



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice

Syria

Syria – SYR38569 – Entry/Exit – Exit Visa
– Lebanon – Travel documents – ID Card –
Work Permit – Bribery

14 April 2011

1. Do persons departing Syria to work in Lebanon need passports, or can they travel back and forth using only ID cards?

A number of sources confirm that Syrians are able to travel back and forth between Lebanon and Syria, using only their Syrian ID cards as a travel document. Despite the end of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon in 2005 following the so-called Cedar Revolution, it appears that Syrians are still able to enter Lebanon using only their IDs, providing they are entering directly from Syria.^{1 2}

According to the Immigration & Refugee Board of Canada, Syria and Lebanon signed the *Bilateral Labour Agreement* in 1994, which grants “entry and temporary permits to seasonal workers”. Syrians intending to work in Lebanon “are supposed to obtain contracts specifying requirements such as wages, hours, and length of contract”. However, “the work contract is not a condition of the work permit and, in practice, Syrian workers only need to state that they are temporary workers to be issued a stamped card and allowed across the border”.³

2. Are exit visas compulsory for persons departing Syria?

The US Department of State reported that in 2010 Syrian citizens were required to “apply for exit visas.”⁴ Despite this report, there are credible sources that indicate that most exit visa requirements were abolished in 2002. A 2004 report by the Human Rights Association of Syria states that that the exit visa requirement was abolished for most Syrian citizens in 2002. However, the report also states that the exit permit requirement has been maintained for “government employees and those conducting military service”.⁵

¹ Danish Immigration Service 2010, *Human rights issues concerning Kurds in Syria: Report from a joint fact finding mission by the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) and ACCORD/Austrian Red Cross to Damascus, Syria, Beirut, Lebanon, and Erbil and Dohuk, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), 21 January to 8 February 2010*, May, p.15 <http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/ronlyres/FF03AB63-10A5-4467-A038-20FE46B74CE8/0/Syrienrapport2010pdf.pdf> – Accessed 18 November 2010 – Attachment 1

² ‘Passport/Visa’ (undated) Made In Lebanon <http://www.made-in-lebanon.com/commercial/visa.html> – Accessed 8 April 2011 – Attachment 2

³ Immigration & Refugee Board of Canada 2009, ZZZ103297.E – *Lebanon and Syria: Documents required by Syrians to reside and/or work in Lebanon; whether Syrians residing in Lebanon are required to return periodically to Syria to meet residency requirements of either Lebanese or Syrian authorities*, 29 October http://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca:8080/RIR_RDI/RIR_RDI.aspx?id=452620&l=e – Accessed 8 April 2011 – Attachment 3

⁴ US Department of State 2011, *Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2010 – Syria*, 8 April, Section 2.d – Attachment 4

⁵ Human Rights Association of Syria 2004, ‘Annual Report Of The Organization 2003’, Human Rights Association of Syria website <http://www.hrassy.org/english/reports-e/Annualreport2004.doc> – Accessed 18 August 2008 – Attachment 6

In lieu of exit visas, the Syrian regime relies primarily on a travel ban database to restrict the movement of particular individuals. In 2007 the Danish Immigration Service reported that persons on the travel ban list are refused issue of new passports. Persons already in possession of a passport who become subject to a travel ban are entered into a computer database. All persons attempting to depart Syria are checked against the computer registry.⁶

A 2010 report in *The Economist* also names 2002 as the year that the travel restrictions system in Syria was changed. While the article does not specifically state that exit visas were abolished, it does remark that, since 2002, travel bans have become the main instrument by which the Syrian regime controls the movement of its population. *The Economist* also observes that such “bans have expanded significantly since 2006”, and comments that often Syrians only find out that they are subject to such bans upon reaching the border.⁷

3 Can a genuine Syrian passport be obtained and departure from that country effected by bribery without an exit visa if the Syrian authorities have an adverse interest in the person concerned?

As discussed in the response to question two, it would appear that a travel ban database has supplanted the use of exit visas as the main instrument for controlling the movement of individuals of interest to the Syrian regime. Information on the use of bribery as a means of circumventing bans on the issue of passports, exit visas, and travel bans is conflicting, with some sources suggesting it is possible to purchase false passports. Most sources consulted indicate that bribery and corruption are common in Syria.

In 2008, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) advice was sceptical that individuals subject to travel bans would be able to bribe officials into allowing them to depart. DFAT advised that “travel bans are quite strictly enforced in terms of departure.” Individuals who are subject to a travel ban caught attempting to depart would be subject to punishment. On this, DFAT states that “[p]unishments for those who attempt departure in defiance of a travel ban depend on the reasons for the travel ban having been imposed. In cases where a ban has been imposed for reasons relating to matters of a criminal or national security nature, the punishment is likely to be more stringent.” On the question of whether a person subject to a travel ban would be able to bribe officials into issuing a new passport or having his or her name expunged from a travel ban ‘black list’, DFAT states that “[w]hile bribery might be a means to avoid a speeding ticket or speed up the processing of routine government paperwork, it is extremely unlikely that it would be successful to obtain new passports, particularly if the person was under a travel ban, had a history of leaving the country in defiance of the travel ban and was allegedly under suspicion because of relatives with connections to the Muslim Brotherhood.”⁸

Information provided in a 2007 report by the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) on the computer system employed by the Syrian border control reinforces the DFAT perspective that departure would be extremely difficult for persons wanted by authorities or subject to travel bans. The DIS reported that “[a]n Embassy in Damascus...observed that the exit-entry control

⁶ Danish Immigration Service 2007, *Syria: Kurds, Honour-killings and Illegal Departure: Report from a fact finding mission to Damascus, 15-22 January 2007*, Danish Immigration Service website, April <http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/0031B53B-2395-4460-A5A6-887DDDFBE357/0/rapportsyria2007.pdf> – Accessed 6 September 2007 - Attachment 5

⁷ ‘How Syria controls its dissidents: Banning travel’ 2010, *The Economist*, 30 September <http://www.economist.com/node/17155868> – Accessed 8 April 2011 – Attachment 7

⁸ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2008, *DFAT REPORT: 899 – RRT Information Request: SYR33787*, 10 October – Attachment 8

in Syria is highly effective...The immigration authorities run an effective computer database...the computer registry of the Syrian immigration authorities will indicate the exit date and place of people leaving Syria. If a person is searched for by the security services, it will be indicated in the registry with information about which security service has requested the search...a computer registry that indicates the date and place of exit and the issue of a passport of a given person. It is also indicated if the person is searched by the police.”⁹

Persons who have been previously detained by authorities are subject to a ‘rights ban’, which “often” includes a ban on being issued with a new passport and travelling abroad. The US Department of State reports that such bans commence from the day of sentencing and continue “until seven years after the expiration of the sentence in the case of a felony and three years in the case of a misdemeanour conviction. In practice restrictions sometimes continued beyond those periods. Persons subjected to this ban were not allowed to vote, run for office, or work in the public sector; they also were often denied passports or the right to international travel.”¹⁰

However, in 2008 the Syrian Human Rights Committee commented that at least “[s]ome former detainees can get some documents, including passports, through corrupted channels and by paying tributes or bribes.”¹¹ In 2007, the DIS reported that a person subject to a travel ban was able to bribe an official into issuing a new Syrian passport with a false name for “a couple of thousand US dollars”.¹²

Speaking generally about corruption in Syria, Freedom House reported in 2010 that “[c]orruption is widespread, and bribery is often necessary to navigate the bureaucracy. Syria was ranked 126 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International’s 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.”¹³ The US Department of State reported that 2010, “[n]otwithstanding the investigation and dismissal of scores of mid- and low-level officials for corruption during the second half of 2010, many other officials continued to engage in corrupt practices with impunity.” The US Department comments that corruption remains a “pervasive problem in the police forces and security services.”¹⁴ Both of these sources strengthen the plausibility of the suggestion that some people subject to a travel ban may be able to depart Syria after paying a bribe to security and immigration officials.

⁹ Danish Immigration Service 2007, *Syria: Kurds, Honour-killings and Illegal Departure: Report from a fact finding mission to Damascus, 15-22 January 2007*, Danish Immigration Service website, April, p.20

<http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/ronlyres/0031B53B-2395-4460-A5A6-887DDDFBE357/0/rappportsyria2007.pdf> – Accessed 6 September 2007 – Attachment 5

¹⁰ US Department of State 2010, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2009 – Syria*, 11 March, Section 1.e – Attachment 9

¹¹ Syrian Human Rights Committee 2008, ‘SHRC: Seventh Report on the Status of Human Rights in Syria (June 2006 – December 2007)’, Syrian Human Rights Committee website, January, p.25

<http://www.shrc.org/data/pdf/ANNUALREPORT2008.pdf> – Accessed 28 April 2008 – Attachment 10

¹² Danish Immigration Service 2007, *Syria: Kurds, Honour-killings and Illegal Departure: Report from a fact finding mission to Damascus, 15-22 January 2007*, Danish Immigration Service website, April, p.16

<http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/ronlyres/0031B53B-2395-4460-A5A6-887DDDFBE357/0/rappportsyria2007.pdf> – Accessed 6 September 2007 - Attachment 5

¹³ Freedom House 2010, *Freedom in the World – Syria*, 3 May

<http://freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2010&country=7928> – Accessed 16 September 2010 – Attachment 11

¹⁴ US Department of State 2011, *Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2010 – Syria*, 8 April, Section 4 – Attachment 4

Attachments

1. Danish Immigration Service 2010, *Human rights issues concerning Kurds in Syria: Report from a joint fact finding mission by the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) and ACCORD/Austrian Red Cross to Damascus, Syria, Beirut, Lebanon, and Erbil and Dohuk, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), 21 January to 8 February 2010*, May <http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/FF03AB63-10A5-4467-A038-20FE46B74CE8/0/Syrienrapport2010pdf.pdf> – Accessed 18 November 2010.
2. ‘Passport/Visa’ (undated) Made In Lebanon <http://www.made-in-lebanon.com/commercial/visa.html> – Accessed 8 April 2011.
3. Immigration & Refugee Board of Canada 2009, ZZZ103297.E – *Lebanon and Syria: Documents required by Syrians to reside and/or work in Lebanon; whether Syrians residing in Lebanon are required to return periodically to Syria to meet residency requirements of either Lebanese or Syrian authorities*, 29 October http://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca:8080/RIR_RDI/RIR_RDI.aspx?id=452620&l=e – Accessed 8 April 2011.
4. US Department of State 2011, *Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2010 – Syria*, 8 April.
5. Danish Immigration Service 2007, *Syria: Kurds, Honour-killings and Illegal Departure: Report from a fact finding mission to Damascus, 15-22 January 2007*, Danish Immigration Service website, April <http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/0031B53B-2395-4460-A5A6-887DDDFBE357/0/rapportsyria2007.pdf> – Accessed 6 September 2007.
6. Human Rights Association of Syria 2004, ‘Annual Report Of The Organization 2003’, Human Rights Association of Syria website <http://www.hrassy.org/english/reports-e/Annualreport2004.doc> – Accessed 18 August 2008.
7. ‘How Syria controls its dissidents: Banning travel’ 2010, *The Economist*, 30 September <http://www.economist.com/node/17155868> – Accessed 8 April 2011.
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9. US Department of State 2010, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2009 – Syria*, 11 March.
10. Syrian Human Rights Committee 2008, ‘SHRC: Seventh Report on the Status of Human Rights in Syria (June 2006 – December 2007)’, Syrian Human Rights Committee website, January <http://www.shrc.org/data/pdf/ANNUALREPORT2008.pdf> – Accessed 28 April 2008.
11. Freedom House 2010, *Freedom in the World – Syria*, 3 May <http://freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2010&country=7928> – Accessed 16 September 2010.