

The Syrian Regime Uses Passports' Issuance to Finance Its War and Humiliate Its Opponents

The Fourth Worst Passport and the
Highest Material Cost in the World

SNHR

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyses in Syria.



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I. Introduction

The Syrian regime has used various Syrian state organs in its efforts to suppress and crush the popular uprising that began in March 2011 with calls for the downfall of the ruling Assad family who first seized control of the Syrian Arab Republic in 1970. The Assad regime has not only harnessed the might of the state's security and military apparatuses to serve their own interests and cement their brutal hold on absolute power, but has also instrumentalized all Syria's state institutions, including the Immigration and Passport Institution, whose role has expanded along with a large number of other institutions to the point where it plays a central role in security and political issues. The corruption of the roles and practices of all these state institutions to serve the Assad regime's interests means that these bodies have become, in effect, a network of Assad family businesses involved in an interconnected system of blackmail and state-backed looting of the Syrian people's resources and wealth; this means that Syrians' own resources are used against the people to weaken, humiliate and subjugate the populace, and to continue an open war against anyone demanding a real political transition to democracy. The ruinous expense of this terrible war has severely depleted and exhausted the capabilities of the Syrian state and its resources.

The continuing and expanding intensity, range and magnitude of the crimes perpetrated across Syria by the Syrian regime, its affiliated militias and allies, particularly Iran and Russia, have left millions of Syrians fleeing in fear for their lives; these crimes and atrocities include murder, arrest, enforced disappearance, torture, and wholesale destruction of homes. Similar associated crimes and atrocities perpetrated by various terrorist groups



who have entered the Syria conflict arena, along with threats and violations by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) forces, and by factions of the Armed Opposition, have added to the suffering inflicted by the aforementioned regime crimes to create a climate of constant fear for millions of Syrians, with many forced to flee for their lives; in these circumstances, the people in Syria need to attain passports and travel documents, while millions abroad are required by law to regularly renew their passports.

This report attempts to document the violations against Syrian citizens attempting to obtain and renew their passports, and reveals the excessive and unreasonable material costs imposed on Syrians compared to citizens of all the world's other countries. In the course of preparing this report, we spoke with dozens of Syrian citizens inside Syria and in the countries of asylum; we will present only four of these accounts here, both for the sake of brevity and because most of those we spoke with were subjected to similar patterns of violations. Three of the accounts detailed here are by citizens outside Syria, while the fourth speaks about his experience in the capital, Damascus. We explained the purpose of these interviews beforehand to all the witnesses and obtained their consent to use the information they provide in this report without providing or offering any incentives, and guaranteeing to them that we would not reveal the identity of anyone who wishes to use an alias for the sake of personal safety.

II. From the Mafia Networks' Control to the Syrian Regime's Exploitation

The process involved in the issuing of passports in Syria can be divided into two main time periods:

Period I: From the beginning of the popular movement until April 2015:

The Syrian regime has followed a dual policy in issuing passports; on the one hand, from the beginning of the popular uprising to April 2015 all applicants, whether inside or outside Syria, were required to obtain approval from branches of the regime's security departments, meaning that anyone participating in the popular uprising was deprived of the opportunity to obtain a passport. Despite this, however, the regime also ran an unofficial mafia-style black market operation through which people could obtain a passport in return for huge payments of up to US \$5,000 per person. Through this, the regime and its militias obtained vast sums of money estimated at hundreds of millions of dollars.



It should be noted that Syrian citizens are also subjected to additional violations when their passports are issued. Residents of other governorates across the country are often required to travel to Damascus to review documents lodged with the Immigration and Passports Department, with SNHR documenting 703 arrests to date of citizens visiting the Department of Immigration and Passports in the capital about their passports; this is one more indication of the subordination of all state institutions in Syria to the authority and control of the regime's security services.

Period II: Since April 2015 to date:

The first period detailed above saw tensions arise between the Syrian security apparatuses and the mafia networks. This phenomenon has been noted many times by social network pages loyal to the Syrian regime. Whilst these tensions have not subsequently developed or expanded to a notable degree and further monitoring and analysis are required before making any definitive assessment of their influence, it seems likely that they played a pivotal role in the promulgation of Legislative Decree No. 17 of 2015. This decree, issued by the Syrian regime on April 21, 2015, amended Law No. 1/2014, allowing the issuance of passports to all Syrians inside and outside the country without any discrimination between regime opponents or pro-regime citizens, applying the same rules to those who had left the country illegally. The consular fee determined for the issuing of passports or travel documents to Syrian citizens and persons of equivalent status outside the Syrian Arab Republic was set at 400 US Dollars, or the equivalent sum in Euros, which included all other fees, including local administration fees. For renewing or extending a passport for a two-year period, Syrians outside Syria would be required by the new legislation to pay 200 US dollars or equivalent local currency.

This decree also stated, crucially, that passports and travel documents issued or stamped with unofficial stamps could not be extended, but should instead be canceled, confiscated and replaced with new passports, with the Immigration and Passports Department to be notified of any such incident.

[Legislative Decree No. 17 of 2015](#) containing the conditions for granting or renewing a passport document:

Subsequently, in March 2017, the Syrian regime issued Decree No. 18, which amended the previous decree No. 17, stating in article 1 that article 1 of Legislative Decree No. 17 of 2015 amended Law No. 1 of 2014 in the following way:



A) The consular fee shall be determined upon the grant or renewal of a passport or travel document for Syrian citizens and persons of equivalent status who are outside the Syrian Arab Republic, immediately and expeditiously to the sum of US\$ 800.

B) The consular fee shall be determined when granting or renewing a passport or travel document for Syrian citizens and persons of equivalent status who are outside the Syrian Arab Republic within the standard queueing system to the sum of US\$ 300.

C). The time required for the grant or renewal of a passport or travel document at our overseas missions shall be immediate and expedited within a maximum of three working days from the date of submission of the application and payment of the fees, and within the standard queueing system with a minimum of ten working days and a maximum of twenty days from the date of submission of the application and payment of fees.

By issuing these decrees, the Syrian regime avoided further inflaming the tensions between the various bodies involved in issuing passports, and ensured that all the financial revenues would return solely to the regime itself. It also set an extremely high price for each passport, the highest for any passport worldwide, namely US \$300 for a passport issued within a period of up to 21 working days and US \$800 for a passport issued within three days. Here it must be stressed that the maximum period of validity allowed for passports held by opponents of the Syrian regime is two years maximum; as is well known, many countries and airlines require passengers to have passports valid for at least six months before the date of travel, meaning that for Syrian dissidents the real practical period for which the passport is valid is 18 months. Also, a large number of Syrians live in cities or countries with no Syrian consulates, forcing them to make travel arrangements and pay for flights and accommodation simply to renew their passports; this is the case with Syrians living in Saudi Arabia, the State of Qatar or the Turkish Republic outside Istanbul. In addition, these individuals have no choice but to pay for an urgent passport given the uncertainty and expense in travel and accommodation involved in waiting up to 21 working days for a standard one, forcing them to pay \$800 to finally get a passport classed by the 'Passport Index' website as the fourth worst national passport in the world.



As Fadel Abdul Ghani, director of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, states:

“The Syrian regime has used the material income it obtained as a result of printing passports for substantial amounts of money in its war against its opponents, the Syrian people, and to continue to pay the salaries of its affiliated militias, in buying and maintaining the ammunition and weapons to bomb areas and cities of Syria, and in continuing to commit more war crimes and crimes against humanity. However, the Syrian regime’s request of a price of 800 dollars for a passport hasn’t seen any international condemnation, nor has there been any effective action by the international community to give the Syrian citizen an alternative to the blackmail of the Syrian regime or to pressure [the regime] to set a rational price like the rest of the world.”

III. Additional violations facing the Syrian citizen added to the material cost

While the high material cost is the biggest challenge for most Syrians, due to the displacement of more than half the Syrian population in the wake of the Syrian and Russian regimes’ destruction of most of the country’s houses and shops, there are also additional difficulties and violations facing Syrians inside and outside Syria, the most prominent of which are:

A. Within Syrian territory:

Regime security services still require all Syrian citizens who wish to obtain a passport to first obtain the approval of state security authorities. Every applicant for a passport is subjected to a background check, with their name checked against the lists of wanted persons, which is essentially a list of all those who contributed to the popular uprising for democracy.

In addition to obtaining the security services’ approval, every male citizen aged between 20 and 42 and not exempted¹ from the compulsory military service is required to obtain approval from their military division recruitment center in order to acquire a passport. The current Syrian regime’s crimes, including mobilizing the Syrian military to commit a vast number of crimes that constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity, and to kill hundreds of thousands of Syrian people, has prompted hundreds of thousands of Syrians to refuse any military service, leaving them with no hope of receiving the recruitment division’s approval to obtain passports.

¹ The categories exempted from compulsory service according to Syrian law are: those aged over 42 (except when conscripted for reserve service); men who are only sons to their parents or to one parent; those with a physical disability; those performing conscripted service in another state’s army; those who pay a cash sum in lieu of military service; People’s Assembly Members during their Assembly



Hussam², a 33-year-old physiotherapist from Damascus city, said that after the head man in his neighborhood told him he was wanted for reserve duty, he had decided to leave the Syrian territory immediately, **“I decided to travel to Turkey, but the obstacle facing me was to get a passport without entering the Immigration and Passport building for fear of being taken from there to the reserve service, I contacted someone who had relations with immigration and passport officials, and he issued me a passport and handed it to me two weeks later for 600,000 Syrian pounds.”** Hussam added that to avoid conscription he first travelled to Idlib governorate and then to Turkey, **“It cost me about two million Syrian pounds to travel out of my country, and on my journey to Idlib, I was in a car with a driver who gave bribes to the military checkpoints so that we could pass through without my name being checked against the wanted lists. “**

In its database logging cases of arrest and enforced disappearances, the Syrian Network for Human Rights has recorded the arrest of at least 1,249 persons, including eight children, and 138 women (adult female), between March 2011 and January 2019 while they were conducting transactions in the immigration and passport departments in several governorates across Syria.

Prominent examples of incidents of arrest inside Immigration and Passport Service buildings: Jalal Zakariya, a resident of Jabla city, in the southern suburbs of Latakia governorate, was arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Thursday, November 1, 2012, at the Immigration and Passport headquarters building in Latakia city. His fate remains unknown to the SNHR, as well as to his family.

Khaled Nasrullah, from Douma city in Damascus Suburbs governorate, was arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Wednesday, May 1, 2013, at the Immigration and Passport headquarters building in the Rekn al Din area in Damascus city. His fate remains unknown to the SNHR, as well as to his family.

Mohammad Faisal Mamoun Burhan, from Zabadani city in Damascus Suburbs governorate, was arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Wednesday, July 23, 2014, at the Immigration and Passport headquarters building in Damascus city. His fate remains unknown to the SNHR, as well as to his family.

membership; overseas workers charged with conducting state business; students studying overseas on state scholarships, or students attending summer training in accordance with the respective document.

² We contacted him via Skype



B. Outside Syria:

Due to the Syrian regime perpetrating hundreds of crimes against humanity and failing to comply with any Arab or international political initiative, a wide range of countries have adopted a legal and moral stance, severing [diplomatic relations](#), including consular affairs, since this is a regime that is presumed to have lost its legitimacy acquired by the people which must resign and leave office and be held accountable.

The Syrian regime has exploited the absence of any alternative to the passports which it issues regularly, and has worked to blackmail Syrians in order to amass the largest possible reserve of funds and to bolster its supposed political legitimacy, as well as to inflict the greatest possible humiliation on citizens and to violate their dignity. We have also noticed a clear difference in the way the consulates of the Syrian regime deal with applications and other business according to the country's political and legal position on the Syrian regime. For example, the Syrian consulate in Geneva, Switzerland, conducts transactions on a routine basis, while Syrians suffer a sadly predictable pattern of humiliation and extortion at the Syrian consulate in the Turkish city of Istanbul.

We have recorded several cases in which Syrian citizens were subjected to the cancellation of their passports and refused any alternative ones, or had their passports confiscated and were refused any alternative passports on the grounds that the citizens in question were wanted by the security authorities in Syria. This security challenge has decreased significantly after the issuance of Legislative Decree No. 17; it appears that the Syrian regime's need for currency of the US dollar was the main reason for these actions.

We also have recorded cases in which citizens have not been issued with any receipt or documentation proving that they have paid for or received their passports by staff members, which are additional violations over and above the catalogue of other violations documented in this process.

IV. Examples of the Nature of Passport Issuance in a Number of Countries

Turkey:

The consular staff at Syrian embassies have effectively created an unofficial network of fraudsters, fixers who collect money from Syrian citizens wishing to obtain a passport; the bribe required by these individuals in exchange for arranging an appointment with consular staff ranges between \$250 and \$500 depending on the applicant's needs, i.e. whether they need an urgent appointment or can wait for a later one. These fixers are deployed outside the consulate buildings where they offer their services to the queues of Syrian citizens who know that they must either pay or be at the very back of the queue for services. Whilst this process is not officially acknowledged, it is standard.



After deciding on an appointment date, a sum of \$800 must be paid if a passport is required urgently, within three working days, or \$300 for the standard service when the passport may take between two to four months to be issued. This tactic is intended by the Syrian regime to force the largest possible number of Syrian citizens to pay \$800 in order to obtain a passport within three days.

In addition, a large proportion of the Syrians in Turkey, many already facing severe financial difficulties, live far from Istanbul city where the Syrian embassy is located, forcing them to pay for the cost of travel and accommodation in Istanbul.

Mutasem Abo al Shamat³, a Syrian dissident and activist based in Turkey, told SNHR about his experience of renewing his passport in Turkey after he was able to obtain an appointment through one of the aforementioned fixers in exchange for a payment of \$250. “When I arrived at the consulate, I waited for my turn, which was scheduled at 9 am though they did not allow me to enter until 11 pm. I conducted the transaction and prepared the required papers. I paid \$300 for the renewal of the passport for two years, and \$25 for the consular registration fee, then they set up a date of getting it in 40 days, and that’s what happened.” Mutasem also told us that during his visits to the consulate, he saw a lady pointing out to staff that the passport she had paid for and received contained a mistake in her national number, adding that the employee refused categorically to correct the mistake.

Syrian refugees in the other surrounding countries, such as Lebanon and Jordan, suffer from similarly straitened circumstances and conditions in terms of violations of human dignity and financial extortion by regime authorities.

Musa Neirabiya, a construction worker from Homs city, entered Lebanon illegally in 2012, and tried, throughout his time in Lebanon, to obtain a passport from the Syrian embassy that would allow him to acquire official residence papers for Lebanon. After hearing about Decree No. 18, he went to the embassy, conducted the passport transaction, and paid the fees.

When he returned on the date given on the receipt issued to him, however, staff brusquely told him that his application had been rejected. SNHR met with Mousa in Lebanon, and he told us: **“Through a mediator, I got an appointment at the embassy to get a passport, and the broker took US\$150. I started preparing the necessary documents, then I paid \$300 for the passport inside the embassy and about \$30 for additional costs during the transaction between fees, stamps and other stuff, and they told me to review them after 30 days. When I returned on time, the staff member told me that my application had been rejected and asked me to return to Damascus to complete my passport issuance procedures. “**

³ We contacted him via Messenger application



Qatar and KSA:

Syrians living in the Gulf countries experience another type of difficulty in renewing their passports, namely that anyone who cannot send his passport to Syria to renew it must travel to Bahrain in the case of those living in Saudi Arabia or to Oman in the case of those in the State of Qatar, and the passport must have a validity period of more than six months. In order to return quickly to the place of residence and work, the vast majority of residents in these countries are forced to pay \$800 each to get the passport via the express option, in addition to paying for travel and accommodation costs.

SNHR talked with Mohammad al Qasem, a Syrian activist who's lived in Doha city, State of Qatar, since 2013. He explained that he has already had to travel three times to State of Bahrain to renew his passport at the Syrian embassy there, adding that he incurred expenses of about \$500 in addition to the renewal fees, **“It was overcrowded at the embassy, and reserving an appointment through the embassy site is not guaranteed, and brokers ask for large sums, so, in my case, I had to get my passport renewed as soon as possible so I could renew my residency document. I prepared the papers required for renewal and paid the fees of \$300, then they told me to come back after 40 days, but when I returned, they gave me another appointment after 20 days. That cost me a lot of wasted time in traveling, and I had to pay heavy travel costs and some bribes to brokers inside the embassy to speed up the receipt process. “**

V. Conclusions and Recommendations

The Syrian regime has implemented a deliberate process to misappropriate Syrian citizens' money by exploitation of the Immigration and Passport Institution, through imposing extortionate prices for passports compared to all the other countries in the world. Since the members of Syria's People's Assembly were elected in a pro forma manner and in coordination with the security services, not even one member of the People's Assembly dares to make any objection, since this body is, to all intents and purposes, an arm of the security services. The Assembly has remained an accomplice to the actions of the Syrian regime in its most severe violations in effectively extorting the funds of the Syrian citizens by asking for 300 USD and 800 USD for a single passport. The People's Assembly has also supported the siege of the Eastern and Western Ghouta of Damascus, the collective starvation of their residents, and the killing of hundreds of thousands of Syrians, the enforced disappearance of tens of thousands more, the torture of countless thousands of others, and many other crimes against humanity through its complicit silence, with no member daring to object or to resign.



The Syrian regime's exploitation of its citizens' need for passports and travel documents and the way in which it adds further insult to injury by charging exorbitant prices to those already suffering, not to mention its insults to citizens' humanity and dignity during the process of obtaining a passport are all violation of fundamental human rights. Hardly any other state in the modern age perpetrates such blatant and offensive violations against its citizens; this is one more reason why the Syrian Arab Republic, under the leadership of the current regime, is once again amongst the worst offenders in terms of global indicators of rights, freedoms and democracy.

By imposing such exorbitant prices, the Syrian regime effectively denies the right of hundreds of thousands of Syrians to travel, with many lacking the material abilities to pay such prohibitive sums for a passport, let alone to do so every 18 months in order to renew it. All of these factors mean that this is a clear violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Recommendations

The Syrian regime

- Stop looting the funds of the Syrian people and set a reasonable price for a passport that does not exceed 20 US dollars like the rest of the world.
- Respect citizens' dignity and humanity and stop establishing and coordinating with networks of mafia-type black marketeers and fraudsters who operate quite openly around the entrance to the Syrian consulate in Istanbul and elsewhere.
- Do not use state institutions and resources intended to serve the Syrian public to finance a war against Syrian society in retaliation for the people's demands for fair and just democratic political change.

The International community

- Put pressure on the Syrian regime and its allies to reduce the price of a Syrian passport.
- The mentality that the Syrian regime shows in dealing with its citizens and the way it exploits state institutions like the Immigration and Passports Institution, confirms that there is no feasible or acceptable alternative to creating a just democratic political system and helping the Syrian people in the process of transition to democracy.
- Any attempt to rehabilitate or restore any form of political or economic relations is a clear and direct expression of support for a murderous and repressive dictatorship that exploits its citizens most basic rights.

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