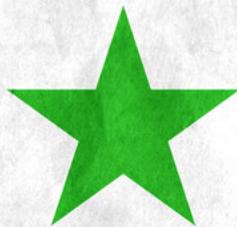


By Nigel Walker

9 June 2021

Syria: 2021 presidential election and future prospects



Summary

- 1 Background
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Summary

Syria held a presidential election on 26 May 2021.

51 candidates had expressed an intention to contest the election, but Syria's Supreme Constitutional Court permitted just three candidates to stand: incumbent President Bashar al-Assad; Abdullah Salloum Abdullah, a former Cabinet Minister; and Mahmoud Ahmad Mari, the head of a Syria-based opposition party.

President Assad dominated the election campaign, which many opposition figures claimed was a sham. Many in the international community declared the election to be neither free nor fair and denounced its legitimacy.

On 27 May, the day after Syrians voted, the Speaker of the People's Assembly announced the results of the presidential election; as expected, President Assad secured a fourth term in office with a landslide victory.

The election result is likely to further deepen the Syrian government's rift with the west and drive Syria closer to Russia and Iran.

1 Background

Following the death of President Hafiz al-Assad on 10 June 2000, the Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic was amended to allow his son, Bashar al-Assad, to accede to the presidency.

On 26 February 2012, in a national referendum, the new constitution was approved and entered into effect the following day. One of the more significant provisions of the new Constitution was the setting of term limits, allowing presidents to serve just two seven-year terms¹. However, this provision did not apply until the 2014 election, allowing incumbent President Bashar al-Assad to also contest the 2021 election.

Other notable amendments to the Constitution included revising Article 8 to remove the reference to the Ba'ath Party as being “the leading party in society and state”, thereby creating a more pluralistic political system that allows greater competition. Previously, only political parties belonging to the National Progressive Front – a coalition of 11 parties headed by the Ba'ath party – could run in elections.

The updated Constitution also revised the requirements for those eligible to stand for President²:

- A candidate's birth parents must both have Arab Syrian nationality since their birth
- Candidates must not have been convicted of an offence that, even if rehabilitated, may have stripped the candidate of his or her political and civil rights
- Candidates must not be married to a non-Syrian
- Candidates must be permanently residing in Syria for at least 10 continuous years before the time of the submission of their candidacy application

Members of the Syrian opposition who had been forcibly displaced claimed this provision was an attempt to disqualify them from contesting presidential elections³.

On 18 April 2021 Hammouda Sabbagh, Speaker of the Syrian People's Assembly, announced the presidential election would take place on 26 May, with the candidate gains the most votes being elected.

¹ [The Constitution \(Syrian Arab Republic\)](#), Europa World online. London, Routledge. [Retrieved 4 June 2021]

² [Syria President 2014](#), ElectionGuide [accessed 4 June 2021]

³ Ibid

2 2021 presidential election

2.1 Candidates

On 3 May 2021, Syria's Supreme Constitutional Court announced three candidates would contest the presidential election: incumbent President Bashar al-Assad; Abdullah Salloum Abdullah, a former Cabinet Minister; and Mahmoud Ahmad Mari, the head of a Syria-based opposition party tolerated by the authorities.

51 mostly unknown candidates had expressed an intention to stand for election, but candidates needed the support of at least 35 MPs to be eligible to run and, even then, the Supreme Constitutional Court could disqualify individual candidates.

The three candidates selected, in alphabetical order, were as follows:

Abdullah Salloum Abdullah

Abdullah Salloum Abdullah was born in 1956 in the Mazraa neighbourhood of the Syrian capital, Damascus, and holds a Law degree from the University of Damascus.

He served two terms in the country's parliament – from 2003-2007 and 2012-2016 – and has held several party posts in the pro-government Socialist Unionist party⁴.

On 3 July 2016 Abdullah was appointed Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs and he served in Cabinet until July 2020⁵.

Abdullah was the first person to put himself forward for the election, on 19 April 2021, after securing the required endorsement of 35 MPs. The Syrian Constitutional Court approved his candidacy for president on 3 May.

Abdullah launched his election campaign on 16 May and announced his slogan: "Our unity is our strength."⁶

⁴ [Names in the News: Who are the challengers in Syria's presidential election?](#) BBC Monitoring, 5 May 2021

⁵ [Biography: Abdullah Salloum Abdullah](#), BBC Monitoring – Syria, 28 May 2021

⁶ Ibid

During an interview with the state TV the following day, he was asked when his dream to contest the presidential election started. Abdullah replied:

It was not my personal dream – it was our party's decision to run for the 2021 election. It chose me to be the candidate and I accepted this mission because I follow party decisions.

Abdullah added that he was not running against any other candidate and that his party was complementary to the Ba'ath Party⁷.

Bashar Hafiz al-Assad

Bashar al-Assad was born on 11 September 1965 in Damascus.

From the age of three he attended Laique school (also known as Al-Hurriyah and Bassel al-Assad), one of Damascus's elite Franco-Arab schools, before transferring to Le Frere school for two years before university. Assad studied Medicine at Damascus University, graduating with a degree in Ophthalmology in 1988.

After graduating, Assad took a four-year internship at Tishrin Military Hospital in Barzah, Damascus, before working at the Western Eye Hospital in London from 1992-1994. He left London to return to Syria following the death of his older brother, Basil, who was killed in a car accident.

Basil had been designated his father's heir apparent and his death meant Bashar had to take his place, despite his lack of military and political experience. To bolster his standing with the country's powerful military and intelligence agencies, Assad trained at a military academy and eventually gained the rank of colonel in the elite Republican Guard⁸.

On 1 January 2001 he married Asma al-Akhras (a British citizen) and they have two sons and a daughter. Both sons hold dual British and Syrian nationality⁹.

Bashar al-Assad became President of Syria in July 2000, succeeding his father Hafez, who had ruled the country since seizing power on 15 October 1970.

Hafez died on 10 June 2000 and the National Assembly promptly amended the constitution to lower the minimum age for president to 34 (Bashar al-Assad's age). Assad was nominated as President of Syria by the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party just eight hours after his father's death.

On 10 July Assad won 97.29 per cent in the referendum for him to become President. Al-Assad secured landslide re-elections in 2007 and 2014.

⁷ [Names in the News: Who are the challengers in Syria's presidential election?](#) BBC Monitoring, 5 May 2021

⁸ [Bashar al-Assad: President of Syria](#), Britannica [accessed 7 June 2021]

⁹ [Biography: Lt-Gen Dr Bashar al-Assad](#), BBC Monitoring – Syria, 1 June 2021

On 15 March 2011 Assad faced a significant challenge to his rule when anti-government protests broke out in Syria, inspired by a wave of pro-democracy uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, known as the Arab Spring.

Unrest spread to other parts of the country and the Government deployed tanks and troops to these cities. By September 2011, armed opposition groups had emerged and they were staging increasingly effective attacks against Syrian forces.

In January 2012 it was reported that more than 5,000 civilians had been killed by Syrian forces, with a further 1,000 killed by opposition rebel groups. This increased international calls for Bashar to resign; something he refused to contemplate.¹⁰

In June 2012 a UN official stated that the uprisings had transitioned into a civil war and the International Committee of the Red Cross also declared the conflict a civil war.¹¹

As the civil war continued, Assad's grip on power appeared to grow stronger. With the emergence in 2013 of the so-called Islamic State in eastern Syria and western Iraq, many countries that had called for Assad's resignation were forced to refocus their efforts on defeating new threats.

Russia – which had long provided weapons and political support to Bashar – launched its own military action in Syria in 2015, bombing rebel strongholds and deploying Russian ground troops in support of Syrian government forces.

Although Assad has not regained control of all parts of Syria, his dominance in most major cities has been re-established and he has started implementing policies to rebuild Syria.

On 21 April 2021 he announced his intention to run for a fourth term as President.

Mahmoud Mari

Mahmoud Mari was born in 1957 in a village near Damascus.

He is a lawyer and involved in human rights. He is President of the Damascus-based Arab Organisation for Human Rights, which he founded in 2004 with other Syrian figures, according to BBC Monitoring, citing a report by Human Rights Watch¹².

¹⁰ [‘Profile: Bashar al-Assad’](#), *Al-Jazeera*, 17 April 2018

¹¹ Ibid

¹² [Names in the News: Who are the challengers in Syria's presidential election?](#) BBC Monitoring, 5 May 2021

He also represented the domestic-based opposition in UN-sponsored Geneva talks on Syria¹³.

Mari is secretary-general of the Syria-based Democratic Front, leading an alliance of domestic-based, officially-tolerated opposition parties that was formed in 2016. He has claimed this coalition represents a coalition of six parties, but one of those parties has since distanced itself from him and affirmed its opposition to the election.¹⁴

On 3 May 2021 the Syrian Constitutional Court approved Mari's candidacy for president and he formally launched his campaign on 16 May, announcing his campaign slogan: "Together."¹⁵

During an interview with Syrian state television on 16 May, Mari described himself as being "born in the opposition"¹⁶, saying that he had been arrested and prevented from travel several times due to his political activities.

In the interview, he also claimed to have support from key opposition figures both within Syria and also overseas:

After I announced I was running in the presidential election, a fair share of the opposition overseas contacted me and said they support me and my statement. We also believe that a political settlement and a national Syria-Syrian conference taking place in Damascus is the solution. You will see key figures from the patriotic opposition at home and overseas collaborating with the government to rebuild Syria.

Despite his proud claims to be the opposition, Mari's party is tolerated by the authorities.

2.2 Election campaign

Preparations for the Syrian presidential election began several months before the poll date was even announced.

In December 2020 Assad appointed several new senior media officials, including a new press officer. The opposition website Enab Baladi suggested this move was to improve his image ahead of the election, using "soft power".¹⁷

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ 'Syria holds presidential election dismissed as farce by opposition', *BBC News Online*, 26 May 2021

¹⁵ [Biography: Mahmoud Ahmad Mari](#), BBC Monitoring – Syria, 28 May 2021

¹⁶ [Names in the News: Who are the challengers in Syria's presidential election?](#) BBC Monitoring, 5 May 2021

¹⁷ [Explainer: Why is this Syrian presidential election different?](#) *BBC Monitoring*, 20 April 2021

In the same month, Saudi-funded Al-Arabiya reported that Assad's supporters were collecting the signatures of two-and-a-half million citizens to call for him to run for re-election. Launching the initiative, organisers described the event as the “longest love letter in the world” to “the first man of peace, President Bashar al-Assad.”¹⁸

At a hustings in March 2021, tribal chieftains from eastern Syria were invited to a sports hall in Deir ez-Zor and were reminded how much the Assad regime cared for them. It was reported that commanders from Russian and Iranian-backed militias were present and that a banner reading “Assad is our choice” was raised¹⁹.

In the same month, members of several Arab tribes held pro-Assad rallies in the far north-eastern town of Qamishli in Hasaka province; an area largely controlled by Syria's Kurds²⁰.

More recently, officials in government-held provinces actively promoted Assad's re-election in schools and cultural centres.²¹

Opposition figures have called the presidential election a sham and pointed to the initial 51 candidates being whittled down to just three, with Assad's re-election assured.

Syria's exiled opposition have called the poll a “theatrical farce” and Yahya al-Arabi, spokesman for the Syrian Negotiation Commission, said:

This election shows contempt to the Syrian people. It's a decision by the government, aided by Russia and Iran, to kill the political process. It's a continuation of tyranny²².

While Assad was sure to secure a fourth seven-year term, all three candidate made pledges to repair the economy – which collapsed in 2020 under the weight of war, sanctions and Covid-19 – and to bring the country's five million refugees home. Abdullah also promised to tackle corruption, which is systemic in Syria.²³

Many commentators have suggested holding an election during a civil war made it easier to suppress the vote. Polling did not take place in at least four provinces because they were under the control of the opposition and Kurdish forces, depriving nearly eight million Syrians their vote. Many refugees were also unlikely to cast their vote in Syrian embassies.²⁴

¹⁸ [‘With a message of 2 km in length, the inauguration of Al-Assad's campaign for the presidential elections’](#), *Al-Arabiya*, 17 December 2020

¹⁹ [‘Assad is being welcomed back into Arab fold’](#), *The Times*, 18 May 2021

²⁰ [‘Explainer: Why is this Syrian presidential election different?’](#) *BBC Monitoring*, 20 April 2021

²¹ *Ibid*

²² [‘Syria holds presidential election dismissed as farce by opposition’](#), *BBC News Online*, 26 May 2021

²³ [‘Civil war, ruin, raging poverty... but Assad is guaranteed to win Syria's fake election’](#), *the Guardian*, 23 May 2021

²⁴ [‘Syrians cast early ballots in symbolic presidential vote’](#), *Independent*, 20 May 2021

The election goes against a UN Security Council resolution that is meant to pave the way for free and fair elections in Syria. Adopted unanimously in 2015 with the backing of the Arab League, the European Union and Turkey, UN Resolution 2254²⁵ calls for a transitional governing body, a new constitution and UN-supervised elections.

On 25 May 2021, in a joint statement issued by the UK, the US, France, Germany and Italy (the “Quint”), the Quint reiterated its firm support of UNSCR 2254 and declared the election would be neither free nor fair. The joint statement continued:

As outlined in the Resolution, free and fair elections should be convened under UN supervision to the highest international standards of transparency and accountability. For an election to be credible, all Syrians should be allowed to participate, including internally displaced Syrians, refugees, and members of the diaspora, in a safe and neutral environment.

Without these elements, this fraudulent election does not represent any progress towards a political settlement. We urge the international community to unequivocally reject this attempt by the Assad regime to regain legitimacy without ending its grave human rights violations and meaningfully participating in the UN-facilitated political process to end the conflict.²⁶

2.3 Election results

On 27 May, the day after Syrians voted, the Speaker of the People’s Assembly (the Syrian Parliament) announced the results of the presidential election.

Table 1: Presidential election result, 26 May 2021		
Candidate	No. of valid votes	% of valid votes
Bashar Hafiz al-Assad	13,540,860	95.2
Mahmoud Mari	470,276	3.3
Abdallah Salloum Abdallah	213,968	1.5
TOTAL	14,225,104	100.0

Source: [President \(Syrian Arab Republic\)](#), Europa World online, Routledge. [Retrieved 5 June 2021]

²⁵ [Resolution 2254 \(2015\)](#), United Nations Security Council, 18 December 2015

²⁶ [Syria Presidential Election on 26 May: Quint Statement](#), Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office press release, 25 May 2021

As expected, President Bashar al-Assad secured a fourth term in office with a landslide victory.

Government officials said turnout was 78.6 per cent, although this figure has been disputed: areas controlled by rebels or Kurdish-led troops were reported not to have held the vote, and over five million refugees who are mainly living in neighbouring countries largely chose not to cast their ballot.²⁷

The win gives Assad seven more years in power and will lengthen his family's rule to nearly six decades.

Following his victory, the President thanked his supporters in a message on his campaign's Facebook page:

Thank you to all Syrians for their high sense of nationalism and their notable participation... For the future of Syria's children and its youth, let's start from tomorrow our campaign of work to build hope and build Syria.²⁸

2.4 Looking ahead

The election result is likely to further deepen the Syrian Government's rift with the west, potentially driving Syria closer to Russia and Iran, with both countries determined for Assad to stay in power²⁹.

Several Arab states that had backed the armed opposition to Assad in the early years of the civil war are now shifting their allegiances.

On 3 May 2021 Saudi Arabia's intelligence chief, Khalid bin Ali al-Humaidan, travelled to Damascus to meet his Syrian counterpart in the first known meeting of its kind in over a decade, since the uprisings began.

The meeting was seen as a precursor to an imminent détente between the two countries and Saudi officials suggested a normalisation of relations could begin shortly.³⁰

Such a move would provide a significant boost for Assad and could be a landmark diplomatic moment in the most bitterly contested corners of the region.

²⁷ [‘Syria election: Bashar al Assad elected for fourth term as president after winning 95.1% of the vote’](#), *Sky News*, 28 May 2021

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ [‘Assad is being welcomed back into Arab fold’](#), *The Times*, 18 May 2021

³⁰ [‘Meeting between Saudi and Syrian intelligence chiefs hints at détente’](#), *the Guardian*, 4 May 2021

Both Egypt and the United Arab Emirates are also reported to have expressed interest in renewing ties with Syria and the Arab League, which expelled the country in 2012, has indicated to Assad that Syria is welcome to join again.³¹

Rogers Boyes, writing for *The Times*, observes:

What seems to be happening is that the stabilisation of the Assad regime — even if it only amounts to the calm of the graveyard — offers new opportunities in the region if you're prepared to ignore the blood on his hands. Syria will need at least \$400 billion to rebuild. His economy is broken, he can no longer rely on Iranian or Russian subsidies. Both are under western sanctions, both in no mood to sink large sums of money into Syria. The Gulf states, by contrast, can mobilise cash. All they want in return, apart from healthy profits, is that Assad loosens his ties with Iran.³²

³¹ [‘Assad is being welcomed back into Arab fold’](#), *The Times*, 18 May 2021

³² *Ibid*

3 UK-Syria relations

In December 2012 President Bashar al-Assad and his wife made a four-day official visit to the UK. Assad had meetings with HM The Queen and the Prince of Wales and held talks with then Prime Minister Tony Blair and other senior politicians.³³

At the time of the visit, Foreign Office officials acknowledged that the two countries do not agree on every issue, but that they valued Syria's strategic interest as a close neighbour of Iraq and a strong influence of Arab opinion.³⁴

Ten years later, with the Arab Spring spreading to Syria and Assad's military clamping down on opposition forces – resulting in thousands of deaths and claims of atrocities being committed – the UK Government suspended all services at the British Embassy in Damascus and withdrew all diplomatic personnel from the country.³⁵

The UK supports a political solution to establish a lasting settlement to the Syrian conflict and to protect the rights of all citizens and has backed the work of UN Envoy Geir Pedersen. The UK Government has pledged not to reopen the British Embassy or to provide reconstruction assistance without a credible, substantive and genuine political process being firmly underway.

In April 2018 the UK joined with the US and France in launching air strikes to “degrade the Syrian Regime’s chemical weapons capability and deter their use.”³⁶ In a statement to the House of Commons, the then Prime Minister Theresa May outlined the military action taken and the reasoning behind it.³⁷

In a Parliamentary Question in March 2020, Foreign Office Minister James Cleverly was asked whether the UK Government supported the removal through democratic means of Bashar al-Assad. The Minister responded:

The UK's position on the Assad regime is unchanged: it has lost its legitimacy due to its atrocities against the Syrian people. Only an inclusive, non-sectarian government can unite the country and protect the rights of all Syrians. Our priority is to end the conflict in Syria through a negotiated political settlement on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 2254. We continue to strongly support the UN-led Constitutional Committee, and all efforts to create a safe,

³³ [‘Syrian leader makes historic UK visit’](#), *BBC News Online*, 15 December 2002

³⁴ *Ibid*

³⁵ [Syria and the UK: Our mission](#), Gov.uk [accessed 7 June 2021]

³⁶ [PM statement on Syria: 14 April 2018](#), 10 Downing St press release, 14 April 2018

³⁷ [Syria](#), HC Deb 16 April 2018, Vol 639 cc39-92

neutral environment that enables Syria to hold free and fair elections through which Syrians can choose their own government.³⁸

More recently, on 15 March 2021, the UK Government marked the tenth anniversary of the Syrian uprising by issuing a joint statement with the Foreign Ministers of the United States of America, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy³⁹, in tandem with the announcement of a fresh round of targeted sanctions against allies of Bashar al-Assad⁴⁰.

Since the Syrian uprising began, the UK has committed £2.81 billion of humanitarian aid, the UK's largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis. The aid package has included food, water, sanitation and basic relief items.⁴¹

In the same time period, the UK has also contributed over £9 million to various accountability mechanisms and NGOs gathering evidence and assisting victims.

³⁸ [Syria: Politics and Government](#), PQ20440, 3 March 2020

³⁹ [Tenth anniversary of the Syrian uprising: joint statement](#), Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office press release, 15 March 2021

⁴⁰ [New UK sanctions targeting Assad regime for repressing the Syrian people](#), Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office press release, 15 March 2021

⁴¹ [Syria and the UK: Our mission](#), Gov.uk [accessed 7 June 2021]

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