in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Ukraine to participate. In Australia, expatriates from New Zealand were also encouraged to register. [Syrian Embassies in Many Countries of the World Finish Their Preparations for The Presidential Elections For Syrians Abroad Next Thursday](#), May 17, 2021, SANA.
45. [Syrian embassy to Venezuela, Facebook page](#), accessed May 17, 2021. [Syrian embassy to Malaysia, Facebook page](#), accessed 17 May 2021.
46. This is inconsistent with authoritative interpretation of the ICCPR, which states that “an independent electoral authority should be established to supervise the electoral process and to ensure that it is conducted fairly, impartially and in accordance with established laws which are compatible with the Covenant.” ICCPR Human Rights Committee, [General Comment 25](#), paragraph 20.
47. “The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates invites citizens to express their wishes in electing while abroad, using Syrian embassies abroad in whichever way it deems fit.” Elections Law, Article 101.
48. See, for example, the [Syrian embassy to Oman](#), accessed May 17, 2021.
49. [Elections are Meaningless if Displaced People Can’t Run and Vote: Survey of Displaced Syrians](#), Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity, 2020.
50. Elections Law, Article 5.
51. [Legal Obstacles to the Participation of Syrian Refugees in the Presidential Elections](#), London School of Economics and Political Science, April 2021.
52. For example, a 2017 study noted that in areas controlled by the Syrian government, two parallel justice systems exist—a regular court system and a “web of exceptional courts without fixed procedure and with no clear limitations on jurisdiction. Both.... [g]enerally fail to live up to international standards of independence and impartiality... there is a clear tendency of the government to move politically sensitive cases out of the regular court system to be heard before the exceptional courts... The exceptional courts are fundamentally flawed when it comes to implementing acceptable standards of independence and due process.” [ILAC Rule of Law Assessment Report: Syria 2017](#), International Legal Assistance Consortium, 2017.
53. ICCPR Human Rights Committee, [General Comment 25](#), paragraph 14.
54. Other problems related to citizenship include mothers being unable to pass on their Syrian citizenship (unless a father is unknown) and women being unable to pass their citizenship to husbands (Syria made a CEDAW reservation to this effect).
55. Syria Nationality Law, articles 10.1 and 21 (a, c, and g).
56. The Elections Law, Article 105, specifies that “[n]ames are verified if registered in the electoral register; after the registration deadline, independent electoral lists are organized per embassy containing the names of persons legally eligible for voting.” The Ministry of Interior, in coordination with other ministries, is mandated by articles 28 and 29 of the Elections Law, to prepare and annually update the GER, with the SJEC responsible for updating and auditing the registry two months before the election.
57. Armenia, China, Romania and Russia. Online announcements were primarily made through Facebook pages or on embassy websites.
58. The treaty body for the [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) states that under its Articles 12 and 29, mental incapacity should not serve as a basis for the deprivation of the right to vote and to be elected under any circumstances ([General Comment 1](#), paragraph 48).
59. Some comments showed voter confusion, with some people seeming to think that filling out the registration form meant they had already voted (despite no political choice being listed on the form).
60. Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Belarus, Czech Republic, Switzerland, Iran and Malaysia.
61. These forms typically asked for the individual’s name, father’s name, mother’s name, place of birth, date of birth, ID number, current place of residence, civil registration number and place, phone number, email address and passport number and issue date.

62. [Facebook page of the Syrian Embassy to the United Arab Emirates.](#)
63. The [Consulate and Embassy to Switzerland Facebook page](#) noted that the link to the electoral register had been activated to facilitate the participation of citizens in the exercise of their electoral duty in the polling process. Accessed May 18, 2021.
64. A Special Form for Those Wishing to go to Participate in the Syrian Presidential Elections that will Take Place in Syria on May 26, 2021, May 25, 2021.
65. [Preparing the electoral lists for the Syrian embassies around the world](#), Al Watan, April 25, 2021.
66. [ICCPR Article 17](#) states, “No one shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his privacy.” [General Comment 16](#) notes, “The gathering and holding of personal information... must be regulated by law. Effective measures have to be taken by States to ensure that information concerning a person’s private life does not reach the hands of persons who are not authorized by law to receive, process and use it, and is never used for purposes incompatible with the Covenant.” ICCPR Human Rights Committee, [General Comment 16](#), paragraph 10.
67. “The electoral campaign should cease 24 hours from the specified elections date; it is impermissible for anyone to distribute any material, leaflets or any other promotional electoral material, himself or through others, once the electoral campaigning has ceased.” Elections Law, Article 48.
68. “It is prohibited for candidates or political parties to fund electoral campaigns activities with any amount of money or in-kind contributions or grants or donations or any other assistance from external or foreign sources, directly or indirectly, under the penalty of legal accountability.” Elections Law, Article 54.
69. [Egypt, Concerts in Support of The Assad Elections in Coordination with the Regime](#), Al Modon, May 11, 2021.
70. [Lebanon’s Tripoli is holding its breath over the impact of the presidential elections in Syria](#), Independent Arabia, May 5, 2021.
71. ICCPR Human Rights Committee, [General Comment 25](#), paragraph 19.
72. [Lebanese Authorities Must Intervene to Stop Violations Against Refugees, and the UNHCR Must Act](#), The Access Center for Human Rights, May 19, 2021.
73. [Assad’s Election in Lebanon: The Refugee’s Blood Voting Market](#), Almodon online, May 5, 2021. See also [Syrian get-out-the-vote push raises eyebrows –and fears –among refugees in Lebanon ahead of the May election](#), L’Orient Today, April 30, 2021.
74. [Pressure on Syrian Refugees in Lebanon to Elect Bashar Al Assad](#), NEDAA Post, May 9, 2021. [Assad Uses Refugees in Lebanon to Legitimize the Elections](#), Enabbaaladi, May 2021. [As If You Are In Syria: From Lebanon, Assad is Chasing his Deported Citizens to Legitimize his Re-election for a Fourth Term](#), Syria Direct, May 19, 2021.
75. [With the Outcome of Syria’s Presidential Election in Little Doubt, Hundreds of Syrians in Lebanon Turn Out to Vote Amid Allegations of Coercion](#), L’Orient Today, May 20, 2021.
76. [Mobs Attack Syrians Heading for Presidential Vote in Lebanon](#), Arab News, May 20, 2021.
77. [Disinformation Campaign Against UNHCR Spokesperson Clarifies](#), Orient Net, May 20, 2021.
78. [Samir Geagea, Twitter](#), May 19, 2021.
79. [ICCPR Article 25](#) states, “Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity, without any of the distinctions mentioned in Article 2 and without unreasonable restrictions: (a) To take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives, (b) To vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors.”
80. [Higher Judicial Committee for Elections: Electoral Process Abroad Proceeds Transparently and Smoothly](#), SANA, May 20, 2021.
81. [MFAE Facebook page](#), May 23, 2021.
82. See photographs, [Syrians Abroad Cast Their Votes to Presidential Elections of Syrian Arab Republic](#), SANA, May 20, 2021.
83. See, for example, [Facebook video, 20 May 2021](#).
84. [Syrian Embassies in Many Countries of the World Finish Their Preparations for The Presidential Elections For Syrians Abroad Next Thursday](#), May 17, 2021, SANA.
85. Elections Law, Article 104.
86. “a. Voting starts at 7:00 a.m. of the set election or polling date, and continues until 7:00 p.m. of that day. b. It is permissible to extend

the voting time for up to 5 hours maximum in all or some elections centres by a decree from the Higher Elections Committee.” Elections Law, Article 64.

87. Syria Nationality Law, Article 21.
88. Persons entitled to vote must be free to vote for any candidate for election... and free to support or to oppose government, without undue influence or coercion of any kind which may distort or inhibit the free expression of the elector’s will. Voters should be able to form opinions independently, free of violence or threat of violence, compulsion, inducement or manipulative interference of any kind.” ICCPR Human Rights Committee, General Comment 25, paragraph 19.
89. See, for example, [101 Facts & Figures on The Syrian Refugee Crisis](#), vol. II, Nasser Yassin, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut, July 2019.
90. See, for example, [video on Twitter](#), May 20, 2021. BBC World Service reporting on numbers injured, May 20, 2021 as of 12:30 p.m.
91. [See Alkhabar Media Report](#)
92. [UN DESA International Migration Stock estimates 1990-2019](#). According to UNHCR forced displacement data, adults over the age of 18 comprise 55.1 percent of their recorded populations.
93. [MFEA Minister hands over results to the Minister of Justice and the SJEC](#), May 23, 2021.
94. See earlier sections on Legal Framework and Election Administration
95. For example, see [Facebook post by Hossain Mortada](#), May 26, 2021.
96. The overall results showed an alleged turnout of 78.64 percent, with 14,239,140 of 18,107,109 eligible voters casting ballots. These reported results showed Bashar El Assad receiving 13,540,860 votes (95.1 percent), Mahmoud Merhi receiving 470,276 (3.3 percent) and Abdallah Salloum receiving 213,968 (1.5 percent). The number of spoiled ballots was reported as 14,000 (0.1 percent).
97. “Each State Party shall, in accordance with the fundamental principles of its domestic law, endeavor to adopt, maintain and strengthen systems that promote transparency and prevent conflicts of interest.” [CAC](#) Article 7.4. “To give effect to the right of access to information, States parties should proactively put in the public domain Government information of public interest. States parties should make every effort to ensure easy, prompt, effective and practical access to such information.” ICCPR Human Rights Committee, [General Comment 34](#), paragraph 19.
98. [MFAE Facebook post](#), May 20, 2021,.
99. [Western Nations Want “Democracy” In Syria so Badly they Close Embassies and Prevent Syrians from Voting in Presidential Elections](#), Russia Today, May 19, 2021.
100. [Sabotage and destruction of shops for Syrians displaced in Lebanon after “participating in the elections.”](#) Enab Baladi, May 21, 2021.
101. [The Wife of a Syrian consul Issues a Public Call for the Killing of Lebanese who Obstructed the Fraudulent Elections](#), Orent NET, May 25, 2021.
102. While the [ICCPR](#) refers to citizens having the “right and the opportunity” to take part in an election, it also notes that there can be “reasonable restrictions.” The 1990 [International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families](#) refers to the right to vote for and be elected in one’s country of origin. However, the treaty uses somewhat discretionary language, noting that “the states concerned shall, *as appropriate and in accordance with their legislation*, facilitate the exercise of these rights” (emphasis added). The convention has limited applicability, as only 55 countries, mainly in West Africa and Latin America, are parties to, and therefore bound by, the treaty.
103. The [Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#) is a cooperative, non-binding framework endorsed by the UN General Assembly in December 2018. The [UN Network on Migration](#) was established to support Member States in GCM implementation.
104. [International IDEA Voting From Abroad Database](#)
105. UN DESA [International Migrant Stocks](#), last updated February 5, 2021. An international migrant is defined as “any person who changes his or her country of usual residence.”
106. [UNHCR Refugee Data mobile app](#)

