

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website. Please note that some RIRs have attachments which are not electronically accessible. To obtain a PDF copy of an RIR attachment, please email the [Knowledge and Information Management Unit](#).

30 July 2013

SYR104510.E

Syria: Passport renewal options, requirements and procedures for Syrians living abroad, specifically those living in Canada and Greece (January-July 2013)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Syrian Embassy Closures

On 29 May 2012, media sources reported that Canadian authorities expelled Syrian diplomats (*Toronto Star* 29 May 2012; *Waterloo Region Record* 29 May 2013). According to the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [translation] "[t]he Embassy of the Syrian Arab Republic in Washington is commissioned to take care of the interests of Syrian citizens living in Canada" (Syria n.d.a).

According to the Hellenic Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Syrian Embassy in Athens suspended its operations in December 2012 (Greece n.d.). Syrian government sources state that the Embassy of the Syrian Arab Republic in Sofia, Bulgaria is commissioned to take care of the interests of Syrian citizens living in Greece (Syria n.d.b; *ibid.* 16 July 2013a; *ibid.* 16 July 2013b).

Sources indicate that the Embassy of the Syrian Arab Republic in Egypt closed in June 2013 (*Wall Street Journal* 17 June 2013; AP 16 June 2013). Attachment 1 of this Response contains a Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs list of [translation] "[c]ountries in which Syria does not have any diplomatic representation but are linked to one of [the] diplomatic missions abroad" (Syria n.d.c). Information on the date this list was published and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a lawyer in Syria currently working as international counsel for a law firm in Toronto, who is also one of the founding members of the Syrian Centre for Dialogue, an NGO that promotes inter-faith dialogue among Syrian communities (Lawyer 9 July 2013), said that some people may not be able to renew their passports because there may not be an embassy available to provide this service (8 July 2013). Media sources report that, since the closure of the Syrian embassy in Egypt, Syrian citizens in this country do not have access to consular services (AP 16 June 2013; *Wall Street Journal* 17 June 2013). However, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, "[i]n other countries where the Syrian embassy has been closed, the host country has arranged for a third country ... to handle consular services for Syrians" (*ibid.*). Associated Press (AP) reports that a Syrian citizen in Egypt "had nowhere to renew his passport ... The embassies in Libya and Tunisia had switched loyalty to the opposition and could no longer issue passports. And the embassy in Algeria simply told him to go back to Syria" (30 Sept. 2012). Media sources report that some Syrian expatriates have not been able to renew their passports from missions abroad (*Los Angeles Times* 27 Feb. 2013; Arab News 12 June 2012), including in Saudi Arabia (*ibid.*). Al Jazeera also reports that some Syrian citizens living in Jordan have been forbidden from renewing their passports (25 June 2012).

2. Syrian Passport Renewal Procedure

The Embassy of the Syrian Arab Republic in Washington posted the following information on their website:

[translation]

To the Syrian community in Canada:

In order to expedite the processing of your applications, the Embassy would like to stress that applicants should provide all necessary documents and that their applications should be complete. A FedEx pre-paid return envelope should be sent to avoid any loss of documents sent by mail to applicants. Application processing fees must be paid by money order issued exclusively in the U.S.A. (Syria n.d.d)

See Attachment 2 for the Embassy of the Syrian Arab Republic in Washington's "Instructions on how to apply for a passport."

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Embassy of the Syrian Arab Republic in Sofia, Bulgaria, stated that [translation] "[u]nder applicable laws and regulations, instructions and documents don't vary according to the Embassy. These are the documents required for renewing: a form to be filled out by the applicant, as well as the identity card of the applicant" (Syria 16 July 2013b).

The Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs posted the following information on their website:

[translation]

How can Syrian citizens living outside Syria apply for a Syrian passport?

To avoid any problems that Syrian citizens living outside Syria may face when their passport or resident permit expires, all Syrian citizens living outside Syria are requested to apply to our embassy in that country for a new passport six months before the expiry date of the passport in the [diplomatic] missions [*sic*] that don't have a passport-issuing service so that the Embassy can send the applications to the Department of Immigration and Passport, which in its turn, will send the passports to the [diplomatic] mission, which takes a long time. (Syria n.d.e)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

See Attachment 3 and Attachment 4 of this Response for Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs lists of requirements for passport applications.

3. Obstacles to Renewing Syrian Passports

On 27 February 2013, media sources reported that the Syrian government agreed to renew passports of Syrian citizens living abroad (*Los Angeles Times* 27 Feb. 2013; AFP 27 Feb. 2013). Agence France-Presse (AFP) said that passports would be renewed for between two and four years for "any" nationals in embassies abroad (27 Feb. 2013), and the *Los Angeles Times* said that passports would be renewed for two years for Syrians living abroad (27 Feb. 2013). The *Los Angeles Times* also said that, according to the Syrian Interior Ministry, passports would be renewed "regardless of the reasons that had earlier prevented their renewal, and without obtaining the necessary authorizations" (27 Feb. 2013). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, the Editor-in-chief of All4Syria Bulletin, an independent news source in Syria, who is also a consultant to various multinational organizations such as the UN and the EU on civil society and economic development in Syria (Editor-in-chief 12 July 2013), said that in December 2012, Syria's National Security Office sent embassies a document, "Article 17," which states that all Syrians living abroad can get their passports renewed for two years, regardless of their political views (*ibid.* 9 July 2013). However, according to him, Article 17 was cancelled in June 2013, and embassies are no longer allowed to issue passports for "any Syrian" without approval from Damascus authorities (*ibid.*). The All4Syria Editor-in-chief further explained that embassies are required to send the names of all Syrians who want their passports renewed to authorities in Damascus for approval (*ibid.*). He emphasized that all embassies across the world are obligated to follow this rule for all applicants without exception, including newborn babies (*ibid.*). In a telephone interview, the lawyer for the Toronto law firm corroborated that embassies send the names and details of applicants to Damascus, and that passports cannot be renewed without permission from Damascus, even though renewals take place at the embassy (9 July 2013). According to the Editor-in-chief, the approval rate for passport renewals is 20 percent, while 80 percent of applicants do not get their passports renewed (Editor-in-chief 9 July 2013). The lawyer stated that "many Syrians abroad cannot renew their passports" (8 July 2013). However, according to the Embassy of the Syrian Arab Republic in Sofia, Bulgaria, "[e]very citizen who meets the requirements can obtain what he/she applied for without any obstacles" (16 July 2013b).

According to the All4Syria Editor-in-chief, there are state and military intelligence personnel in all embassies that collect information about Syrian citizens living abroad (Editor-in-chief 9 July 2013). He said that, when a Syrian citizen abroad applies to have his or her passport renewed, embassies must send the applicant's name and intelligence file, including information on whether the person has criticized the government, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Damascus (ibid.). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs then sends the applicant's information to the National Security Office, which is a coordination office of four intelligence departments (ibid.). The four intelligence departments provide their comments on whether or not the applicant's passport should be renewed (ibid.). He stated that, if any of the four intelligence agencies indicates that the person's passport should not be renewed, the applicant's passport will not be renewed (ibid.). According to the lawyer, each intelligence agency has its own "list of names" (Lawyer 9 July 2013).

In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, the Director of the Centre for Critical Development Studies at the University of Toronto stated that when attempting to renew a passport, "some people may be at risk by making themselves known to the regime by going to the embassy" (Director 8 July 2013). A 27 January 2013 report by Al-Hayat, a London-based newspaper, indicates that according to a "defecting" Syrian diplomat in Saudi Arabia,

the "consulate" had become an intelligence service barracks, as it was dedicated to interrogating its visitors, who had come to renew their passports. The results of these interrogations were sent in the form of security reports daily to the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and to branches of the Syrian Air Force Intelligence Directorate.

Arab News, an English-language newspaper founded in Saudi Arabia (n.d.), reports that according to a Syrian National Council (SNC) [opposition body (SNC 28 Nov. 2011)] member, informants give embassies information about anti-regime individuals, and some Syrian diplomatic and consular staff in Saudi Arabia are connected to the Syrian intelligence and are supposed to "keep an eye on Syrian expatriates" (12 June 2013). The All4Syria Editor-in-chief corroborates that intelligence personnel in embassies have been known to interrogate people, and also added that they have threatened people (9 July 2013). According to a 25 June 2012 Al Jazeera report, a Syrian citizen in Jordan reported receiving threats from the Syrian embassy.

According to the All4Syria Editor-in-chief, the decision made by the intelligence agencies regarding whether or not to permit a passport renewal is based on the applicant's political opinions and political activities, such as if the person: has criticized the government, the president, or the president's family; has opposed the government, even if the person is an independent; or has a relative who is an activist, even if the applicant is not an activist (9 July 2013). The lawyer corroborated that "if the applicant is an activist or related to an anti-regime figure, they will never [obtain] the permission from Damascus to renew" their passport (Lawyer 8 July 2013). *Arab News* reports that a member of the SNC said that anti-regime citizens cannot get their paperwork processed at the Syrian embassy in Saudi Arabia (12 June 2012).

According to the lawyer, whether or not someone receives the permission required for a passport renewal is determined on a "case-by-case basis," although the majority of the Syrians who experience difficulties in renewing their passport are not in pro-regime circles (9 July 2013). The lawyer added that if authorities are not aware of someone's political activities, they may assume that they are against the government based on their sect and the city that they are from (Lawyer 9 July 2013).

The lawyer said that the majority of people who are not able to get their passports renewed are Sunnis (ibid.). She said it is "very difficult" for Sunnis to attain permission to renew their passports because "they are originally from some of the rebel cities" (ibid. 8 July 2013). According to the All4Syria Editor-in-chief, Sunnis make up the majority of the opposition group, which is why the majority of Sunnis are not approved for passport renewals (9 July 2013).

The lawyer said that Alawites, Christians or Druze who are not activists will get permission to renew their passports (8 July 2013). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. The All4Syria Editor-in-chief stated that sometimes, Alawites are unable to get their passports renewed because of their intelligence reports, as some Alawites are against the government (9 July 2013). He added that President Bashar al-Assad's brother was not allowed to get his passport renewed because he claimed his support for the opposition (9 July 2013). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The lawyer said that if an applicant's passport indicates that he or she is from "one of the liberated cities," such as Hama or Daraa [also spelled Dara'a, Deraa, Dera, Dare], it will be "very difficult" to get a passport renewed (8 July 2013). She also said that people from "hot cities" [anti-government cities] most likely will not get their passports renewed (Lawyer 9 July 2013). She also said that it is "very difficult" for Kurds to get their passports renewed, as the majority of Kurds are from anti-regime areas (ibid.). She added that "lots" of Kurds do not have passports, as for years, the regime did not issue them with passports,

although some Kurds have old Syrian passports (Lawyer 9 July 2013). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Attempts to contact the following individuals and organizations were unsuccessful within time constraints: Syria – Embassy of the Syrian Arab Republic in Greece; Syrian National Council; UNHCR – Jordan, Lebanon, Syria. The following organizations could not provide information for this response: Amnesty International; Canadian Arab Federation; Syria – Embassy of the Syrian Arab Republic in Washington.

Internet sites, including: Al Jazeera; Factiva; Syrian Arab News Agency; United States – Department of State.

Attachments

Syria. N.d. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (Countries in Which Syria Does not Have Any Diplomatic Representation but Are Linked to One of our Diplomatic Missions Abroad). Translated by the Translation Bureau, Public Works and Government Services Canada.

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