



Assessment of the Syrian 2021 Presidential Election

REPORT | DECEMBER 2021

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Introduction

Introduction



The 2021 presidential election for the Syrian Arab Republic was called by the speaker of the People’s Assembly, Hammouda Sabbagh, on April 18, 2021. The Speaker announced May 26, the earliest possible date according to Syria’s legal framework, as Election Day.

The decade-long conflict in Syria is not a conducive environment for credible elections. However, irrespective of the conditions, this assessment of the legal framework and electoral administration and operations illustrates the ways in which the election fell short of meeting multiple international standards. One key example of the shortfalls of the election process was the voting abroad aspect (also known as out-of-country voting (OCV). While Syrians abroad are eligible to vote in presidential elections (unlike in legislative elections, in which they are not entitled to vote), millions of internationally displaced Syrians were not able to cast their votes in this election.¹

This assessment was guided by international electoral standards set forth in treaties and conventions that the Syrian Arab Republic has accepted as obligations or commitments. Its focus is not to highlight the political dynamic between the candidates or their stakeholders, but to address the procedural aspects of the election process and produce a set of recommendations for electoral reforms at the constitutional, legislative, administrative and operational levels. The researchers also considered the need for a post-conflict, reconciliatory and inclusive political electoral process that will enable the future participation of Syrians abroad.

This assessment is not a replacement for an official election observation, which was impossible due to the fact that Syrian elections can be observed by parliamentary invitation only, and restrictions on travel due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the overall security environment. However, the review of documentation and media reports described in this report was supplemented by reports from researchers within and outside Syria. Each topic discussed below includes a review of the relevant legal framework and analysis of its implementation. In cases where no systematic information was available, the report refrains from stating definitive conclusions.

Legal Framework and Electoral System

Legal Framework and Electoral System



In Syria, the election of the president is determined by absolute majority. A candidate must receive votes from over 50 percent of participating voters in order to win. If no candidate receives a majority, the two candidates receiving the highest number of votes compete in a second round² which, according to law, must be held within two weeks after the Supreme Judicial Elections Committee (SJEC) submits the results of the first round of voting to the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC).³

The primary framework for political rights and the electoral process in Syria is established by the Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, as approved in a referendum held on February 26, 2012. Measures to implement these rights are elaborated in General Elections Law No. 5 of 2014, which is the main legislation governing elections of the president, members of the People's Assembly and local administration councils. Other legislation that either complement the Elections Law or regulate civil status and processes that directly affect presidential elections include:

- Law No. 8 of 2016 amending the 2014 General Elections Law
- Executive instructions on the General Elections Law No. 5 of 2014, adopted by the Cabinet in 2014
- Civil Status Law No. 26 of 2007 (with amendments)
- Nationality Law of 1969
- Penal Code of 1949
- Constitutional Court Law No. 7 of 2014
- Presidential decrees
- Judicial decisions
- Ministry of Justice Regulation on Misdemeanors (2014)
- Regulations and instructions issued by the Supreme Judicial Elections Commission
- Decisions issued by the SCC

The key difference between the legal frameworks guiding presidential and legislative elections is that the most critical aspects of the presidential electoral process are determined by the Constitution and therefore managed by the SCC instead of the SJEC, as for legislative elections. While there are no international standards for how proscriptive a Constitution should be regarding the implementation of electoral processes, Syrian law makes many electoral reforms contingent upon constitutional reforms, including for any change to the candidacy process.

Some key electoral rights deserve constitutional protection. Implementation of these rights is usually prescribed in electoral legislation and sometimes delegated according to the electoral administration's regulations and instructions. In environments without developed democratic institutions and norms, failure to protect these rights adequately through legislation presents a danger that elections will be implemented haphazardly, with political bias and without transparency. The Syrian electoral process is one such case.

This assessment of the Syrian legal framework found that some of the principal electoral rights are restricted because they are not explicitly protected in the Constitution. Further, insufficient legislation—legislation that lacks essential details to guide the process—results in a lack of transparency in election administration. In short, Syria's legal framework does not provide a solid basis for implementing elections that comply with electoral standards as defined in relevant treaties, international conventions and their authoritative interpretations. These include the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Arab Charter on Human Rights. Syria is bound by, or has affirmed its commitment to, all of these instruments.

The major shortcomings noted would exist even without the added impact of the current Syrian conflict. When factoring in the nearly 10 years of conflict, the weaknesses of the electoral provisions in Syria's Constitution and Elections Law become even more apparent. The Elections Law of 2014, which replaced the 2011 law, completely ignored the conflict, and the 2016 amendment only addressed voting by internally displaced people, ignoring the participation of over 5 million Syrians who are outside the country's borders as a direct result of the conflict and political persecution. Further, the laws and regulations ignore United Nations Security Council Resolutions and the emerging framework for conflict resolution agreements. The most critical weaknesses in the legal framework are discussed under each topic in this report, along with recommendations.

1.1 RECOMMENDATIONS: Conduct a constitutional review and propose amendments that will strengthen protection of key political rights, align the Constitution with UN Security Council Resolution 2254 of 2015, remove restrictions on the eligibility of Syrians to participate in elections, and establish an independent electoral authority. Reform the Elections Law to comply with generally accepted principles regarding the rule of law and to provide a framework for an electoral process that recognizes the post-conflict environment and allows for partnership with the UN in administration of elections in Syria.

Call to Elections

Call to Elections

At the surface level, the Syrian Constitution's treatment of elections aligns with the principle of periodicity as defined in the ICCPR.⁴ The term of the presidency is limited to seven years—a rare divergence from cases of executive presidency.⁵ The Constitution allows for an exception if no new president is elected by the end of the term, in which case extension is automatic.⁶ Presidents can be elected for only one successive term. However, there is a caveat: the Constitution includes a transitional provision that allows the incumbent to serve for two additional terms after the constitution was amended in 2012. This enables Bashar al-Assad's presidency to extend from July 17, 2000, to 2028, a total of four consecutive terms.

2.1 RECOMMENDATIONS: Amend the Constitution to prohibit presidents from serving more than two terms under any circumstances. Consider reducing the term from seven years to five years to ensure periodic renewal of presidential legitimacy.

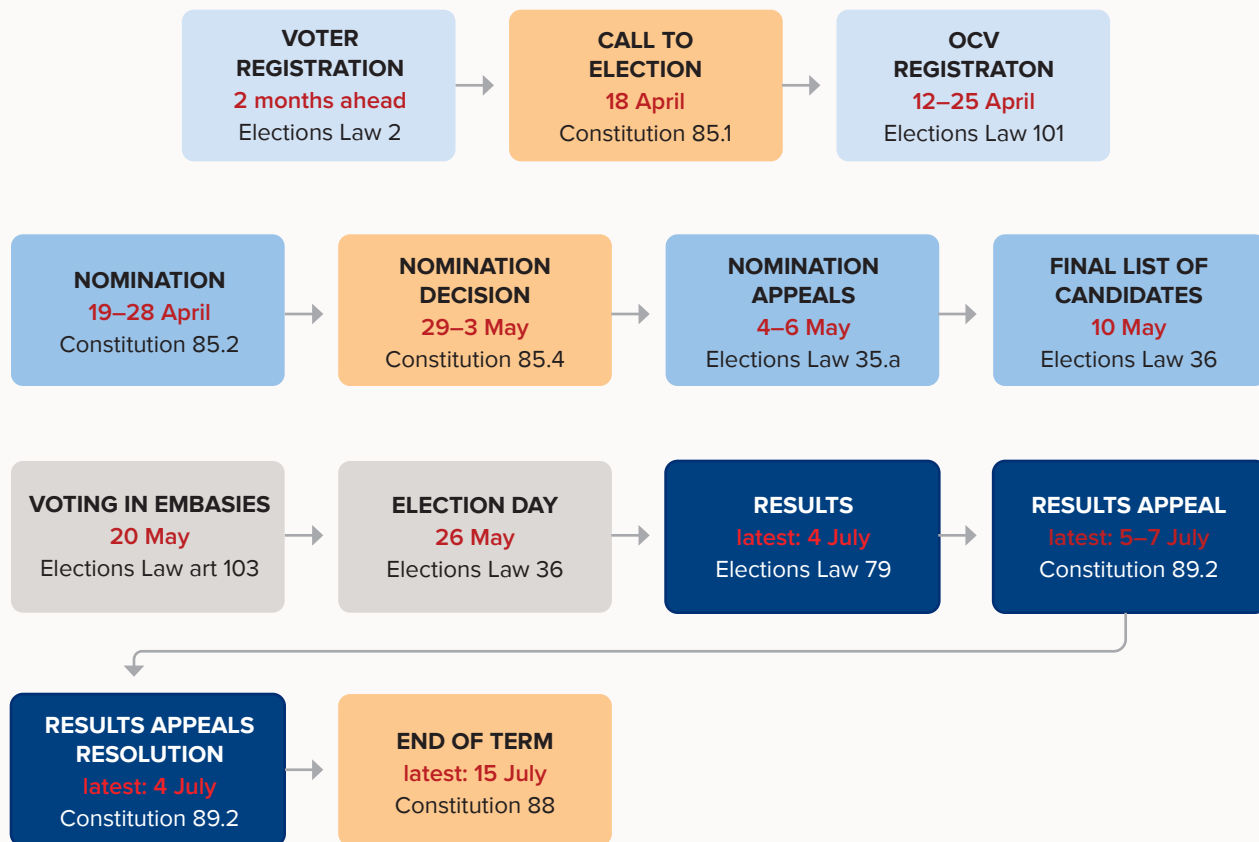
The Constitution addresses presidential vacancy by authorizing the vice president (or the prime minister, should there be no vice president at the time), to assume power for 90 days. New presidential elections should be held within this timeframe. The Constitution does not, however, address reasons for vacancy. These are defined in the Elections Law and are limited to three circumstances: death, resignation and loss of any nomination eligibility criteria.⁷

Removing the president from office is possible only for high treason. This accusation must be made by a two-thirds majority of the People's Assembly, and the president must be tried by the SCC, which is appointed by the president.⁸ Other than for treason, the Constitution explicitly protects the president against prosecution for any reason.

2.2 RECOMMENDATION: The principle of independence of the judiciary is a prerequisite for the rule of law, and reform of the judiciary has implications far beyond elections. However, in the context of removing an elected official, refrain from vesting this power in a body appointed by that official.

The Constitution grants authority to call for a presidential election to the speaker of the parliament, stating that the call for election should be issued 60 to 90 days before the end of the presidential term. In the 2021 electoral cycle, this call was issued on April 18, as early as legally possible, setting the date for the election as May 26. The remainder of the electoral calendar is determined by the deadlines for registration, nomination, voting and announcement of results, as set forth in the Constitution and the Elections Law. However, the legal framework does not sufficiently define some key electoral events (such as registration of voters and announcement of electoral results). These can only be determined by calculating the end date of the presidential term, with the understanding that the electoral process must be complete by that time. This lack of clarity undermines the certainty and predictability of the electoral process and allows the electoral administration to arbitrarily set some key deadlines in the electoral process—for example, a short campaign period. Figure 1 lays out the timing for the recently completed presidential election process.

Figure 1. Timeline for the 2021 Presidential Election Process



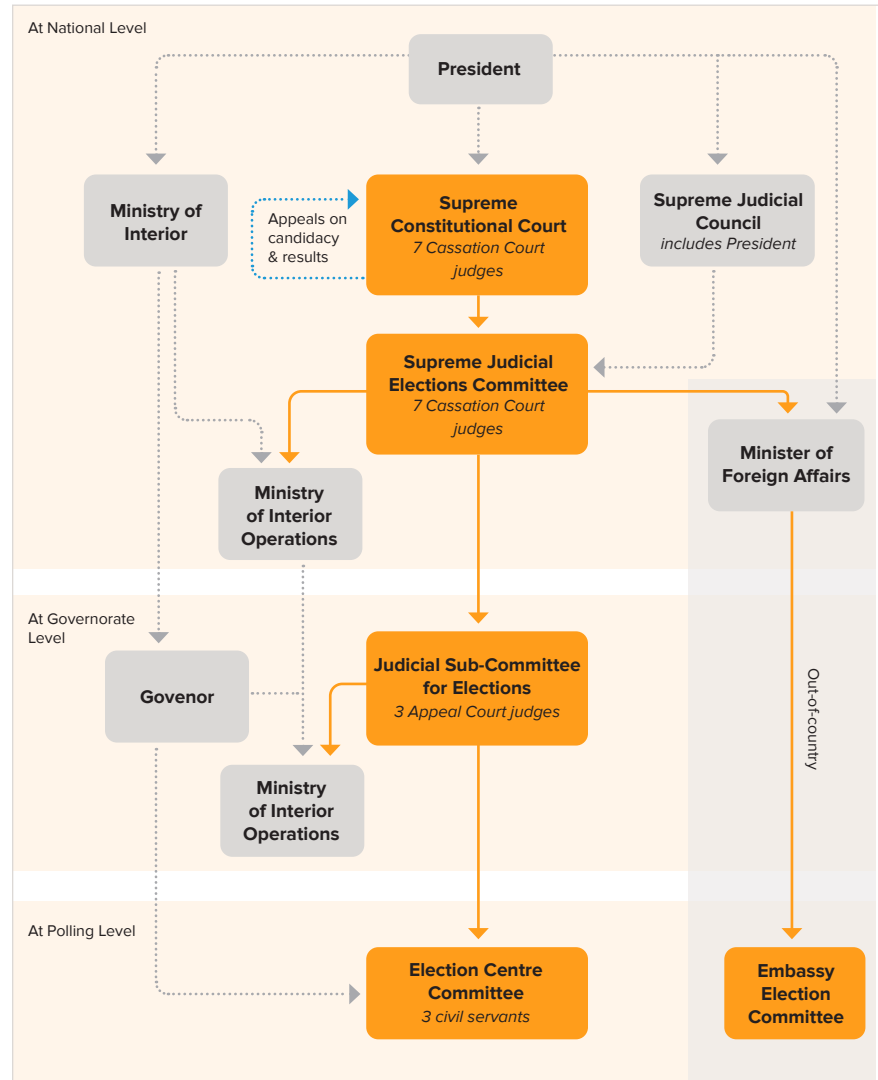
2.3 RECOMMENDATIONS: Amend the Elections Law to define key deadlines in the electoral process instead of leaving them open to arbitrary decisions by the electoral administration.

Electoral Administration

Electoral Administration

Elections in Syria are administered by both judicial and governmental bodies. The Constitution includes several provisions that partially regulate electoral authority. While the electoral legislation provides detailed guidance on the management of elections, the Constitution explicitly mandates the SCC to administer key aspects of presidential elections (such as candidacy) and to adjudicate disputes.⁹ Authority for other aspects of the electoral process is divided between the SJEC, as the supervisory body, and lower-level committees, some of which are appointed by the executive branch. With regard to electoral operations, the Ministry of Interior oversees administration of the voters list; archiving of electoral documents and data; security; IT support; and election materials such as indelible ink, stamps, ballot boxes and other items. The Ministry of Interior also provides security and logistical support for the electoral process.

Figure 2. Structure of Electoral Administration



The legal framework establishes a direct relationship between the president and the electoral administration. The president appoints the SCC and, with the minister of Justice, heads the SJEC.¹⁰ At the lowest level, polling officials are appointed by governors, who are appointed by the president.

This arrangement does not sufficiently safeguard the independence of the electoral administration because it relies on judicial bodies that are appointed directly or indirectly by the president. Further, the governmental bodies involved in electoral administration do not have specialized departments that can operate in a politically independent manner—for example, by utilizing an appointment process that is shielded from political influence. This is contrary to the international standard of independent election administration codified in the ICCPR; it opens any presidential election to the risk of interference by the incumbent.¹¹

3.1 RECOMMENDATIONS: Consider amending the Constitution and Electoral Laws to establish an electoral commission empowered to administer elections independent from political influence. The responsibility for appointing the electoral commission could be shared between the legislative and executive branches of the state. The electoral commission should have the authority and the responsibility to regulate, oversee and implement all aspects of the electoral process, including recruiting and training staff and managing logistics and materials used in elections.

As during the 2020 legislative elections, in the 2021 presidential election the SJEC did not assume responsibility for strengthening the legal framework by elaborating and supplementing the Elections Law and issuing regulations. Its authority to develop regulations is undermined by the Elections Law, which authorizes the Cabinet to develop executive instructions.¹² The SJEC website has been outdated since 2016. In addition to their failure to develop and issue regulations, electoral authorities did not proactively publish any decisions. Although some decisions issued by sub-committees and governors during legislative elections were shared on social media, this was not the case during the presidential election. No decisions were posted on social media, perhaps indicating the lack of interest in the process by the political groups and candidates' supporters.

3.2 RECOMMENDATION: Amend the law to explicitly authorize and require the SJEC to enact regulations for key aspects of the electoral process, such as voter registration, nomination of candidates, electoral dispute resolution and accreditation of election observers. Require the SJEC to post all regulations on their website.

Members of governorate level sub-committees stated that they were appointed a few days after the call for the presidential election. Apart from the event of May 16, when the SJEC summoned all sub-committees to Damascus to pledge that they would practice “full independence, neutrality, impartiality and transparency” and acknowledge that “it is prohibited for any other entity to intervene in its affairs and tasks or limit its authorities,”¹³ the electoral administration’s involvement in managing electoral operations was minimal, similar to the legislative elections.

According to the Elections Law, the role of governors in elections is limited to appointing polling station-level elections committees. In practice, however, governors have a much more significant role. As in the legislative elections, governors appointed so-called support committees to assist the nomination process and the sub-committees in operational functions: human resources, printing, production of election materials and logistics (including the handling of sensitive materials such as ballot papers and ballot boxes, collection of results and other tasks). The local administration infrastructure (wihadat idariya) served as the operational backbone for these processes. This role is not defined in the law; in fact, the law implies that the Ministry of Interior carries

out support functions. During the campaign period, governors are responsible for the security of campaign events. In coordination with sub-committees, governors are in charge of organizing training and oath-taking ceremonies for polling officials. The governors are also effectively in charge of the entire Election Day operation, from the appointment of polling staff to the tabulation of results. This arrangement further undermines the independence of the electoral administration and the ability of the SJEC and the sub-committees to supervise the process and manage election staff.

Observation of the electoral process confirmed that the Ministry of Justice, governorate-level attorneys general and public prosecutors also have responsibilities in the electoral process. However, the legal basis for their involvement in the electoral process is unclear, as the Elections Law does not designate roles for them. Additionally, administration of polling by the military was implemented by a separate sub-committee established by the Ministry of Defense

3.3 RECOMMENDATIONS: Amend the law to require appointment of governorate-level administration officials on a long-term basis. Invest in long-term training of senior election administration officials. Amend the law to place all elections staff and appointees working under the authority and management of the election administration. Ensure that logistical support and handling of sensitive election materials is under the supervision of the election administration and that the role of the police is limited to providing for the security of election administration officials and the polling process. Consider establishing a permanent electoral administration office at the governorate level, under the direct management of the national-level office.

In the week prior to elections, from May 18 to 24, appointed polling staff took part in oath-taking ceremonies, with each sub-committee setting its own schedule for these events. The hour-long ceremonies were usually of a folkloric, celebratory and ceremonial nature. Polling officials received only rudimentary instructions for conducting these mass events and had limited opportunity to engage with sub-committee members.¹⁴ Further, in several cases, the ceremonies erupted into supposedly spontaneous chants of allegiance to President al-Assad, blatantly ignoring the basic principles of neutrality (see Figure 3).¹⁵

Figure 3. Oath-Taking Ceremony in Latakia



3.4 RECOMMENDATIONS: Establish a training program for polling station officials. Amend the law to require the neutrality of election officials and explicitly prohibit any expression or activity supporting any

Voters

Voters

The Syrian Constitution confers the right to vote to every citizen over 18 years of age. At the same time, the Constitution allows for the electoral legislation to restrict this right by introducing conditions—some of which are neither reasonable nor objective. Legislation further delegates power to the government to restrict voting rights, both explicitly and in practice.

Voting rights are directly linked to citizenship; only citizens of Syria have the right to vote.¹⁶ In most cases, citizenship is obtained through one's father, and place of birth does not play a role.¹⁷ Mothers cannot pass their Syrian citizenship to their children except when the father is unknown. A Syrian man can pass citizenship to his foreign wife, but a Syrian woman cannot pass citizenship to her foreign husband. This policy follows Syrian reservations on Article 9 of CEDAW (ratified in 2003), which provides equal nationality rights for men and women, including the transfer of nationality to children.¹⁸

4.1 RECOMMENDATION: Review the reservation on Article 9 of the CEDAW and amend the Nationality Law to provide equal rights for women and men in matters of nationality.

The Nationality Law allows foreign nationals of Syrian origin to apply for Syrian citizenship. The minister of Interior, given his wide discretion to grant nationality, can bypass the usual requirements and grant citizenship arbitrarily.¹⁹ The minister also has broad discretion to propose the cancellation of an individual's citizenship; conversely, Syrians cannot abandon their citizenship without permission from the government.²⁰

The Syrian opposition has repeatedly stated that the government actively engages in demographic changes by resettling Syrians within the country and by granting residency to foreigners fighting in the conflict. This in turn impacts voting preferences. While there is no reliable data on how many foreigners have been granted citizenship during the conflict, this issue bears significant political weight, especially in light of similar cases in the region.²¹ The issue of annulling and granting citizenship is especially relevant for a significant number of ethnic Kurds, whose citizenship rights have been denied in the past.

4.2 RECOMMENDATION: Review the processes for granting and annulling citizenship, including removing the power of the minister of Interior to arbitrarily decide on citizenship matters.

Perhaps the most obvious example of arbitrary restrictions in Syrian electoral law is the restriction on voting for those convicted of a “felony or dishonorable misdemeanor or that which shakes public trust.”²² The law does not define which offenses are considered to shake public trust, but instead vests authority in the minister of Justice to arbitrarily determine those that apply.²³

4.3 RECOMMENDATION: Amend the law to remove voting restrictions on convicted persons after their sentences end. Consider removing restrictions on voting by convicted persons altogether.

Persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities can be denied the right to vote in Syria. The legislation contains a vaguely defined provision that refers to those who are “mentally ill in a manner that affects his

eligibility” without elaboration. This is contrary to the relevant United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) communique, which requires that states revise their legislation to ensure it does not discriminate against intellectual disability.²⁴ It should be noted that the relevant communique of the CRPD Committee goes farther than UNHCR’s interpretation and does not allow for restriction of voting rights on the basis of intellectual disability in any instance.

4.4 RECOMMENDATION: Amend the law to remove references to the mentally ill.

The right of Syrians abroad to vote in presidential elections (but not in legislative elections) is guaranteed by the Elections Law, not by the Constitution.²⁵ While constitutions rarely address this issue, there are some notable cases.²⁶ International election standards do not require that citizens abroad be permitted to vote, although 151 countries provide this opportunity to their citizens.²⁷ Syrian legislation envisions setting up polling stations in Syrian embassies where voters can vote in person. No other type of external voting (e.g., postal ballot, proxy voting) is included in the legislation. To vote, Syrians abroad must register with an embassy and, by law, they must provide a valid passport and a valid exit stamp to vote. The law does not address the issue of refugees whatsoever. Details on registration of Syrian expatriates to vote in an embassy are provided in an IFES report on voting by Syrians abroad.²⁸

4.5 RECOMMENDATION: Amend the law to provide a legal basis for voting in Assembly elections for all Syrians abroad, including refugees.

Similar to the 2020 legislative elections, except in Syrian embassies no voter registration activities took place prior to the 2021 presidential election, and there was no voters list. This is contrary to the legislation, which requires the Ministry of Interior to prepare the registry in coordination with the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Local Administration and Central Statistics Bureau. The law also authorizes the SJEC to “update and audit” the registry two months before elections, although it provides no details about how the registry should be prepared, updated and audited.

The lack of a voters list meant that there was no way to comply with the basic principles of transparency regarding how many voters were eligible and registered, and where. Any voter data and statistics cited in statements of officials originated from the civil registry and did not reflect the large number of Syrians abroad or in areas outside the government’s control.²⁹ Use of the civil registry for electoral purposes is problematic, as it cannot be considered an accurate record of citizens in Syria.³⁰ Despite popular opinion that the Syrian regime has kept tight control of the population, this has not been reflected in orderly civil registry records—even before the conflict’s severe impact on their maintenance.³¹ Since the beginning of the conflict, NGOs have made several parallel and uncoordinated attempts to preserve civil registry records. However, these efforts are not reflected in the civil registry records used by the Syrian government.

The issue of accuracy and inclusion in the civil registry is especially significant in the case of Kurdish populations, because the civil registration status of a significant number of ethnic Kurds is not equal to that of other Syrian citizens. In 1962, the Syrian government conducted a census in the Hasakah governorate to update the register to record Kurds who purportedly entered the country from Turkey and Iraq.³² After the census, hundreds of thousands of Kurds were registered as foreigners (*ajanib*) in a special register. Many remained unrecorded (*maktoumeen*) and received only identification notification, which cannot be used for official purposes and was issued only upon approval by the Syrian Political Security Directorate. In 2011, a presidential decree ostensibly conferred citizenship on Kurds who were registered as *ajanib*, stating that they were to be reinstated in the

civil registry. However, interviews with Kurdish and Syrian activists suggest that administrative burdens, security procedures, displacement and a lack of trust resulted in only a small number of Syrian Kurds successfully claiming citizenship through this initiative.

4.6 RECOMMENDATIONS: A credible voter registry is a condition without which elections will not be acceptable to a broad range of stakeholders. Defining the electorate in a transparent manner is one of the most important steps that must be taken prior to the next election. For this reason, it is recommended that the voters list be reformed from the ground up, either by reforming civil registration or by establishing an independent voters list. This process must be defined in the law and must include measures that will guarantee transparency, accuracy and professionalism. The registration process should include procedures for registering Syrians abroad, including refugees, and taking into consideration a sizable internally displaced population. In addition, the voter registration process should consider various types of identification documents issued by various institutions and host countries.

The lack of basic transparency in voter data makes analysis of Syrians' participation in elections impossible. Numbers cited in statements by various officials cannot be trusted or verified. The SJEC did not provide voter data for the presidential election in sufficient detail, or even broken down by governorate. Since voter data was never independently verified and the electoral authorities never published the voters list, the only available information about the 2021 election are figures cited in SJEC statements (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Number of Voters According to SJEC Statements

Year Election Type	2007 Legislative	2007 Presidential	2012 Legislative	2014 Presidential	2016 Legislative	2020 Legislative	2021 Presidential
Registered or Eligible Voters	7,805,994	11,967,611	10,118,000	15,845,575	8,834,994	18,763,879	18,107,109
Votes		11,472,157	5,186,000	11,634,412	5,085,444	6,224,687	14,239,140

Attempts to estimate the number of eligible voters on the basis of population estimates are as elusive as voter registration data. The estimates of Syria's total population range between 24 million and 27 million, with 16 million to 20 million Syrians in the country and 6 million to 8.5 million outside the country.³³ Syria has one of the youngest populations in the world, with just 55 percent of the population over 18 years of age.³⁴ If this ratio is applied, estimates of Syrians of voting age within the country range from 9 million to 11 million (up to 15 million, including Syrians abroad) and 3 million to 5 million of voting age outside the country. In addition to the unverified population data, the number of Syrians living in government-controlled areas range from 9.5 million to 14 million, with the population of voting age numbering from 5.2 million to 7.7 million.

4.7 RECOMMENDATION: Consider cooperating with the UN and other international agencies to verify and consolidate population data for the purpose of planning a voter registration operation.

Candidacy

Candidacy

Candidacy for the presidency is regulated by the Constitution, reflecting the importance of the office in the Syrian governance system. Aside from the established voting age, which is in line with international standards, a number of other restrictions are either explicitly prohibited by treaty standards or could be counterproductive in the Syrian context.

The most direct violation of the ICCPR is a constitutional restriction on religion. The Constitution allows only Muslims to be candidates for presidency.³⁵ Other restrictions that should be reviewed are:³⁶

- Candidates must be Syrian at birth, with both parents of Syrian nationality by birth. Dual nationals are not eligible to run.
- Similar to candidates for Parliament, presidential candidates must enjoy civil and political rights and have no record of conviction for a dishonorable felony. However, those who seek presidential candidacy also remain ineligible even if their rights are reinstated at a later date.
- The Constitution implies that candidates must be male, as the language utilizes a feminine version of “spouse” in the context of prohibited marriage to a non-Syrian. While the Constitution does not explicitly bar women from candidacy, this provision uses gender-discriminatory language. Since the SJEC did not publish reasons for rejection of candidacy, it is unclear whether the candidate’s sex is ultimately a disqualifying factor.
- Candidates must have resided in Syria for at least 10 continuous years leading up to the election. Considering the length of the conflict, this would disqualify candidates from the diaspora or refugees who fled the war.
- Perhaps the most politically prohibitive restriction is the requirement that a candidate be supported by at least 35 Members of Parliament. Current members were elected through processes that did not meet democratic standards, and without genuine competition. It is difficult to envision how opposition candidates could secure support from these legislative representatives.

5.1 RECOMMENDATIONS: Amend the Constitution to remove restrictions that do not comply with electoral standards or that place undue burdens on potential candidates in the Syrian context. Review the following restrictions for potential removal: dual nationality, ineligibility of candidates whose civil and political rights have been reinstated, marriage to a foreign national and continuous residency of 10 years. Revise the Constitution and Electoral Laws to incorporate gender-inclusive language. Consider replacing the endorsement requirement with a requirement to obtain a certain level of popular support (e.g., 100,000 signatures).

The Constitution and the Electoral Laws do not regulate the administrative process for candidacy in great detail; this is covered by Cabinet-issued regulations.³⁷ However, regulations regarding nomination of candidates should be issued by the electoral authority (see Recommendation 3.2). Further, the outline of the process in the Constitution and in the law, and the provisions in the regulations are inconsistent. Perhaps the most important discrepancy is in the sequence of events: The law requires candidates to present endorsements when applying for candidacy, while the regulation allows applications and requests for endorsements in parallel for 10 days. In practice, this means candidates who submit applications later in the process have

very little opportunity to obtain required endorsements. Candidacies are announced daily during a continuous session of Parliament, and members grant endorsements daily during this period. Contrary to the regulation, candidates themselves do not notify Parliament of their candidacy; notification is issued by the SCC.

Figure 5. MP Endorsing a Candidate



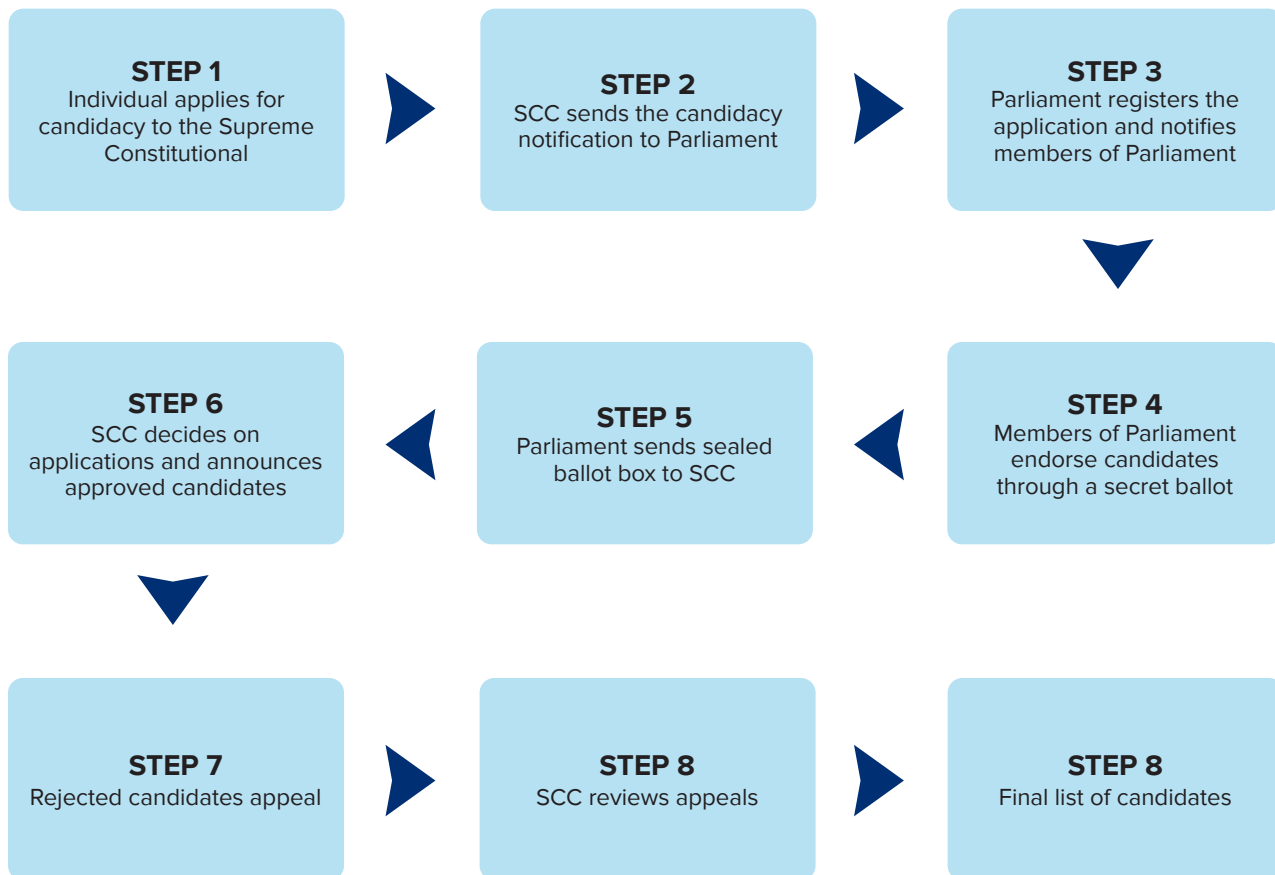
Photo Credit: SANA

5.2 RECOMMENDATION: Review regulations and streamline candidacy procedures to ensure equal treatment of all candidates' candidacy applications.

The SJEC published decisions on candidacy applications for the presidential election during a press conference on May 3. It approved the candidacies of Abdallah Saloum Abdallah, Bashar al-Assad and Mahmoud Merai. The remaining 48 applications were rejected because they “did not meet the legal requirements.” Seven of the rejected candidates were women.³⁸ No information was provided on which legal requirements the candidates did not meet, or how many endorsements they had collected. The SCC announced that rejected candidates had the right to object within three days and that, until any appeals were resolved, candidacies would not be finalized, and the approved candidates could not start to campaign.

5.3 RECOMMENDATION: Amend the law to require the electoral administration to publish the reasons for rejection of candidacy applications.

Figure 6. Nomination Process for the Presidential Election (April 19–28, 2021)



Competition and Campaigning

Competition and Campaigning

Campaigning in the 2021 presidential election was markedly different than in the 2020 legislative elections, which did not see intense campaigning by the candidates or the lists. However, the presidential campaign was not characterized by competition among the candidates, presentation of political platforms and policies, or messaging that would distinguish one candidate from another. The focus of campaigning was overwhelmingly on getting out the vote to support the apparent legitimacy of the election with high a turnout.

The Elections Law codifies some basic campaigning rules.³⁹ However, the cabinet-level regulation does not expand the rules or provide guidance for their implementation.⁴⁰ The law prohibits use of public funds for electoral campaigns. It also prohibits foreign funding, but it adds “external funding,” which implies that Syrians who reside outside the country may not contribute to the campaigns. The law also appears very restrictive about who can contribute: Only political parties and candidates may fund a campaign, implying that donations from individuals or organizations are prohibited. This is contrary to the widespread production and display of banners and posters expressing support for President al-Assad. The legislation remains mostly silent on how campaign finance rules are to be implemented, requiring only that each candidate submit a final financial statement, audited by the certified auditor.

Perhaps the most restrictive rule that undermines competition and campaigning is that a candidate may campaign only once the SCC confirms his candidacy.⁴¹ This undermines basic rights of free political speech and organizing. In addition, uncertainty over the length of the campaign period undermines opportunities for candidates to organize effective campaigns.

6.1 RECOMMENDATIONS: Review and amend the legislation to include principles of transparency in campaign financing. Consider removing the limitation on external funding, which could exclude a significant number of Syrians displaced due to the conflict, contrary to the framework of UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Amend the legislation to mandate electoral authorities to develop regulations on how to implement monitoring and enforcement of campaign financing rules. Amend the legislation to explicitly allow contributions of Syrian voters to the campaigns. Amend the legislation to remove campaigning restrictions prior to certification of candidates.

On May 10, the SCC announced that the campaign period would begin on May 16 and end 24 hours before the start of polling on May 26, as prescribed by law,⁴² effectively allowing only 10 days of campaigning. The SCC also called on the candidates and their supporters to respect the dates and avoid campaigning before the official campaign period. Since voting by Syrians abroad was scheduled for May 20, the candidates had no opportunity to address the Syrian diaspora.⁴³ All three approved candidates launched their campaigns on May 16.

Mahmoud Merai chose *Maan* (“Together”) as his campaign slogan. His campaign platform used a combination of messages that addressed reconstruction, release of political prisoners, rejection of sectarian strife, building a new social contract and support for underprivileged classes. He demanded a participatory democracy in Syria, criticized unilateral US sanctions on Syria and accused the opposition in the diaspora of treason and

trying to undermine the UN-proposed transitional process. Merai expressed surprise, as a credible opposition candidate, at being approved to run, and said the government showed positive intentions by permitting his candidacy. “I see that there is a new mentality in Syria, which could be the beginning of a national democratic change. We must adhere to and develop this nascent experience,” Merai stated in an interview with the Sputnik news agency.⁴⁴

On May 17, the Democratic Arab Socialist Union party, which Merai claimed to represent, issued a statement denying any relationship with him.⁴⁵ In addition, the Syrian Solidarity Party reportedly filed a lawsuit against Merai accusing him of “defamation, slander, treason and scolding.”⁴⁶ The secretary general of the Solidarity party, Abu Qasim, stated that candidates do not have immunity before the courts. Abu Qasim accused Merai of violating paragraph 3 of Article 50 of the Elections Law, which prohibits campaigns that “violate public order and public morals,” stating that attacking licensed political parties violates this rule. Merai in turn accused the Solidarity Party of establishing relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and being linked to the opposition and the banned National Democratic Front (*Jud*). Finally, the Youth for Building and Change party filed an appeal with the SCC, claiming that Merai had resided outside the country for a period exceeding the constitutionally permissible limit. Several local and external opposition groups challenged Merai’s claim of being an opposition candidate.

Abdallah Saloum Abdallah’s campaign slogan was “Our strength comes from our unity.” His campaign focused on defeating “economic terrorism,” sanctions imposed by countries “that have no minimum of humanity, morality of principles.” Abdallah is a member of the political bureau of the Socialist Unionist Party but did not promote his candidacy or provide details of his platform. Further, the coalition of the National Progressive Front, of which the Socialist Unionist Party is a member, announced support for the candidacy of Bashar al-Assad.

While Merai and Abdallah took part in TV and press interviews to appeal to voters, President al-Assad did not. His campaign centered around the slogan “Work brings hope” and focused on consolidating military victory by promoting the reconstruction of Syria. Campaign messages addressed “transforming destruction and terrorism into renovation and peace.”

In contrast to the legislative elections, the government invested significant efforts in get-out-the-vote campaigns for the presidential election. The Ministry of Interior sponsored four songs by prominent Syrian performing artists,⁴⁷ and “Support the Presidential Election” events were organized across the country. Media channels promoted the importance of participation to motivate voters to go to the polls. Most messages included images of the Syrian flag, without photos or direct references to al-Assad. Many showed local politicians attending “Support the Presidential Election” events and calling on voters to participate in elections and vote for “the most suitable candidate,” the one “who protects the homeland” and “supports and leads the Syrian Arab Army.” These events were hosted by universities, municipalities, tribes, and other organizations and received significant airtime on the state-run media.

Campaign activities and promotional materials in direct or indirect support of President al-Assad dwarfed those of Merai and Abdallah. This was especially noticeable in the number of posters and banners displayed in the streets and on buildings. It appears that the majority of campaign materials were produced by local state institutions, communities, businesses and individuals, rather than being financed by the centralized campaign fund or the President Assad’s Ba’ath party. News reports claimed that business owners were encouraged—and sometimes forced—to put out campaign materials. In contrast, most of Merai’s and Abdallah’s campaign materials were limited to paid billboard advertising on roads (see Figure 7).

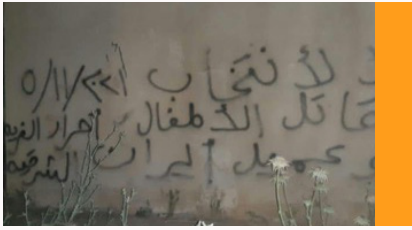
Figure 7. Campaign Billboards



A campaign challenging the legitimacy of the presidential election was launched on the internet and social media, and it spread even inside government-controlled areas. In Daraa, posters and graffiti called for rejecting the election and warned against participation. They reminded residents of the “hardships and violence that they and their sons have endured.” On May 23, revolutionary and tribal groups in Daraa called for a boycott of the election, stating that it was taking place in a “despotic climate” in which Syrians’ free will had been “confiscated.”⁴⁸ Other activists and public figures in the governorate issued statements rejecting the election and objecting to the opening of polling stations.⁴⁹ Activists in the village of Herak in eastern Daraa posted a statement on Facebook rejecting the opening of polling stations in Herak and calling for a “no-tolerance” approach to those promoting the election. Similar appeals were documented in Jassem city in Northern Daraa and the villages of Jaydour, Nahta, Saida, Nassib, Taybe and Tassil. The campaign in the Daraa area was not limited to statements and graffiti; protests took place in villages and towns, including Eastern Karak, Easter Ghaziya, Western Mleiha and Jassem. Unconfirmed reports emerged that the SJEC had cancelled plans to open polling centers in Saida, Taybeh, Ghaziya, Kerfa and other areas to “protect the polling and the security staff.”⁵⁰ This concern appeared justified, as videos of militias threatening to attack the polling centers circulated on the internet.

On May 18, Homs-based media reported an attack on an al-Assad campaign tent in the village of Farhaniya, adjacent to the town of Talbiseh on the Homs-Hama highway in the northern countryside of Homs. Ammar Fawzi Talawi, a sound engineer, was killed in the tent, and two others were wounded. The Saraya Mukawama in Homs group had issued a threat against the tent on Telegram the previous day and then claimed responsibility for killing Talawi.⁵¹

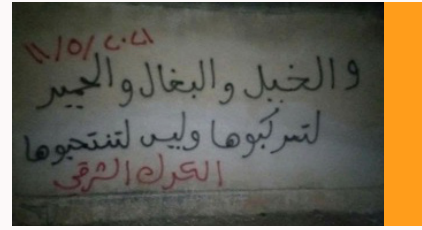
On May 24, the Council of Syrian Tribes and Clans held its fourth conference in the countryside of Aleppo under the slogan “Our strength is in our unity.” In a closing statement, the council rejected “Bashar’s sham and illegal elections,” which they claimed had “violated the right of Syrians to choose their leadership.” The statement added, “the Assad regime has no right to hold any elections before the enactment of a new Constitution and under full UN supervision of elections in a safe and neutral environment, in accordance with Security Council Resolutions 2118 and 2254.”

Figure 8. Campaign Graffiti Opposing Bashar al-Assad, May 11, 2021

“No to voting for the assassin of children and Iran’s infiltrator.”
—The Free of Eastern Ghoura

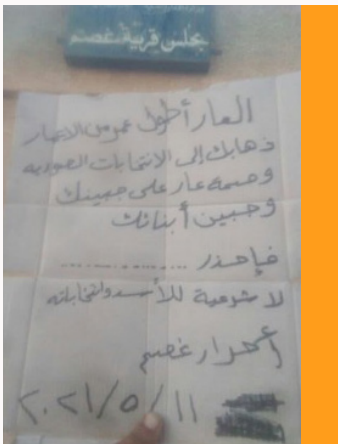


“No to voting for the assassin of children and Iran’s infiltrator.”
—Eastern Karak

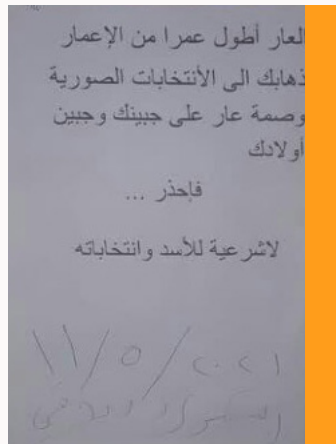


“Horses, donkeys and mules are to be ridden and not to be voted [for].”
—Eastern Karak

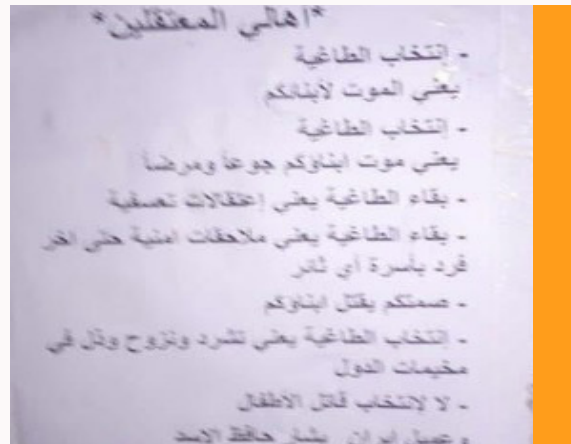
Similar anti-election activities were documented in Deir Ezzor and Quneitra. For example, on May 25, threatening leaflets were left on the doors and cars of Ba’ath Party members in the town of Ovania in the northern countryside of Quneitra. The messaging demanded the closure of the polling center that was allegedly established by the Ba’ath Party and the security branches. A number of polling stations in Quneitra were closed after citizens refused to participate in the elections.⁵²

Figure 9. Anti-Election leaflets, May 11, 2021

“Shame lasts for a lifetime. Participating in these sham elections is shameful to you and your children, so be aware. No legitimacy for Assad and his elections.”
—The Free of Ghasm (Posted at Ghasm Local Council Building, Daraa)



“Shame lasts for a lifetime. Participating in these sham elections is shameful to you and your children, so be aware. No legitimacy for Assad and his elections.”
(Posted in Eastern Karak)



“Voting for the tyrant means death to your children from hunger and sickness. Tyrant staying in power means mass arrests. Tyrant staying in power means security prosecution of all family members of any revolutionary. Your silence is killing your sons. Voting for the tyrant means homelessness, displacement and humiliation in foreign camps. No to voting for the assassin of children and Iran’s infiltrator Bashar Hafez Assad.”
— Families of the Detainees (Posted in Western Mliha)

Social Media

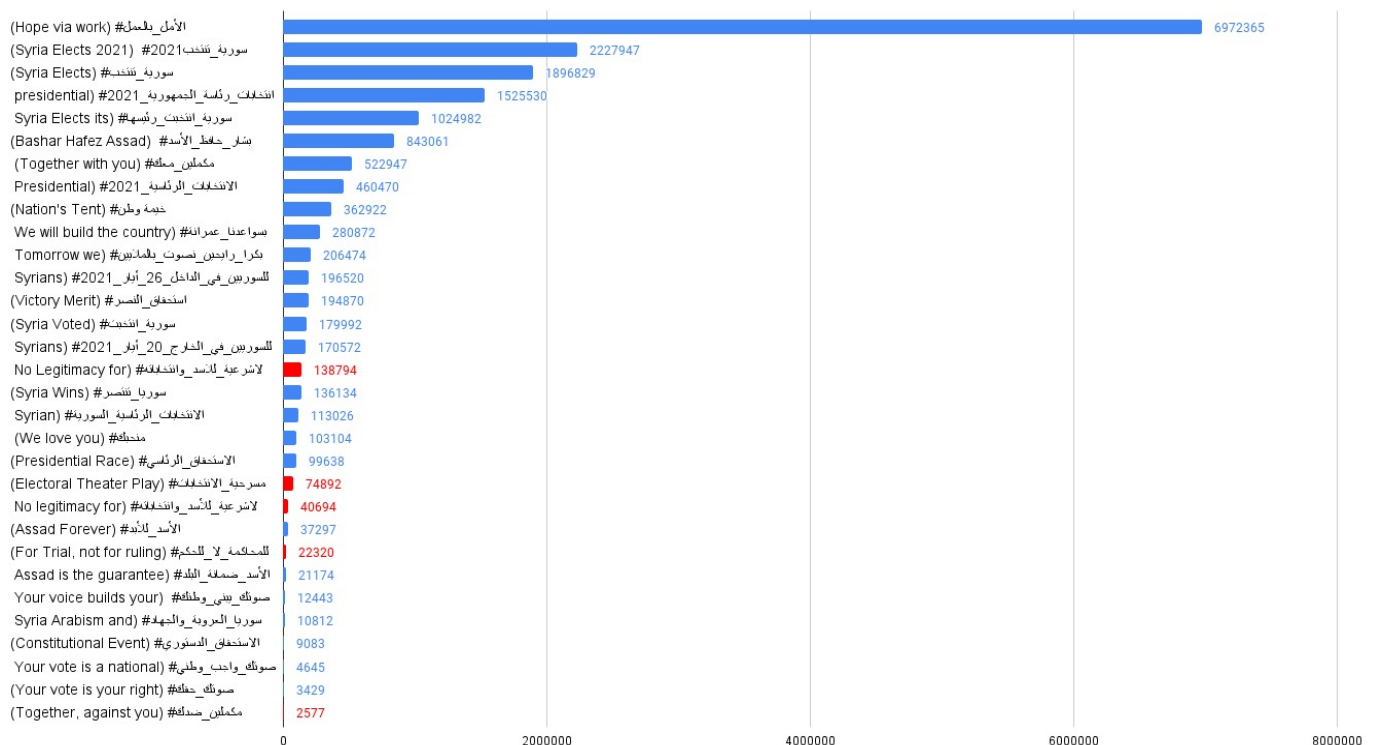
Social Media

Monitoring of social media confirmed that Facebook is the primary social media platform for campaigning and exchange of election-related communications in Syria. From May 6 to June 5, this assessment focused on pages, hashtags, likes, reach, views and comments, and collected 82,239 posts from 5,651 pages.⁵³ This level of activity represents a significant increase from the 2020 legislative elections, when only 13,478 election-related posts were documented over 70 days. The key factors that influenced this increase were the efforts of the opposition to discredit the election and the advanced campaign supporting al-Assad by encouraging increased turnout. Analysis did not identify any significant disinformation campaigns.⁵⁴

Pro- and Anti-election Campaigns

Of 31 election-related hashtag campaigns, 26 supported the process and/or President al-Assad, but none supported Merai or Abdallah. Five campaigns opposed the election process by attempting to undermine its credibility and calling on voters to boycott the election. No significant campaigns supported Merai. The pro-election campaign, with 17,617,138 interactions, was disproportionately more active than the anti-election campaign, with only 279,277 interactions (see Figure 10). Anti-election campaigns were more active on Twitter than Facebook, presumably targeting international audiences. One anti-election campaign was launched by the Syrian National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (*Etilaf*) under the title “To trial, not to rule,” targeting every Syrian user within and outside the country.

Figure 10. Interactions per Hashtag Campaign



The top 100 Facebook pages posting electoral topics produced over 40 percent of the content. Only one was affiliated with the opposition, and it ran an anti-election campaign. The vast majority of pro-election pages were set up by the state media, the Ba'ath Party or media institutions supporting the Syrian government, indicating better organizational capacity and coordination of online campaigns.

Geographical Distribution of Posts

The vast majority of engagement with the Facebook campaigns— approximately 89 percent of posts—originated within Syria. This reflects the low level of support for election among the Syrian diaspora. The distribution of engagements originating outside Syria was as follows: Turkey, 3 percent; Lebanon, 2 percent; and Iraq, Germany, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, 1 percent each. Figure 11 lists the number of posts originating from the top 20 countries.

Figure 11. Top 20 Countries Engaging with the Elections

Country	Number of Posts	Country	Number of Posts
1. Syria	71,898	11. United States	179
2. Turkey	2,228	12. Qatar	142
3. Lebanon	1,741	13. Kuwait	125
4. Iraq	566	14. Tunisia	125
5. Egypt	504	15. Iran	120
6. Germany	503	16. Great Britain	88
7. United Arab Emirates	453	17. Palestine	88
8. Jordan	347	18. Algeria	84
9. Sweden	341	19. Canada	81
10. France	217	20. Morocco	81

Most engagements with the anti-election campaigns originated abroad; Turkey, Germany and Denmark were the most common countries of origin. Several pro-election campaigns were launched by users in Lebanon, Palestine and Egypt. cursory analysis of these campaigns revealed that they were support by organized online groups affiliated with Syria's regional allies such as Hezbollah and Iraqi groups close to Muqtada al-Sadr.⁵⁶

Public institutions Supporting al-Assad

President al-Assad garnered considerable online support on the Facebook pages of public institutions, ministries, educational establishments, syndicates and private companies. Figure 12 lists public institutions that posted pro-election messages.

Figure 12. Public Institutions that Posted Pro-Election Messages

Page Name Arabic	Page Name English
مديرية المسارح والموسيقا - دمشق	Directorate of Theaters & Music - Damascus
جامعة الفرات	Al-Furat University
سيريئل	Syriatel
الهيئة الإدارية لكلية التربية بجامعة حلب	The Administrative Board of the Faculty of Education at the University of Aleppo
مديرية أوقاف دمشق	Directorate of Endowments of Damascus
الهيئة العامة لمستشفى العيون الجراحي بدمشق	General Authority of the Ophthalmological Surgical Hospital in Damascus
المؤسسة السورية للتجارة	Syrian Trade Institution
الهيئة الإدارية لكلية الحقوق - تعليم مفتوح	The Administrative Board of the Faculty of Law - Open Learning
جامعة البعث - كلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية	Al-Baath University - College of Arts and Humanities
مديرية تربية الحسكة	Al-Hasakah Directorate of Education
مسبح ومطعم نادي الجلاء العائلي	Al-Jalaa Family Club and Swimming Pool
نقابة المعلمين في سورية	Teachers` Syndicate in Syria
المؤسسة العامة السورية للتأمين	Syrian Public Establishment for Insurance
الهيئة الإدارية لوحدة معهد إدارة الأعمال والتسويق في جامعة حلب	The Administrative Board of the Institute of Business Administration and Marketing Unit at the University of Aleppo
الهيئة العامة للإذاعة والتلفزيون في سورية - قناة دراما	The General Authority for Radio and Television in Syria - Drama channel
كلية التربية في جامعة طرطوس-الهيئة الإدارية	Faculty of Education at Tartous University - Administrative Authority
مديرية صحة اللاذقية	Lattakia Health Directorate
نقابة أطباء الأسنان بطرطوس	Dentists` Syndicate in Tartous
نقابة أطباء الأسنان في سورية	Dentists` Syndicate in Syria
نقابة المهندسين السوريين - فرع حمص	Syrian Engineers` Syndicate-Homs Branch
اتحاد عمال حمص	Homs Workers Union
المكتب الصحفي - مديرية التربية في حماة	Press Office - Directorate of Education in Hama
الهيئة الإدارية لكلية الاقتصاد_وحدة التعليم المفتوح	The Administrative Board of the Faculty of Economics_Open Learning Unit
الهيئة الإدارية لكلية الاقتصاد-جامعة حلب	The Administrative Board of the Faculty of Economics - Aleppo University

Page Name Arabic	Page Name English
الهيئة الادارية لكلية طب الأسنان جامعة حلب	Administrative Board of the Faculty of Dentistry, Aleppo University
الهيئة العامة للإذاعة والتلفزيون	Public Authority for Radio and Television
-جامعة طرطوس	Tartous University
مديرية صحة حماه	Hama Health Directorate
مشفى تشرين	Tishreen-hospital
المكتب التنفيذي لبلدية داريا	Daraya Municipal Executive Office
الهيئة الإدارية بكلية التربية-فرع جامعة البعث	The Administrative Board of the College of Education - Al-Baath University Branch
الهيئة الإدارية لكلية الهندسة المعمارية جامعة حلب	The administrative body of the Faculty of Architecture, University of Aleppo
جامعة الحواش الخاصة	Al-Hawash Private University
كلية العلوم السياسية جامعة دمشق	Faculty of Political Science, Damascus University
مجلس مدينة حماه	Hama City Council
مديرية الثقافة بدمشق	Directorate of Culture, Damascus
مديرية اوقاف ريف دمشق	Directorate of Endowments, Rural Damascus
مستشفى الأسد الجامعي بدمشق	Al-Assad University Hospital in Damascus
نقابة أطباء اللاذقية	Lattakia Medical Syndicate
نقابة الصيادلة فرع حماه	Pharmacists` Syndicate Hama Branch
نقابة المهندسين فرع حلب	Engineers` Syndicate, Aleppo Branch
نقابة صيادلة سوريا -	Syrian Pharmacists Syndicate
الشركة العامة لكهرباء محافظة دمشق	The General Electricity Company of Damascus Governorate
الشركة العامة لمرفأ طرطوس	The General Establishment for Tartus Port
. المؤسسة السورية للمخابز	The General Establishment for Bakeries
المؤسسة العامة لنقل وتوزيع الكهرباء	General Corporation for Electricity Transmission and Distribution
الهيئة الإدارية في كلية الآداب جامعة حماة	The Administrative Body of the Faculty of Arts, University of Hama
الهيئة الإدارية في كلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية	The Administrative Board of the College of Arts and Humanities
الهيئة الإدارية في كلية التربية - جامعة تشرين	The Administrative Board of the Faculty of Education - Tishreen University
الهيئة الإدارية في كلية الطب البشري - جامعة البعث	The Administrative Body of the Faculty of Medicine - Al-Baath University

Page Name Arabic	Page Name English
الهيئة الإدارية في كلية الهندسة المعمارية	The Administrative Body of the Faculty of Architecture
الهيئة الإدارية لكلية الهندسة الكهربائية والإلكترونية	Administrative Board of the Faculty of Electrical and Electronic Engineering
الهيئة الإدارية في كلية الحقوق - جامعة البعث	The administrative body of the Faculty of Law - Al-Baath University
الهيئة الإدارية لكلية الحقوق - جامعة حلب	Administrative Board of the Faculty of Law - University of Aleppo
الهيئة العامة لمشفى الباسل /	General Authority of Al - Bassel Hospital
جامعة دمشق _ كلية الحقوق _ دراسات قانونية	Damascus University _ Faculty of Law _ Legal Studies
كلية الآداب في جامعة طرطوس - الهيئة الإدارية	The Faculty of Arts at Tartous University - the administrative body
كلية الزراعة جامعة تشرين/الصفحة الرسمية	Faculty of Agriculture, Tishreen University/official page
كلية الصيدلة - جامعة دمشق	Faculty of Pharmacy - Damascus University
كلية الطب البشري في جامعة طرطوس - الهيئة الإدارية	Faculty of Medicine at Tartous University - Administrative Board
كلية الهندسة التقنية في طرطوس - الهيئة الإدارية	Faculty of Technical Engineering in Tartous - Administrative Authority
كلية هندسة تكنولوجيا المعلومات والاتصالات - الهيئة الإدارية	College of Information and Communication Technology Engineering - Administrative Authority
مجلس مدينة جبلة	Jableh City Council
مجلس مدينة دوما	Douma City Council
مجلس مدينة ديرالزور	Deir Ezzor City Council
مديرية أوقاف حماة	Hama Endowments Directorate
مديرية أوقاف حمص	Homs Endowments Directorate
مديرية سياحة حمص	Homs Tourism Directorate
مديرية صحة محافظة ريف دمشق	Damascus Countryside Governorate Health Directorate
نقابة المحامين - فرع حلب	Bar Association - Aleppo Branch
نقابة صيادلة سوريا فرع ريف دمشق	Syrian Pharmacists Syndicate, Rural Damascus Branch
نقابة مهندسي ريف دمشق - الصفحة الرسمية	Syndicate of Rural Damascus Engineers - official page

Candidates launched official Facebook campaign pages on May 16. The al-Assad campaign utilized Facebook more than the other candidates' campaigns and generated exponentially more interest and engagement (see Figure 13).

Figure 13. Public Institutions that Posted Pro-Election Messages

	“Hope for Work” Bashar al-Assad	“Together” Mahmood Merai	“Our Strength Is from Our Unity” Abdallah Saloum Abdallah
Posts During the Campaign eriod	166	48	35
Interactions With Official Page	1,076,618	13,626	2,681
Type of Media	<u>Live video:</u> 2 <u>Shared video:</u> 53 <u>Photos:</u> 65 <u>Status:</u> 46	<u>Link:</u> 2 <u>Live video:</u> 3 <u>Uploaded video:</u> 19 <u>Photos:</u> 21 <u>Status:</u> 2 <u>YouTube:</u> 1	<u>Live video:</u> 2 <u>Uploaded video:</u> 10 <u>Photos:</u> 22 <u>Status:</u> 1

The messaging of the al-Assad campaign was similar to the overall media campaign, with themes addressing reconstruction, Syria's win over terrorism, its struggle against the blockade and the importance of reviving various sectors to overcome the crisis. The campaign page published videos of an ad campaign, photos and videos of major pro-Assad campaign events in regions and information about the voting process abroad.

Merai's campaign called for establishment of a participatory government, and dialogue between the internal opposition and the government. It also promoted the release of prisoners of conscience. Merai's Facebook posts consisted mostly of videos of his media interviews and meetings.

Abdallah's campaign was the least active on social media and generated negligible engagement. The 35 posts focused mostly on the importance of reconciliation and resistance against occupation and plots against Syria. The vast majority of posts presented footage of Abdallah's media interviews. No customized advertising campaign was developed. Figures 14 and 15 show interactions on the official Facebook campaign pages and Facebook "likes" trends, respectively.

Figure 14. Interactions on the Official Campaign Facebook Pages

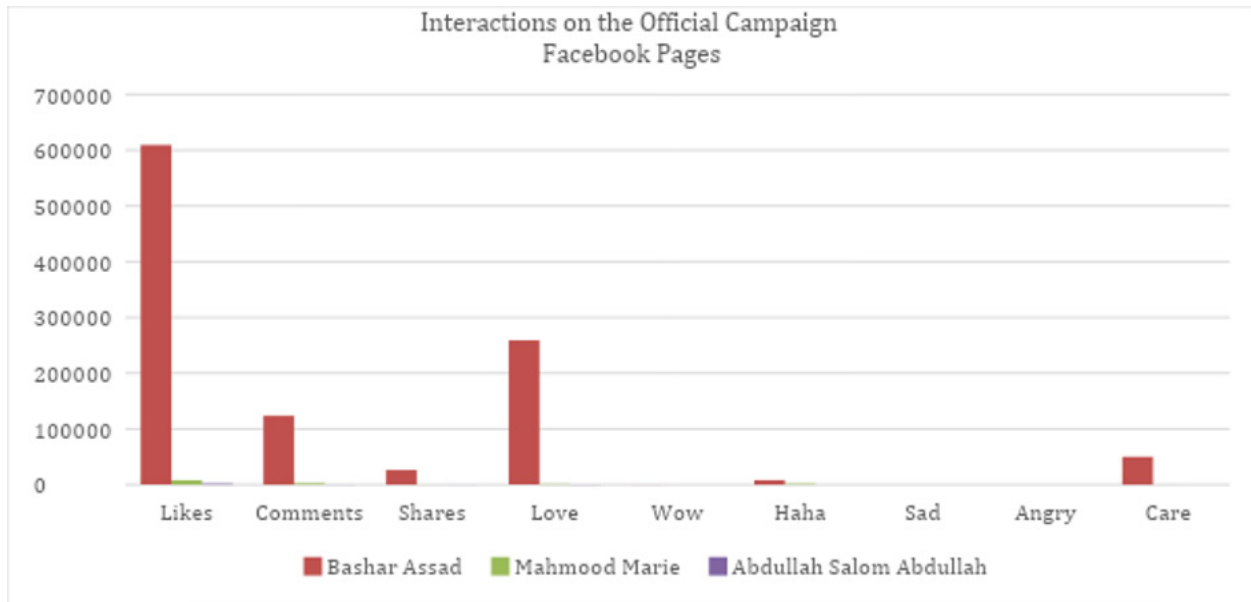
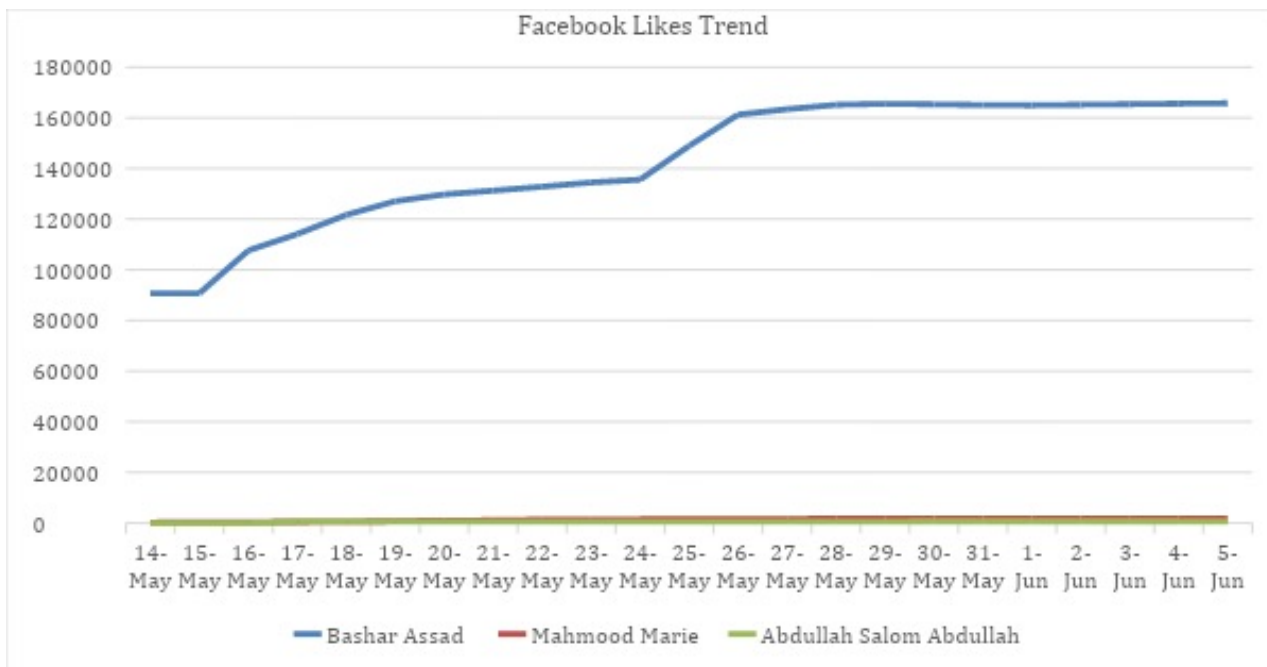


Figure 15. Facebook “Likes” Trends



Internally Displaced Persons

Internally Displaced Persons

The 2016 amendments to the electoral laws allowed for polling stations for internally displaced persons (IDPs) to be set up outside of governorates. The amendments also allowed voters to transfer their registrations to other governorates. However, the law provides no guidance on how voting by IDPs should be administered or the procedures for verifying of IDP status.

Since there was no voter list and the presidential election was held in a single, nationwide constituency, IDPs could vote at any polling station in the country. The number of IDPs who were eligible and who voted was never recorded or published because there was no voters list or registration method for them. While some officials made statements implying that electoral authorities had increased the number of polling stations to accommodate IDP communities, no systematic information on this subject was published.^{57,58} The election results include no information on voting by IDPs—their total number, turnout rate or votes were not transparent, and there is no data to estimate their participation in the election.

8.1 RECOMMENDATIONS: The electoral authority should develop regulations for the registration of and voting by IDPs, including measures to safeguard the integrity of the process and criteria for the establishment of IDP polling stations. Revise the presentation of election results to include data on IDP polling stations.

Polling and Counting

Polling and Counting

The Syrian legal framework does not protect the integrity of polling, as it does not include effective measures for the control and oversight of polling committees, the secrecy of voting or effective administration of the process. Even basic procedural measures stipulated in the law were not implemented on Election Day.

According to the election law, electoral sub-committees should identify polling stations at least seven days before Election Day in coordination with governorate administrations. The governorate-level sub-committees announced that they had issued official decisions with lists of polling locations—yet the lists were not made public. The only source of information on polling stations was occasional statements from the sub-committees. However, the number of polling stations according to those statements changed repeatedly and did not add up to the final number of 12,102 that was announced during a joint press conference between the Ministry of Interior and SJEC.⁵⁹

Figure 16. Number of Polling Centers as Announced by Governorate Election Authorities on May 19, 2021⁶⁰

1. Damascus	1,870		9. Idlib	40	
2. Latakia	1,018	Increased to 1,018 by May 24	10. Raqqa	95	increased to 95 by May 23
3. Aleppo	628		11. Rural Damascus	2,058	
4. Rural Aleppo	617		12. Quneitra	130	33 in Qunaitra, 64 in IDP settlements in Reef Dimashk, 25 in IDP settlements in Damascus and 8 in IDP settlements in Daraa
5. Homs	1216		13. Deir ez-Zor	357	Decreased to 317 by May 23
6. Tartus	789		14. Al-Hasakah	157	
7. Hama	1,040		15. Daraa		(Around 200)
8. As-Suwayda	365				Total: About 10,560

The lack of transparency regarding the number and locations of polling stations, as well as arbitrary last-minute increases in numbers of polling stations, undermines the integrity of the process and makes it difficult to supervise polling.

9.1 RECOMMENDATIONS: Amend the law to require election administrators to publish a complete list of polling stations in advance of elections, including the number of registered voters for each station. Amend the law to prescribe venues for polling stations.

While the law does not regulate the process for administering the military vote, observations indicated that military polling stations were administered by and in coordination with military personnel. The military voted on the same day as the rest of the public, but information on the locations of military polling stations was not published.

9.2 RECOMMENDATION: Amend the law to regulate administration of the military vote consistent with Recommendation 3.2, which addresses supervision and management of the electoral administration. As mentioned in the Voters section, no voter lists were available at polling stations on Election Day. Voter eligibility was “determined” only by checking each voter’s identification. Those who voted were recorded in a log that contained five fields: 1) serial number, 2) full name of the voter (including father’s name), 3) mother’s name, 4) register location and number and 5) ID card number.

Since voters were not assigned to specific stations, and the president is elected at large, voters could vote in their governorate of origin or of residence. In addition to increasing the risk of fraud, this ambiguity complicates the planning of election logistics and has direct implications for Election Day operations such as staffing, distribution of election materials, crowding and locations of polling stations. In addition, the lack of voters lists made verification impossible, turnout figures.

Direct observation of, and media reports about, the polling process painted a picture of chaos, intimidation and coercion of voters, and a breakdown of basic integrity protection measures.⁶¹ Security forces were present both inside and outside polling centers. The government and the Ba’ath Party appear to have applied systemic pressure through universities, labor unions, syndicates, tribes, governmental institutions and private businesses to increase voter turnout. Students in Homs were not allowed to leave their campus before voting, and students in Damascus were not allowed to submit their exams without voting. The University of Tartous did not admit students to classrooms unless they had voted. In Deir Ezzor, school grades were announced on Election Day; parents were asked to accompany their children and to vote before they could receive the grades.

In Hasaka, Qamishli and Suweida, general directors in governmental institutions and heads of labor unions threatened to dismiss employees who abstained from voting. Governmental organizations compiled their own voter lists to be marked when employees voted. In Al-Hasakah and Qamishli, tribal leaders pressured members of their tribes to vote for al-Assad. Pressure campaigns ensuring that civil servants voted were reported in Damascus and Aleppo.

Unlike the scenes broadcast on television, long queues of voters were not seen in most of the observed polling centers in Syria. Crowding and queues were documented in the early hours of Election Day, when students, civil servants and public sector employees tended to vote, and in polling stations where the media and official delegations were visiting. Where turnout was high, queues were not very organized, and COVID-19 preventive measures were not implemented. Although the law explicitly prohibits campaigning on

Election Day, the SJEC announced that “promotional agents” (*munachet*) were permitted to operate outside polling stations and promote their candidates within legally permissible bounds.”

Enforcing vote secrecy was not a priority for polling officials. Voting booths were either unavailable or were ignored. In some cases, polling officials asked voters not to booths to make the process faster. Voting occurred in the presence of state security agents or representatives of student unions linked to the Ba’ath Party. All the observed polling stations were staffed by officials who were prominent Ba’ath Party loyalists. Multiple voting, ballot box stuffing, coaching of voters and marking ballots with bloodied fingers were regular features of Election Day. Indelible ink, which in theory prevents multiple voting, was used only as a sign of loyalty to President Assad outside of polling stations. For example, in Homs, people crossing checkpoints were asked to show their fingers to confirm that they had voted.

Figure 17. Presidential Ballots



In the governorate of Daraa, the process was strikingly different—and many residents rejected it altogether. Calls for a boycott were common before Election Day, leading to scattered attacks against polling centers the night before polling. On Election Day, a general strike took place in a number of villages and towns, and polling activities were completely absent. The government transported military personnel and their families to the boycotting areas of Daraa and Douma to cast votes and thereby increase participation in those areas.

9.3 RECOMMENDATIONS: Introduce mechanisms for the supervision and control of polling committees, along with a robust training program. Guarantee the right to observe the polling process. Amend the election law to explicitly prohibit proxy voting and confirm that only in-person voting is allowed. Establish polling procedures to protect the secrecy of voting and regulate voting of illiterate citizens. Ensure that ballot boxes are secured with tamper-evident seals.

The election law does not mention non-partisan election observers having the right to observe polling, but it explicitly allows candidates and their agents (*wakil*) to observe elections. The role of candidates' agents is not to contribute to independent scrutiny of elections but to protect the candidate's interests. Syria is the only country in the region without non-partisan observation groups.

No international observation missions were deployed to observe the presidential election. Syria's Parliament invited "friendly" parliaments from other countries to follow the process but not to observe, as this would "undermine the nation's sovereignty."⁶³ The initial announcement listed 14 countries.⁶⁴ The Ministry of Information announced that it had accredited 290 foreign reporters from 65 countries for election reporting.

9.4 RECOMMENDATIONS: Amend the election law to allow observation by non-partisan organizations. Amend the election law to allow invitations to be issued to international observation missions.

Diaspora Voting

Diaspora Voting

IFES conducted a comprehensive assessment of Syrian diaspora voting in the 2021 presidential election and made 14 recommendations for future diaspora voting. The assessment included surveying voting processes in Jordan, Lebanon, Sweden and Turkey. It is available on IFES' website in English and Arabic.⁶⁵ This section briefly summarizes the assessment.

The legal framework for Syrian diaspora voting and related operational practices do not meet international standards. The electoral process for the presidential election excluded the vast majority of Syrians living outside the country, particularly those displaced by conflict. It lacked all basic electoral transparency and accountability measures for voter registration and polling procedures and results. Voting was limited to diplomatic missions. Diaspora members were subjected to pressure and intimidation, compromising their ability to vote freely.

Syria has an estimated diaspora of nearly 8.5 million—nearly 30 percent of Syria's internationally estimated total population. The vast majority are refugees. A recent UN survey found that 90 percent of Syrian refugees could not meet their basic needs in host countries. While UN Security Council Resolution 2254 establishes a framework for holding elections involving the diaspora, the 2021 presidential election was organized outside this framework and was denounced by large parts of the diaspora and the international community.

The Syrian legal framework does not provide for an inclusive or credible process. It contains multiple provisions that exclude voters, with particular impact on refugees, and lacks fundamental electoral safeguards. Members of the diaspora cannot run as presidential candidates even if they return to Syria. There are no transparency or accountability measures, and no provisions are made for independent scrutiny or access to remedy. Diaspora voting is administered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates and takes place at Syrian embassies.

The election administration fundamentally lacked independence during the presidential election. There was no sign of training for staff. Voter education was inadequate and inconsistent. It is therefore unsurprising that survey data shows that respondents' electoral information came primarily from sources other than the election administration: social media, friends and international media.

In practice, the voter registration process appears to have been conducted extremely loosely, with the cut-off date overlooked and registration continuing on Election Day. The campaign period was focused on promoting turnout rather than electoral choice. Pressure on the diaspora was most pronounced in Lebanon, where human rights organizations reported three people being abducted and beaten and threats to refugee camp superintendents. Other reports refer to retaliation, including threats of arrest, deportation and dismissal from work, and electoral participation described as "forced voting."

Polling for the diaspora was held on May 20, six days before in-country voting. Embassy and state media announcements stated that voting took place at 47 locations (including honorary consulates) in 44 countries. However, even on Election Day, a member of the SJEC referred to 67 diplomatic representations hosting voting and noted that the number could have increased further.

Intimidation and conflict were most pronounced in Lebanon. There were extensive reports of multiple forms of pressure and coercion to participate. In addition to pressure from Syrian compatriots, there were difficult dynamics between members of the diaspora and some host country entities, intensified because the voting process was regime-run. Some Lebanese groups attempted to deter voters, arguing that those who vote, and therefore support the Syrian regime, should not be eligible for refugee status. This included altercations that damaged vehicles and reportedly resulted in injuries to at least seven people.

Polling on Election Day in 2021 may be characterized as a demonstration of loyalty and an act of devotion for many, showing support for and devotion to President al-Assad. It is not possible to assess the extent to which voters took part in the election freely—or pragmatically, for self-protection. The results reporting process was about narratives rather than numbers; in fact, no data on diaspora participation or results was disseminated.

10.1 RECOMMENDATIONS: IFES recommendations, elaborated in a separate report, include establishing an agreed international framework for diaspora participation under UN supervision and for elections to be administered by an independent body. IFES also recommended fundamentally reforming the legal framework; reaching political consensus on key issues; involving diaspora; undertaking early planning and research; and making timely agreements with host countries. IFES also recommended the provision of maximum protection assurances, extending permitted documentation, using neutral venues, increasing the locations and hours of voting, the provision of extensive public information and voter education, and ensuring scrutiny of electoral processes.

Results

Results

Of all the indicators for judging the credibility of the Syrian presidential election, perhaps the announced election result and data give the clearest picture of this sham process.

The Elections Law mandates that polling station results be announced at the end of the count. However, it does not require results to be displayed at the entrance of each polling station to make them accessible to the public. Announcement of results at polling stations is the only time in the post-polling process when full results may be disclosed. The law does not require election administrators to publish complete results at any point after Election Day. While the law states that tabulation by governorate level sub-committees may be observed, it does not address transparency of results or require sub-committees to publish detailed results. This is also the case for final tabulated results. The SCC is under no legal obligation to announce detailed election results, including by polling station.

11.1 RECOMMENDATIONS: Amend the law to require election authorities to publish complete election results for every polling station, including turnout with breakdown by voters' sex, number of registered voters and number of invalid ballots. Establish a timeline for the publication of preliminary results.

The speaker of the Parliament announced election results on May 27 (see Figure 18). Although it was reported that approximately 200,000 Syrians had voted abroad in the 2014 election, no data on diaspora voting was presented for the 2021 presidential election.

Figure 18. Election Results as Announced on May 27

Eligible Voters	18,107,109
Valid Votes	14,239,140 voted (78.64%)
Spoiled ballots	14,000 (0.1%)
Diaspora votes	N/A
Bashar al-Assad	13,540,860 (95.1%)
Mahmoud Ahmad Merai	470,276 (3.3%)
Abdallah Saloum Abdallah	213,968 (1.5%)
Total Polling Centers	12,101

As discussed in the Voters section, Syrians of voting age within the country range from 9 million to 11 million (or up to 15 million, including Syrians abroad). The number of Syrians living in areas controlled by the government of Syria is estimated to range from 9.5 million to 14 million, with the population of voting age numbering from 5.2 million to 7.7 million. However, according to the final result, this population cast more than 14.2 million votes.

Dispute Resolution

Dispute Resolution

Syrian law does not provide sufficient guidance on resolving disputes arising from the electoral process. It presents only a general timeframe and allows for objections and appeals in three instances in the electoral process—candidacy, polling and election results. The law assigns authority for adjudication of candidacy and election results to the SCC, and it limits the right to appeal to rejected or losing candidates, who can object within three days after the list of candidates is published or final results are announced. The law does not elaborate on any other key elements of the adjudication process, such as transparency of documentation and proceedings, publication of cases or requirements for burden of proof or remedies. There is no second-level review of objections to decisions regarding candidacy and election results, since the SCC is the both the highest court in the country and the electoral authority. This system undermines the principle of independent judicial review given that the electoral authority that runs elections is also in charge of adjudicating objections to its work.

The authority to address Election Day objections against the polling committees is assigned to governorate level sub-committees. Again, the law does not elaborate any of key elements in the process.

12.1 RECOMMENDATIONS: Amend the law along the lines of Recommendation 3.1 (establishment of an independent electoral authority) to assign the electoral authorities as the first instance electoral dispute resolution mechanism. Amend the law to require electoral authorities to develop administrative regulations for adjudication of first instance objections and the courts to develop and publish judicial regulations for adjudication of second instance appeals. Amend the law to expand the right to object to any aspect of the electoral process, instead of limiting it only to candidacy, polling and results. Amend the law to ensure transparency of the process, including publication of the decisions of electoral authorities and the courts.

In a statement, SCC President Jihad Al-Laham, noted that the court would adjudicate appeals of the rejection of candidacy by Firas Mohammed bin Yassin Rjough, Mohammed bin Muwafak Sawan, Sinan bin Ahmed Al-Kassab, Mohammed Kamiran bin Mohammed Jamil Mirkhan, Mohammed Bashar bin Mohammed Fayez, Yassin Assabagh and Walid bin Nazim Al-Attar in a plenary session. Quoting a source in the SCC, media reports implied that appeals would be rejected if candidates did not receive the required 35 endorsements from the Members of Parliament.⁶⁶

In addition to the six official appeals, the Youth Party for Building and Change published a letter to the SCC objecting to the candidacy of Mahmoud Merai, claiming that he resided outside of Syria for almost a full year between 2013 and 2014.⁶⁷ Candidate Faten Ali Nahar posted on Facebook that she had tried to submit an appeal but “was met with a ridiculous reaction from important figures in Parliament [who] told her that this whole electoral process is a theater play.” Consequently, she did not file an official appeal.⁶⁸

On May 10, the SCC announced at a press conference that all six appeals had been denied and that the court’s decisions included legal justification for the rejection. However, the SCC provided no information on the content of the appeals or the decisions.

Prior to Election Day, the SJEC stated that governorate-level sub-committees would address complaints on the election day. The day after the election, the SJEC congratulated the Syrian people on the successfully completed election and stated that “no legal violations were recorded on Election Day.”⁶⁹ Since no appeals were filed against the election results, Bashar al-Assad was inaugurated on July 17, 2021.⁷⁰

Annexes

Annex 1. List of Candidates

Application Date	#	Name Transliterated	Name in Arabic	Gender
19/04/2021	1	Abdullah Salloum Abdullah	عبد الله سلوم عبد الله	Male
19/04/2021	2	Mohammed Firas bin Yassin	محمد فراس بن ياسين رجوح	Male
19/04/2021	3	Faten Ali Nahar	فاتن علي نهار	Female
21/04/2021	4	Muhannad bin Nadeem Shaaban	مهند بن نديم شعبان	Male
21/04/2021	5	Mohammed bin Muwafak Sawan	محمد بن موفق صوان	Male
21/04/2021	6	Bashar bin Hafez al - Assad	بشار بن حافظ الأسد	Male
22/04/2021	7	Ahmed Yousef Abdel Ghani	أحمد يوسف عبد الغني	Male
22/04/2021	8	Nahed Anwar Dabbagh	ناهة أنور الدباغ	Female
22/04/2021	9	Mohammed Saleh Asaad Haj Abdullah	محمد صالح اسعد الحاج عبد الله	Male
22/04/2021	10	Abdul Hanan Khalaf Al-Badawi	عبد الحنان خلف البدوي	Male
22/04/2021	11	Mahmoud Ahmed Mari	محمود أحمد مرعي	Male
22/04/2021	12	Khalid bin Abdo Al-Karidi	خالد بن عبدو الكريدي	Male
23/04/2021	13	Sanan bin Ahmed Al Qasab	سنان بن أحمد القصاب	Male
23/04/2021	14	Mohammed bin Yusuf Ramadan	محمد بن يوسف رمضان	Male
24/04/2021	15	Ahmed Haitham bin Ahmed Al - Makari	أحمد هيثم بن أحمد المكارى	Male
24/04/2021	16	Daad Bint Mubarak Kanouh	دعد بنت مبارك قنوع	Female
24/04/2021	17	Mohammed Kamiran bin Mohammed Jamil Mirkhan	محمد كاميران بن محمد جميل ميرخان	Male
24/04/2021	18	Hussein bin Mohammed Tijan	حسين بن محمد طيجان	Male
25/04/2021	19	Inas Marwan Al Qadri	إيناس مروان القادري	Male
25/04/2021	20	Hani Adnan Al Dahan	هاني عدنان الدهان	Male
25/04/2021	21	Mohamed Hamdi Salah	محمد حمدي الصلاح	Male
26/04/2021	22	Mohammed Bashar Ben Mohammed Fayeze Yassin Al- Sabagh	محمد بشار بن محمد فايز ياسين الصباغ	Male

Application Date	#	Name Transliterated	Name in Arabic	Gender
19/04/2021	23	Abdullah Salloum Abdullah	عبد الله سلوم عبد الله	Male
19/04/2021	24	Mohammed Firas bin Yassin	محمد فراس بن ياسين رجوح	Male
19/04/2021	25	Faten Ali Nahar	فاتن علي نهار	Female
21/04/2021	26	Muhannad bin Nadeem Shaaban	مهند بن نديم شعبان	Male
21/04/2021	27	Mohammed bin Muwafak Sawan	محمد بن موفق صوان	Male
21/04/2021	28	Bashar bin Hafez al - Assad	بشار بن حافظ الأسد	Male
22/04/2021	29	Ahmed Yousef Abdel Ghani	أحمد يوسف عبد الغني	Male
22/04/2021	30	Nahed Anwar Dabbagh	ناهة أنور الدباغ	Female
22/04/2021	31	Mohammed Saleh Asaad Haj Abdullah	محمد صالح اسعد الحاج عبد الله	Male
22/04/2021	32	Abdul Hanan Khalaf Al-Badawi	عبد الحنان خلف البدوي	Male
22/04/2021	33	Mahmoud Ahmed Mari	محمود أحمد مرعي	Male
22/04/2021	34	Khalid bin Abdo Al-Karidi	خالد بن عبدو الكريدي	Male
23/04/2021	35	Sanan bin Ahmed Al Qasab	سنان بن أحمد القصاب	Male
23/04/2021	36	Mohammed bin Yusuf Ramadan	محمد بن يوسف رمضان	Male
24/04/2021	37	Ahmed Haitham bin Ahmed Al - Makari	أحمد هيثم بن أحمد المكارى	Male
24/04/2021	38	Daad Bint Mubarak Kanouh	دعد بنت مبارك قنوع	Female
24/04/2021	39	Mohammed Kamiran bin Mohammed Jamil Mirkhan	محمد كاميران بن محمد جميل ميرخان	Male
24/04/2021	40	Hussein bin Mohammed Tijan	حسين بن محمد طيجان	Male
25/04/2021	41	Inas Marwan Al Qadri	إيناس مروان القادري	Male
25/04/2021	42	Hani Adnan Al Dahan	هاني عدنان الدهان	Male
25/04/2021	43	Mohamed Hamdi Salah	محمد حمدي الصلاح	Male
28/04/2021	44	Bashir Mohammed Al-Balah	بشير محمد البلح	Male
28/04/2021	45	Khaled Issa Alissa	خالد عيسى العيسى	Male
28/04/2021	46	Fayez Kamal Geha	فايز كمال جحا	Male
28/04/2021	47	Wissam Eldin Abdel Rahman Othman	وسام الدين عبد الرحمن عثمان	Male
28/04/2021	48	Mohamed Habib Arous	محمد حبيب عروس	Male

Application Date	#	Name Transliterated	Name in Arabic	Gender
28/04/2021	49	Jabr Mahmoud Khallouf	جبر محمود خلوف	Male
28/04/2021	50	Mouin Ahmed Ibrahim	معين أحمد إبراهيم	Male
28/04/2021	51	Hassan Rabih Rouawli	حسن ربيع الرويلي	Male

Annex 2. News Headlines:

Available online on this [link](#)

Annex 3. List of acronyms

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IFES	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
SCC	Supreme Constitutional Court
SJEC	Supreme Judicial Elections Committee
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Endnotes

1. Assessment of Syrian Diaspora Voting in the 2021 Presidential Election, IFES.
2. Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, Article 86.2.
3. Elections Law, Article 79.c.
4. ICCPR Article 25b.
5. Only Burundi, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon.
6. Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, Article 87.2.
7. Elections Law, Article 85.
8. Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, Article 141.
9. Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, Articles 85 and 89.
10. Law 7 for 2014 on the Constitutional Court, Article 3.
11. ICCPR Article 25b.
12. Elections Law, Article 127.
13. Elections Law, Article 8.d.
14. For example, the ceremony in Damascus took place in a stadium and was attended by several thousand officials – from all 1,870 stations in the governorate.
15. “With our blood, with our souls, we sacrifice for you, Bashar!”
16. The law references Syrian Arab nationality, which in this context refers not to Arab ethnicity but to the full name of the country—the Syrian Arab Republic.
17. Nationality Law, Article 3.
18. <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/MTDSG/Volume%20I/Chapter%20IV/IV-8.en.pdf>
19. Nationality Law, Article 6.
20. Nationality Law, Article 21.
21. In 1994, Lebanon naturalized at least 154,931 foreign residents. During the four parliamentary elections that followed, these naturalized citizens participated in voting at a higher rate than the native-born population. (Presidential Decree 5427 of 1994).
22. Elections Law, Article 5.

23. Ministry of Justice Regulation on Misdemeanors (2014).
24. CCPR/C/BLZ/CO/1, Belize (2013).
25. Elections Law, Article 99.
26. Portugal (Article 172), Spain (Article 68/5) Croatia (Article 45), Tunisia (Article 55).
27. [IDEA Voting from Abroad database](#).
28. IFES, June 2021, <http://ifes.org/syria>
29. [Press conference by the Minister of Interior, May 25](#)
30. Ibid. The population size is “around 28 million.” [Press conference by the Minister of Interior, May 25](#)
31. A UN report from 2008 indicated that cross-checking of records made before computerization revealed major flaws, as well as incomplete and multiple records. [Technical Report on the Status of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia Region, 2009](#)
32. [Letter from Syrian government to Human Rights Watch, 1996](#)
33. [IOM Migration Data, UN DESA, UNICEF Syria Demographics Data, UNHCR Refugee Statistics Syria](#)
34. <http://cbssyr.sy/yearbook/2012/Data-Chapter2/TAB-4-2-2012.pdf>
35. Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, Article 3.
36. Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, Article 84.
37. Election regulations, Article 26.
38. Annex 1 lists all candidates who applied.
39. Elections Law, Articles 48–58.
40. Elections Regulation. Articles 43–47.
41. Elections Law, Article 48.
42. [Ortas, May 25](#)
43. Assessment of Syrian Diaspora Voting in the 2021 Presidential Election, IFES., www.ifes.org/syria
44. [Sputnik News, May 16](#)
45. [Al-Watan, May 18](#)
46. [RT Arabic, May 15](#)
47. [Alaan-Media, May 18](#)
48. [Enab Baladi, May 24](#)
49. [Enab Baladi, April 25](#)

50. [Enab Baladi April 25](#)
51. [Enab Baladi, May 25](#)
52. [Enab Baladi, May 25](#)
53. IFES analysts used CrowdTangle, Facebook’s data analysis tool, for social media monitoring.
54. A notable exception was a faked photo of Mahmoud Merai in a state of undress that circulated on social media.
55. Some pages, posts, likes, etc., were not counted, as CrowdTangle cannot access pages set as private.
56. These included Syria’s Knights, 313, Lovers and other groups.
57. [Al-Watan, May 20](#)
58. [Sana, May 23](#)
59. [SKY News Arabia](#), May 25, 2021.
60. <http://www.sana.sy/?p=1385820>, <http://sana.sy/?p=1390114>,
<http://wehda.alwehda.gov.sy/daily/154425-1018.html>
61. “Direct observation” refers to reports by IFES field researchers in Syria.
62. [Ortas, May 23](#)
63. [Al-Watan, April 29](#)
64. Algeria, Armenia, Belarus, Bolivia, China, Cuba, Ecuador, Iran, Mauretania, Nicaragua, Oman, Russia, South Africa and Venezuela.
65. www.ifes.org/syria
66. <https://alwatan.sy/archives/257326>
67. The Youth Party for Building and Change is headed by Berwan Ibrahim, who failed to secure a seat in the 2020 parliamentary elections. She was arrested and held briefly after criticizing the 2020 parliamentary electoral process, the government and the Ba’ath party.
68. [Facebook, Faten Ali Nahar, May 6](#)
69. [SJEC statement, May 27](#)
70. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/17/syrias-assad-sworn-in-for-4th-term-in-war-torn-country>

