



# Syria - Country Focus



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# Acknowledgements

This report was jointly drafted by the EUAA COI Sector together with:

- Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD).

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- Austria, Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, Country of Origin Information Department
- France, Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA), Information, Documentation and Research Division
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All parts of this report have been reviewed by at least one reviewer.

The review carried out by the mentioned departments, experts or organisations contributes to the overall quality of the report, but does not necessarily imply their formal endorsement of the final report, which is the full responsibility of the EUAA.



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## Disclaimer

This report was written according to the [EUAA COI Report Methodology \(2023\)](#). The report is based on carefully selected sources of information. All sources used are referenced.

The information contained in this report has been researched, evaluated and analysed with utmost care. However, this document does not claim to be exhaustive. If a particular event, person or organisation is not mentioned in the report, this does not mean that the event has not taken place or that the person or organisation does not exist.

Furthermore, this report is not conclusive as to the determination or merit of any particular application for international protection. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

'Refugee', 'risk' and similar terminology are used as generic terminology and not in the legal sense as applied in the EU Asylum Acquis, the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees.

Neither the EUAA, nor any person acting on its behalf, may be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained in this report.

The drafting of this report was finalised on 31 August 2023. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this report. More information on the reference period for this report can be found in the [Methodology](#) section of the [Introduction](#).





## Glossary and abbreviations

Term	Definition
<b>CTC</b>	Counterterrorism Court
<b>GoS</b>	Government of Syria
<b>HTS</b>	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
<b>IDP</b>	Internally Displaced Person
<b>IRGC</b>	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
<b>ISIL</b>	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant; also known as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Islamic State (IS), or Daesh
<b>MEB</b>	Minimum Expenditure Basket
<b>MSNA</b>	Multi-Sector Needs Assessment
<b><i>mukhtar</i></b>	Mayor or chief of a village/neighbourhood
<b>NDF</b>	National Defence Forces
<b>NPA</b>	North Press Agency
<b>OHCHR</b>	Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights
<b>SAA</b>	Syrian Arab Army
<b>SDF</b>	Syrian Democratic Forces
<b>SNA</b>	Syrian National Army





Term	Definition
<b>SNHR</b>	Syrian Network for Human Rights
<b>SOHR</b>	Syrian Observatory of Human Rights
<b>STJ</b>	Syrians for Truth & Justice
<b>UNCOI</b>	Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic
<b>UNOCHA</b>	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs







# Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide relevant information for the assessment of international protection status determination, including refugee status and subsidiary protection, and in particular for use in updating EUAA’s country guidance development on Syria.

The report covers the period of August 2022 – August 2023, and provides a limited update of selected sections previously addressed in the EUAA COI reports: [Syria - Targeting of individuals \(September 2022\)](#) and [Syria - Targeting of individuals \(March 2020\)](#) as well as an update of the EUAA COI report: [Syria - Socio-economic situation in Damascus city \(September 2022\)](#).

This report should be read in conjunction with the EUAA COI report: [Syria – Security situation \(September 2023\)](#).

## Methodology

This report was jointly drafted by EUAA and ACCORD and reviewed by EUAA and national COI departments in EU+ countries, as mentioned in the [Acknowledgements](#) section.

This report is produced in line with the EUAA COI Report Methodology (2023)<sup>1</sup> and the EUAA COI Writing and Referencing Style Guide (2023).<sup>2</sup>

## Defining the terms of reference

The terms of reference (ToR) of this report were defined by EUAA based on discussions held and input received from COI experts in the EUAA COI specialist network on Syria and from policy experts in EU+ countries within the framework of a Country Guidance development on Syria. The ToR also build on previous EUAA COI reports on Syria covering the same topics. The Terms of Reference for this report can be found in [Annex II](#) of this report.

## Collecting information

The information gathered is a result of research using public, specialised paper-based and electronic sources until 8 August 2023. Some limited additional information was added during the finalisation of this report in response to feedback received during the quality control process, until 31 August 2023.

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<sup>1</sup> EUAA, EUAA Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology, February 2023, [url](#)

<sup>2</sup> EUAA, Writing and Referencing Guide for EUAA Country of Origin Information (COI) Reports, February 2023, [url](#)





## Quality control

To ensure that the authors respected the EUAA COI Report Methodology and that the Terms of Reference were comprehensively addressed, a review was carried out by COI specialists from the countries and organisations listed as reviewers in the [Acknowledgements](#) section. All comments made by the reviewers were taken into consideration and most of them were implemented in the final draft of this report, which was finalised on 31 August 2023. EUAA also performed the final quality review and editing of the text.

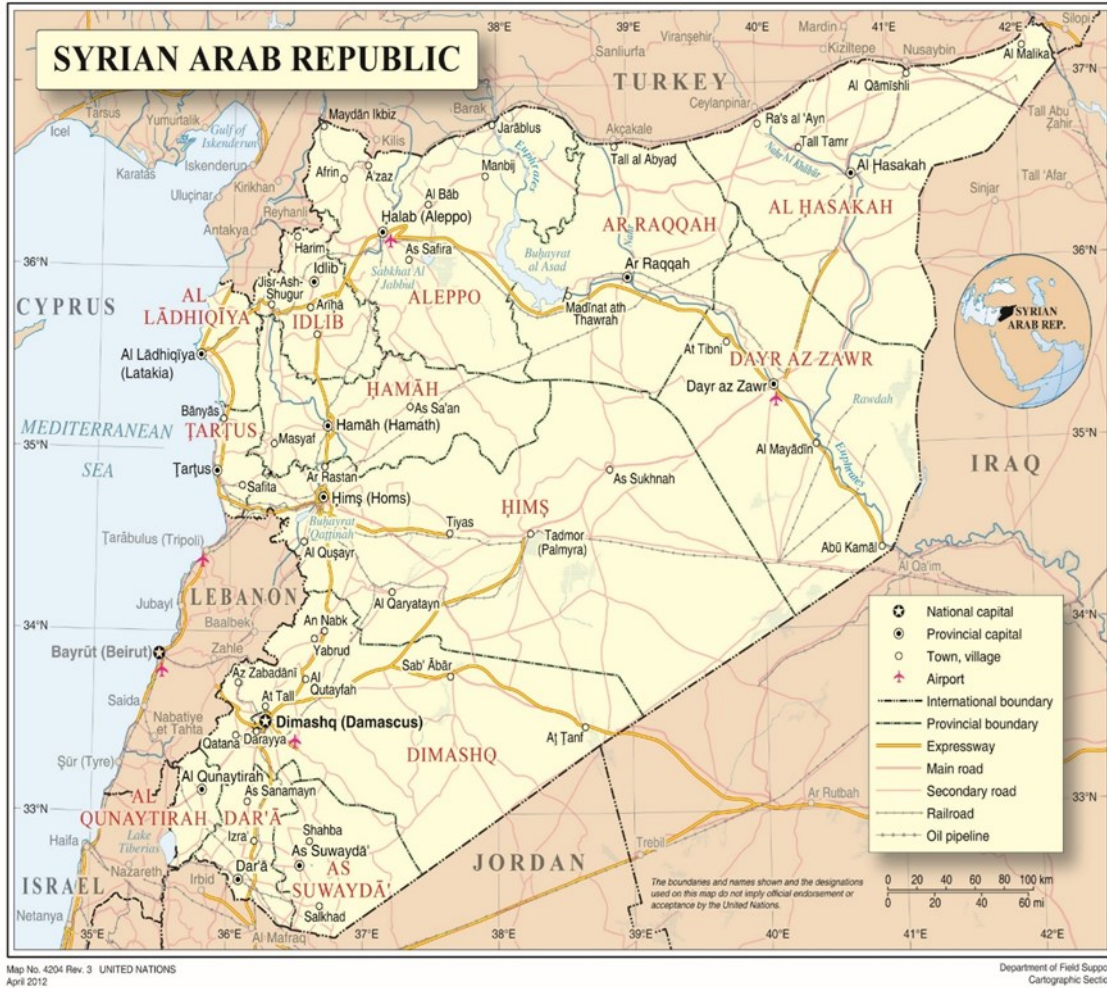
## Sources

In accordance with EUAA COI methodology, a range of different published documentary sources have been consulted on relevant topics for this report. These include: COI reports by governments; information from civil society, advocacy groups, humanitarian organisations, and NGOs; international and NGO human rights reports; reports produced by various bodies of the United Nations; Syrian and regionally-based media and social media; academic publications and think tank reports and specialised sources covering Syria. All information from these sources was consulted within time constraints and within the research constraints posed by Syria's challenging information-gathering environment.

In addition to using publicly available documentary sources, several oral sources were contacted for this report. Some sources who were interviewed chose to remain anonymous for security reasons. Sources were assessed for their background, publication history, reputability and current ground-level knowledge. All oral sources are described in the [Bibliography](#).



# Maps



Map 1: Syrian Arab Republic, © United Nations <sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Syria, Map No. 4204 Rev. 3, April 2012, United Nations, [url](#)

# 1. Profiles

## 1.1. Persons perceived to be opposing the Government of Syria (GoS)

### 1.1.1. Treatment of persons perceived to be opposing the Government of Syria

Security incidents, including attacks on GoS forces, increased in GoS-controlled areas since mid-2022 as the government conducted security and retaliatory policies, forced conscriptions,<sup>4</sup> and arbitrary arrests.<sup>5</sup> Disappearances and deaths in detention also continued to be reported, as were cases of extortion, harassment and other violations.<sup>6</sup> During the reference period, civilians were reported to have been targeted by a variety of state or state-backed actors, including the Military Intelligence Directorate,<sup>7</sup> the Air Force Intelligence Directorate, the Political Security Directorate,<sup>8</sup> the Syrian Arab Army (SAA)'s Fourth Division<sup>9</sup> and pro-GoS militias.<sup>10</sup>

Civilians who were arrested or otherwise targeted included protesters,<sup>11</sup> media workers,<sup>12</sup> political activists, human rights defenders,<sup>13</sup> university students, lawyers and government employees<sup>14</sup> and others expressing views critical of local conditions and the authorities' conduct

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<sup>4</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Manifestations of Security Disorder in Syrian Regime Areas: Causes and Implications, 19 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>5</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Manifestations of Security Disorder in Syrian Regime Areas: Causes and Implications, 19 June 2023, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/52/69, 7 February 2023, [url](#), para. 23, 52

<sup>6</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/52/69, 7 February 2023, [url](#), para. 23

<sup>7</sup> SNHR, At Least 178 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in January 2023, Including 14 Children and Seven Women, 2 February 2023, [url](#), pp. 12-13; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/52/69, 7 February 2023, [url](#), para. 56

<sup>8</sup> SNHR, At Least 178 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in January 2023, Including 14 Children and Seven Women, 2 February 2023, [url](#), p. 13

<sup>9</sup> SNHR, 12th Annual Report: Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in 2022, 17 January 2023, [url](#), p. 18; SOHR, Ongoing arbitrary arrests | Members of 4th Division arrest displaced young man in Aleppo city, 29 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>10</sup> SNHR, At Least 208 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in October 2022, Including Seven Children and Five Women, Mostly at the Hands of Syrian Regime Forces, 2 November 2022, [url](#), p. 11; SOHR, For unknown reasons | Iranian-backed militia arrests civilian in Rif Dimashq, 10 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>11</sup> SNHR, At Least 158 Arbitrary Arrests/Detention Documented in April, Including Five Children and Eight Women, 2 May 2023, [url](#), pp. 4, 9; SNHR, 1,057 Civilians, Including 251 Children, 94 Women, and 133 Victims Who Died due to Torture, Were Documented Killed in Syria, in 2022, 1 January 2023, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>12</sup> SNHR, At Least 158 Arbitrary Arrests/Detention Documented in April, Including Five Children and Eight Women, 2 May 2023, [url](#), p. 9; SOHR, Having criticised regime government | Security services arrest journalist in Masyaf for "undermining prestige of the state", 28 April 2023, [url](#); SOHR, Accused of undermining Syria's prestige | Regime security services arrest correspondent of regime-run channel in Aleppo, 12 December 2022, [url](#)

<sup>13</sup> AI, Amnesty International Report 2022/23 – Syria, 27 March 2023, [url](#), p. 352

<sup>14</sup> SNHR, At Least 2,221 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in 2022, Including 148 children and 457 Women (Adult Female), with 213 Cases Documented in December, 3 January 2023, [url](#), p. 9



in GoS-held areas<sup>15</sup> (including some cases of arrests and attempted arrests for social media activity),<sup>16</sup> members of political parties other than the ruling Baath party,<sup>17</sup> residents of areas reconquered by the GoS who have entered so-called ‘reconciliation’ agreements,<sup>18</sup> individuals who travelled between areas outside GoS control and GoS-held areas<sup>19</sup> or contacted relatives in opposition-held areas,<sup>20</sup> individuals with family members who were dissidents, activists<sup>21</sup> or armed opposition members,<sup>22</sup> as well as returnees from abroad<sup>23</sup> and internally displaced persons (IDPs) seeking to return to their original places of residence in GoS-held areas.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, GoS-controlled areas saw large numbers of ‘random’ arrests of civilians of unspecified profile.<sup>25</sup> In southern Syria, there was a reported ‘pattern’ of targeted assassinations of former members of opposition groups by unidentified persons.<sup>26</sup>

Cases involving political or national security offences were ‘assigned in an apparently arbitrary manner to the Counterterrorism Court (CTC), courts martial, or criminal courts’.<sup>27</sup> The US Department of State (USDOS) cited media and NGO reports stating that sentences against persons accused of anti-GoS activity were generally harsh, with non-violent offenders receiving

<sup>15</sup> SNHR, At Least 226 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in May, Including Six Children and 11 Women, 2 June 2023, [url](#), p. 4; SNHR, At Least 137 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in February 2023, Including Six Children and Three Women (Adult Females), 2 March 2023, [url](#), pp. 8, 13

<sup>16</sup> SNHR, At Least 164 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in March 2023, Including Nine Children and Three Women (Adult Females), 2 April 2023, [url](#), p. 9; BBC News, Syria: Protests over growing economic hardship spread in south, 24 August 2023, [url](#); Mohammed Alaa Ghanem, Alawites in Syria breaking silence?: Criticizing the dictatorship from within, MEI, 11 August 2023, [url](#)

<sup>17</sup> USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), pp. 70-71

<sup>18</sup> HRW, World Report 2023 – Syria, 12 January 2023, [url](#); SNHR, At Least 226 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in May, Including Six Children and 11 Women, 2 June 2023, [url](#), p. 4. The GoS has entered into so-called reconciliation agreements with different actors in most of the areas the GoS forces have recaptured from various anti-government groups. The reconciliation agreements ‘ranged from compromises in which after a cease fire opposition fighters remained involved in security and governance roles in their areas, to cases of virtual opposition surrender involving evacuations of fighters or even whole populations’. See: Hinnebusch, R., and Imady, O., Syria’s reconciliation agreements, Centre for Syrian Studies. University of St. Andrews, 12 February 2017, [url](#), p. 1; Adleh, F. and Favier, A., “Local reconciliation agreements” in Syria: A nonstarter for peacebuilding, European University Institute, June 2017, [url](#), pp. 1-2. Detailed information on the so-called reconciliation agreements and impact on the population is available in the EUAA COI Report: [Syria - Exercise of authority in recaptured areas \(January 2020\)](#)

<sup>19</sup> SNHR, At Least 178 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in January 2023, Including 14 Children and Seven Women, 2 February 2023, [url](#), p. 13

<sup>20</sup> SNHR, At Least 137 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in February 2023, Including Six Children and Three Women (Adult Females), 2 March 2023, [url](#), p. 13

<sup>21</sup> USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, At Least 2,221 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in 2022, Including 148 children and 457 Women (Adult Female), with 213 Cases Documented in December, 3 January 2023, [url](#), p. 10

<sup>22</sup> USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 10

<sup>23</sup> SNHR, At Least 226 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in May, Including Six Children and 11 Women, 2 June 2023, [url](#), pp. 4, 9; SNHR, At Least 158 Arbitrary Arrests/Detention Documented in April, Including Five Children and Eight Women, 2 May 2023, [url](#), p. 4; SNHR, 1,057 Civilians, Including 251 Children, 94 Women, and 133 Victims Who Died due to Torture, Were Documented Killed in Syria, in 2022, 1 January 2023, [url](#), p. 15

<sup>24</sup> SNHR, 12th Annual Report: Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in 2022, 17 January 2023, [url](#), p. 21

<sup>25</sup> SNHR, At Least 226 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in May, Including Six Children and 11 Women, 2 June 2023, [url](#), p. 4; SNHR, At Least 158 Arbitrary Arrests/Detention Documented in April, Including Five Children and Eight Women, 2 May 2023, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>26</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/52/69, 7 February 2023, [url](#), para. 46

<sup>27</sup> USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 15



punishments similar to those accused of violent activity.<sup>28</sup> Prison conditions for political and national security prisoners, especially alleged opposition members, were reportedly ‘much worse than those for ordinary criminals’.<sup>29</sup>

The UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (UNCOI), in a report covering the period from January 2020 to April 2023, noted that torture was practised at detention facilities of the Military Intelligence Directorate (also known as Military Security),<sup>30</sup> the Air Force Intelligence Directorate,<sup>31</sup> and the Political Security Directorate,<sup>32</sup> all of which had branches across the country, as well as in facilities of the General Intelligence Directorate (based in the Damascus area),<sup>33</sup> the Criminal Security Department of the police,<sup>34</sup> and in military prisons overseen by the Military Police (including Sednaya military prison).<sup>35</sup>

## 1.1.2. Specific profiles interpreted by the government as opposition

### (a) Members of political opposition parties

The GoS has been reported to ban ‘genuine’ political opposition.<sup>36</sup> While the USDOS reported that the GoS had ‘little tolerance’ for non-Baathist parties,<sup>37</sup> a Syrian academic interviewed for this report observed that the GoS was relatively tolerant towards independent politicians and members of parties labelled as ‘domestic’ opposition as long as these groups did not call for the overthrow of the Syrian President. Nevertheless, such members of domestic opposition were not completely immune to harassment and arrest.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, the GoS used its intelligence and security apparatus to ‘monitor and punish opposition movements that could meaningfully challenge Assad’s rule’<sup>39</sup> and reportedly harassed parties with a Socialist/Communist or Islamist agenda.<sup>40</sup>

In Sweida governorate, it was reported that the Military Intelligence Directorate carried out abductions at checkpoints targeting suspected members of the Syrian al-Liwa Party,<sup>41</sup> a local

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<sup>28</sup> USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 21

<sup>29</sup> USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 23

<sup>30</sup> UNCOI, “No End in Sight”: Torture and ill-treatment in the Syrian Arab Republic 2020-2023, A/HRC/53/CRP.5, 10 July 2023, [url](#), para. 17-18

<sup>31</sup> UNCOI, “No End in Sight”: Torture and ill-treatment in the Syrian Arab Republic 2020-2023, A/HRC/53/CRP.5, 10 July 2023, [url](#), para. 22-23

<sup>32</sup> UNCOI, “No End in Sight”: Torture and ill-treatment in the Syrian Arab Republic 2020-2023, A/HRC/53/CRP.5, 10 July 2023, [url](#), para. 27

<sup>33</sup> UNCOI, “No End in Sight”: Torture and ill-treatment in the Syrian Arab Republic 2020-2023, A/HRC/53/CRP.5, 10 July 2023, [url](#), para. 31

<sup>34</sup> UNCOI, “No End in Sight”: Torture and ill-treatment in the Syrian Arab Republic 2020-2023, A/HRC/53/CRP.5, 10 July 2023, [url](#), para. 32

<sup>35</sup> UNCOI, “No End in Sight”: Torture and ill-treatment in the Syrian Arab Republic 2020-2023, A/HRC/53/CRP.5, 10 July 2023, [url](#), para. 33

<sup>36</sup> Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2023 – Syria, 2023, [url](#)

<sup>37</sup> USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), pp. 70-71

<sup>38</sup> Syrian academic, email correspondence, 15 August 2023

<sup>39</sup> Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2023 – Syria, 2023, [url](#)

<sup>40</sup> USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 71

<sup>41</sup> SNHR, At Least 2,221 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in 2022, Including 148 children and 457 Women (Adult Female), with 213 Cases Documented in December, 3 January 2023, [url](#), p. 10



anti-GoS Druze political party<sup>42</sup> which had a military wing<sup>43</sup> (the ‘Counter-Terrorism Force’)<sup>44</sup> that reportedly collaborated with the US-supported Maghawir al-Thawra militia in Al-Tanf.<sup>45</sup> In late January 2023, it was reported that eight members of the Counter-Terrorism Force who had been arrested in a GoS military campaign on the party’s headquarters in June 2022 had died in detention, with the bodies reported to be showing signs of maltreatment in custody.<sup>46</sup>

## (b) Political activists and protesters

### *Political activists (including journalists and media activists)*

While the 2012 Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic guarantees freedom of expression (Article 42.2) and freedom of the press (Article 43),<sup>47</sup> it was noted that the GoS suppressed free speech, and persons seeking to expose or criticise government corruption faced reprisals ranging from job dismissal to imprisonment.<sup>48</sup> In GoS-held areas, the authorities were reportedly controlling all forms of media- and internet-based expression, and independent media outlets did not exist.<sup>49</sup> According to civil society organisations, Syrian journalists faced arrest, abduction, torture<sup>50</sup> and death in custody, as well as censorship.<sup>51</sup>

Syria’s new Cybercrime Law (Law No. 20 of 2022), which was adopted in April 2022 and came into effect the following month,<sup>52</sup> provides an overhaul of legal rules on cybercrime that were previously specified in the now-repealed<sup>53</sup> Law (Legislative Decree) No. 17 of 2012.<sup>54</sup> It contains a broadened definition of cybercrimes<sup>55</sup> and imposes harsher punishments for publishing dissident content on the internet<sup>56</sup> (up to 15 years in prison).<sup>57</sup> Freedom of expression and the press have also been restricted by provisions of the 2011 Media Law<sup>58</sup> the Law for Protecting the Revolution (1965),<sup>59</sup> the Terrorism Law (2012), and the Penal Code.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>42</sup> The Syrian al-Liwa Party, founded in mid-2021, proclaims that it seeks to protect Sweida from GoS-backed insecurity and ‘terrorism’ to represent the Druze community politically. Al-Monitor, New Druze political party, military faction take shape in Suwayda, 18 July 2021, [url](#)

<sup>43</sup> Enab Baladi, Multiple conflicting forces on the ground portend possible clash in Syria’s As-Suwayda, 3 October 2021, [url](#)

<sup>44</sup> Tamimi, A. J., Interview with Hizb al-Liwa’ al-Souri in al-Suwayda’ Province [blog], 31 December 2022, [url](#); Syria Direct, In Suwayda, ‘organized gangs’ serve as an arm of Damascus and violence threatens to ignite interfamilial conflicts, 15 June 2022, [url](#)

<sup>45</sup> Carter Center (The), Quarterly Review of Syrian Political and Military Dynamics, January - March 2022, 13 May 2022, [url](#), p. 13

<sup>46</sup> NPA, Government hands body of arrestee to Men of Dignity In Syria’s Suwayda, 31 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>47</sup> Syria, Constitution, Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, 26 February 2012, [url](#), Articles 42.2, 43

<sup>48</sup> Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2023 – Syria, 2023, [url](#)

<sup>49</sup> AI, Türkiye/Syria: A human rights response to the 6 February earthquakes, February 2023, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>50</sup> RSF, Syria, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>51</sup> Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2023 – Syria, 2023, [url](#)

<sup>52</sup> TIMEP, Understanding Assad’s New Cyber-Crackdown in Syria, 5 October 2022, [url](#)

<sup>53</sup> STJ, Syria: Cybercrime Law is an Additional Tool for Suppressing Freedom of Expression, 14 June 2022, [url](#)

<sup>54</sup> SNHR, The Annual Report on the Most Notable Violations Against Media Workers in Syria, 3 May 2023, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>55</sup> STJ, Syria: Cybercrime Law is an Additional Tool for Suppressing Freedom of Expression, 14 June 2022, [url](#)

<sup>56</sup> SNHR, The Annual Report on the Most Notable Violations Against Media Workers in Syria, 3 May 2023, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>57</sup> TIMEP, Understanding Assad’s New Cyber-Crackdown in Syria, 5 October 2022, [url](#)

<sup>58</sup> RSF, Syria, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>59</sup> RSF, Syria, n.d., [url](#); AI, Syria: End human rights violations in Syria – Amnesty International submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review 12th session of the UPR Working Group, October 2011, July 2011, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>60</sup> RSF, Syria, n.d., [url](#)



According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), the GoS arrested a variety of individuals based on the Cybercrime Law, including pro-government media workers<sup>61</sup> and citizen journalists. These included persons who on social media called for the implementation of the Anti-Torture Act in GoS-controlled areas<sup>62</sup> or voiced criticism of living conditions and corruption in GoS-held areas.<sup>63</sup> The authorities also arrested one or several individuals for allegedly communicating news to external media.<sup>64</sup> In the wake of the 6 February 2023 earthquake, sources reported that authorities arrested individuals who had criticised the GoS's aid distribution practices.<sup>65</sup>

The GoS authorities reportedly also arrested and tortured persons with real or perceived family links to political dissidents and activists.<sup>66</sup> They also targeted young men suspected of knowing the identities of individuals who were wanted for writing public messages calling for the overthrow of the Assad government,<sup>67</sup> as well as individuals accused of criticizing the Iranian presence in the country.<sup>68</sup>

### *Protesters*

The 2012 Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic guarantees peaceful assembly (Article 44).<sup>69</sup> In late 2022/early 2023, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) documented an increase in the number of sit-ins and demonstrations to protest the worsening living conditions, including in Dar'a and Sweida governorates. Most of these events were peaceful and unfolded without the use of force or interference by the security forces.<sup>70</sup>

However, in early December 2022, security forces opened fire at protesters in Sweida who had stormed a governorate building, set fire to it, and torn down pictures of President Bashar al-Assad.<sup>71</sup> In at least two instances following this event, GoS security services in Damascus arrested persons from Sweida over their alleged participation in anti-GoS protests in their home

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<sup>61</sup> SNHR, At Least 2,221 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in 2022, Including 148 children and 457 Women (Adult Female), with 213 Cases Documented in December, 3 January 2023, [url](#), p. 9; SOHR, Accused of undermining Syria's prestige | Regime security services arrest correspondent of regime-run channel in Aleppo, 12 December 2022, [url](#)

<sup>62</sup> SNHR, The Annual Report on the Most Notable Violations Against Media Workers in Syria, 3 May 2023, [url](#), pp. 6-7

<sup>63</sup> SNHR, At Least 226 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in May, Including Six Children and 11 Women, 2 June 2023, [url](#), p. 4; SNHR, At Least 158 Arbitrary Arrests/Detention Documented in April, Including Five Children and Eight Women, 2 May 2023, [url](#), p. 9

<sup>64</sup> SNHR, At Least 186 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in August 2022, Including 17 Children and 11 Women, 2 September 2022, [url](#), p. 10

<sup>65</sup> AI, Türkiye/Syria: A human rights response to the 6 February earthquakes, February 2023, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>66</sup> USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, At Least 2,221 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in 2022, Including 148 children and 457 Women (Adult Female), with 213 Cases Documented in December, 3 January 2023, [url](#), p. 10

<sup>67</sup> SOHR, Regime storms houses | Unidentified people write sentences against regime on walls in Rif Dimashq, 2 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>68</sup> SOHR, Publications against Iranian and Hezbollah presence | Regime security service arrested six people in Al-Hasakah, 23 August 2022, [url](#)

<sup>69</sup> Syria, Constitution, Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, 26 February 2012, [url](#), Article 44

<sup>70</sup> UN Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General [S/2023/127], 21 February 2023, [url](#), para. 32

<sup>71</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/52/69, 7 February 2023, [url](#), para. 49



governorate.<sup>72</sup> Further arrests were reported after protests in Qudsaya city (Rural Damascus governorate) calling for the release of detainees and the overthrow of the GoS.<sup>73</sup>

In August 2023, protests criticising the economic situation and the Assad regime grew significantly in GoS-controlled areas, particularly in Sweida and Dar'a, but also in the cities of Damascus, Aleppo and the coastal regions of Latakia and Tartous.<sup>74</sup> In the first 25 days of August 2023, SNHR documented the arrest of 57 protesters by the GoS forces, as well as raids on the homes of protesters for the purpose of intimidation.<sup>75</sup>

**(c) Civilians originating from, or residing in, areas perceived to be opposing the government/reconquered areas**

There were numerous reports of arrests of civilians in GoS-controlled areas, including those reconquered by the GoS.<sup>76</sup> According to International Crisis Group, 'the mere fact of having lived outside regime-controlled areas exposes returnees to suspicion of sympathising with, aiding or actively participating in rebel activities'. Such suspicions could be a pretext for detention or financial exploitation.<sup>77</sup>

Among those detained were IDPs, including some who had signed settlement agreements with the GoS upon their return to GoS-held territory.<sup>78</sup> Other civilians were arrested on terrorism charges<sup>79</sup> (a charge commonly brought against political opponents and other detainees)<sup>80</sup> or after being accused of offences such as having a damaged ID document<sup>81</sup> or possessing/selling mobile phones for which no customs duties had been paid.<sup>82</sup> The arrests sometimes also targeted persons who had previously been released from GoS detention.<sup>83</sup> Several civilians who

<sup>72</sup> SNHR, At Least 158 Arbitrary Arrests/Detention Documented in April, Including Five Children and Eight Women, 2 May 2023, [url](#), p. 9; SOHR, Accused of expressing his political opinion | Regime security services arbitrarily arrest civilian at Damascus international airport, 27 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>73</sup> SOHR, Arrests campaign | Regime patrols arrest 14 civilians in Rif Dimashq following attack on Republican Guard checkpoint and anti-regime graphics, 10 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>74</sup> SNHR, The Syrian Regime is Responding to the August 2023 Protests with the Same Savage Mindset with Which It Reacted to the Protests of March 2011, 26 August 2023, [url](#), pp. 1-3; New York Times (The), Rare protests in Syria summon echoes of Arab Spring, 31 August 2023, [url](#)

<sup>75</sup> SNHR, The Syrian Regime is Responding to the August 2023 Protests with the Same Savage Mindset with Which It Reacted to the Protests of March 2011, 26 August 2023, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>76</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/52/69, 7 February 2023, [url](#), para. 52; SNHR, At Least 164 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in March 2023, Including Nine Children and Three Women (Adult Females), 2 April 2023, [url](#), p. 8; SNHR, At Least 178 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in January 2023, Including 14 Children and Seven Women, 2 February 2023, [url](#), p. 8; HRW, World Report 2023 – Syria, 12 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>77</sup> International Crisis Group, Syria: Ruling over Aleppo's Ruins, 9 May 2022, [url](#), p. 19

<sup>78</sup> SOHR, After returning to Syria | Regime security services arrest a civilian on his way to Damascus, 13 May 2023, [url](#); SOHR, "Out of frying pan, into fire" | "State Security" arrests civilian with settled status in Homs after leaving Al-Rukban camp, 19 December 2022, [url](#)

<sup>79</sup> SOHR, Since beginning of March | Regime security services arrest over 80 civilians including child and woman, 19 March 2023, [url](#)

<sup>80</sup> USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), pp. 26-27

<sup>81</sup> SOHR, For "possession of damaged ID" | Young man arrested by "Military Security" in Rif Dimashq, 3 November 2022, [url](#)

<sup>82</sup> SOHR, Accused of "selling uncustomed mobile phones" | Regime security service arrest civilian in Deir Ezzor city, 30 May 2023, [url](#); SOHR, Ongoing oppression | Security services launch security campaign in Aleppo, arresting hundreds of civilians and imposing large fines, 28 April 2023, [url](#)

<sup>83</sup> SNHR, At Least 178 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in January 2023, Including 14 Children and Seven Women, 2 February 2023, [url](#), p. 8



had undergone ‘reconciliation’ were reported to have died in GoS custody.<sup>84</sup> It was noted that many individuals in southern Syria who were explicitly wanted by the authorities rarely left their homes so as to avoid encounters with GoS-linked security actors.<sup>85</sup>

In recent years, GoS security forces have also been harassing, detaining and extorting individuals who had relatives in armed opposition-controlled areas.<sup>86</sup> There were several reported cases of civilians in GoS-controlled areas who were arrested for communicating on the phone with relatives living in areas outside GoS control.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, civilians were arrested for travelling between GoS-held areas and areas controlled by other parties,<sup>88</sup> e.g. from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-held areas in Aleppo’s northern countryside to Aleppo City’s GoS-controlled territory.<sup>89</sup> Others were current humanitarian workers in areas of Deir Ez-Zor currently controlled by the SDF<sup>90</sup> or former health/humanitarian workers in now-reconquered areas.<sup>91</sup> In many cases, meanwhile, the authorities did not provide reasons for arrests.<sup>92</sup> Such cases often concerned young men<sup>93</sup> (including university students),<sup>94</sup> some of whom had reportedly not sided with any party to the conflict.<sup>95</sup> For information on the treatment of young men accused of draft evasion or failing to perform military service, see section 1.2 of this report.

#### **(d) (Former) members of anti-government armed groups**

During the reference period, there were a number of reported arrests of individuals with various types of alleged links to anti-GoS armed groups, some of whom had undergone

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<sup>84</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/52/69, 7 February 2023, [url](#), para. 59; SOHR, During October | Five civilians died under torture in regime prisons, 1 November 2022, [url](#)

<sup>85</sup> Etana Syria, Arrests in South Syria – February 2023, 20 February 2023, [url](#)

<sup>86</sup> International Crisis Group, Syria: Ruling over Aleppo’s Ruins, 9 May 2022, [url](#), p. 9

<sup>87</sup> SNHR, At Least 137 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in February 2023, Including Six Children and Three Women (Adult Females), 2 March 2023, [url](#), p. 13; SNHR, At Least 2,221 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in 2022, Including 148 children and 457 Women (Adult Female), with 213 Cases Documented in December, 3 January 2023, [url](#), p. 10

<sup>88</sup> SNHR, At Least 2,221 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in 2022, Including 148 children and 457 Women (Adult Female), with 213 Cases Documented in December, 3 January 2023, [url](#), p. 10

<sup>89</sup> SNHR, At Least 178 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in January 2023, Including 14 Children and Seven Women, 2 February 2023, [url](#), p. 13; SOHR, Arbitrary arrests | Political security arrests displaced people from Afrin en route to Aleppo for “dealing with “Autonomous Administration”, 23 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>90</sup> SOHR, Ongoing oppression | Regime forces arbitrarily arrest five people in the military hospital in Deir Ezzor, 11 April 2023, [url](#)

<sup>91</sup> SNHR, At Least 2,221 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in 2022, Including 148 children and 457 Women (Adult Female), with 213 Cases Documented in December, 3 January 2023, [url](#), p. 9

<sup>92</sup> UN Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General [S/2023/284], 20 April 2023, [url](#), para. 32; SOHR, For unknown reasons | Regime checkpoints arrest four young men in Al-Bokamal city in Deir Ezzor, 27 April 2023, [url](#); SOHR, Arbitrary arrests | Regime security services arrest young man at one of their checkpoints in western countryside of Daraa, 22 April 2023, [url](#); SOHR, Since beginning of March | Regime security services arrest over 80 civilians including child and woman, 19 March 2023, [url](#)

<sup>93</sup> SOHR, For unknown reasons | Regime checkpoints arrest four young men in Al-Bokamal city in Deir Ezzor, 27 April 2023, [url](#); SOHR, Arbitrary arrests | Regime security services arrest young man at one of their checkpoints in western countryside of Daraa, 22 April 2023, [url](#); SOHR, Demanding ransoms | Group of “Military Intelligence” arrests young man in Daraa, 14 April 2023, [url](#)

<sup>94</sup> MEMO, Syria regime arrests university students near Damascus, 1 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>95</sup> SOHR, Demanding ransoms | Group of “Military Intelligence” arrests young man in Daraa, 14 April 2023, [url](#); SOHR, For taking pictures | Regime security patrol arrests young man in Al-Mayadin in Deir Ezzor, 3 December 2022, [url](#)





‘reconciliation’/settlement with the GoS.<sup>96</sup> Those detained included persons suspected of former membership of the Free Syrian Army,<sup>97</sup> the pro- Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) Khalid ibn al-Walid Army<sup>98</sup> or unspecified opposition factions<sup>99</sup> (including at least one former commander<sup>100</sup> and several members of unspecified rank<sup>101</sup>). Moreover, in Dar’a governorate, there was a continuing ‘pattern’ of targeted assassinations of former members of opposition groups by unidentified gunmen.<sup>102</sup>

Several civilians were arrested by the Military Intelligence Directorate on (reportedly unfounded) allegations of ‘communicating with opposition groups in north Syria’ and planning a car-bomb attack,<sup>103</sup> or because they lived near places where attacks on GoS targets had occurred.<sup>104</sup> In several instances, arrests were made of individuals (including women)<sup>105</sup> with relatives who had been affiliated with armed opposition groups such as ISIL<sup>106</sup> and the Yassir Al-Aboud faction, a local armed group in Dar’a governorate.<sup>107</sup>

The USDOS reported that the outcomes of court trials of defendants accused of membership in the armed opposition ‘appeared predetermined’, although some defendants were able to bribe prosecutors and court officials.<sup>108</sup> The same source cited media and NGO reports stating that sentences of persons accused of anti-GoS activity (including violence against the GoS) were generally harsh.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>96</sup> SOHR, Deir Ezzor | Regime security services arrest brother of ex-ISIS wali of Deir Ezzor, 21 January 2023, [url](#); SOHR, Security campaign | Commanders and officers of IRGC, Hezbollah and Air Intelligence investigate 34 Syrians in Deir Ezzor for “dealing with coalition”, 21 September 2022, [url](#); SOHR, Ongoing arresting campaign | Security forces arrest former commander of Daraa opposition factions, 10 September 2022, [url](#)

<sup>97</sup> SOHR, Arrests campaign | Military Intelligence arrests five young men in Atman town north of Daraa, 1 February 2023, [url](#)

<sup>98</sup> SOHR, Daraa countryside | Regime forces arrest man for “joining faction pledging allegiance to ISIS”, 8 August 2022, [url](#)

<sup>99</sup> SOHR, Deir Ezzor | Regime security services arrest three National Defence commanders in less than week, 11 September 2022, [url](#); SOHR, Ongoing arresting campaign | Security forces arrest former commander of Daraa opposition factions, 10 September 2022, [url](#)

<sup>100</sup> SOHR, Ongoing arresting campaign | Security forces arrest former commander of Daraa opposition factions, 10 September 2022, [url](#)

<sup>101</sup> SOHR, Arrests campaign | Military Intelligence arrests five young men in Atman town north of Daraa, 1 February 2023, [url](#); SOHR, Deir Ezzor | Regime security services arrest three National Defence commanders in less than week, 11 September 2022, [url](#); SOHR, Daraa countryside | Regime forces arrest man for “joining faction pledging allegiance to ISIS”, 8 August 2022, [url](#)

<sup>102</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/52/69, 7 February 2023, [url](#), para. 46

<sup>103</sup> SOHR, Accused of planning to detonate car-bomb near Hama University | Three young men arrested by military intelligence service in Talbiseh, 17 May 2023, [url](#)

<sup>104</sup> SOHR, Over targeting regime military convoy | Military intelligence of regime launches arrest campaign against young men in Daraa, 14 May 2023, [url](#); SOHR, Arrests campaign | Regime patrols arrest 14 civilians in Rif Dimashq following attack on Republican Guard checkpoint and anti-regime graphics, 10 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>105</sup> SOHR, Ongoing oppression | Regime security services arrest woman arbitrarily in Al-Mayadeen city, 23 January 2023, [url](#); SOHR, After the arrest of a woman | protests erupt to demand the release of detainees and overthrow the regime, 25 December 2022, [url](#)

<sup>106</sup> SOHR, Ongoing oppression | Regime security services arrest woman arbitrarily in Al-Mayadeen city, 23 January 2023, [url](#); SOHR, Deir Ezzor | Regime security services arrest brother of ex-ISIS wali of Deir Ezzor, 21 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>107</sup> SOHR, After the arrest of a woman | protests erupt to demand the release of detainees and overthrow the regime, 25 December 2022, [url](#)

<sup>108</sup> USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 19

<sup>109</sup> USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 21



## (e) Returnees from abroad perceived as opposition

### *Current return procedures*

Individuals returning to Syria need to go through one or both of two return procedures: security clearance and status settlement.<sup>110</sup> Both procedures are run by Syrian intelligence.<sup>111</sup> However, the distinction between making an application for security clearance and settling one's status was not always clear-cut.<sup>112</sup> According to International Crisis Group, the process of 'settlement of security status (*taswiyat al-wadaa al-amni*)' involved obtaining formal security clearance from all four main security agencies as well as verification of whether the applicant has satisfied the requirements regarding the mandatory military service.<sup>113</sup>

The UNCOI found that on-the-ground procedures regarding return varied considerably and often depended on where persons were returning from, where they intended to go,<sup>114</sup> their individual profile,<sup>115</sup> and the intelligence services' local capacities. While all returnees were required to visit security agencies,<sup>116</sup> in some areas they had to 'navigate multiple and overlapping clearance processes involving a range of authorities'.<sup>117</sup> Some returnees were required to settle their status in 'status settlement' centres in GoS-held areas before embarking on their return, thus having to rely on family members or friends in Syria acting on their behalf. Others lodged a request for status settlement at a border crossing or accessed such centres in person after re-entering Syria through clandestine routes.<sup>118</sup>

Persons who found out that they were listed as wanted by the authorities paid large amounts of money to members of security forces and brokers to avoid arrest upon their return to GoS-held territory.<sup>119</sup> In some cases, the Syrian intelligence agencies denied return permissions on 'criminal' or security-related grounds. In other cases, persons wishing to return were denied entry at the border.<sup>120</sup> For detailed information on return procedures to Syria, see sections 1.1.3 Wanted lists and 1.2.5 Returnees from abroad perceived as opposition of the [EUAA COI report Syria: Targeting of individuals \(September 2022\)](#).

<sup>110</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria: Issues regarding return, October 2021, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>111</sup> Syria Direct, 'Syria is safe, refugees should return': The dangers of the growing narrative, 29 June 2021, [url](#); Al Jumhuriya, *مناهة الموافقة الأمنية* [Maze of security approval], 14 March 2022, [url](#)

<sup>112</sup> EUAA, Country of Origin Information Report, Syria: Situation of returnees from abroad, June 2021, [url](#), p. 20; HRW, "Our Lives Are Like Death": Syrian Refugee Returns from Lebanon and Jordan, 20 October 2021, [url](#), p. 47

<sup>113</sup> International Crisis Group, Syria: Ruling over Aleppo's Ruins, 9 May 2022, [url](#), p. 20

<sup>114</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/52/69, 7 February 2023, [url](#), para. 63-64

<sup>115</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/52/69, 7 February 2023, [url](#), para. 63-64; TIMEP, The Selective Return of Syrian Refugees, 23 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>116</sup> TIMEP, The Selective Return of Syrian Refugees, 23 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>117</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/52/69, 7 February 2023, [url](#), para. 64

<sup>118</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/52/69, 7 February 2023, [url](#), para. 64

<sup>119</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/52/69, 7 February 2023, [url](#), para. 67

<sup>120</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/52/69, 7 February 2023, [url](#), para. 65



### *Treatment of returnees by GoS and affiliated armed groups*

Returning to Syria from abroad was described as a ‘gamble’<sup>121</sup> due to documented human rights abuses against returnees, including arbitrary detention, torture and forced disappearances.<sup>122</sup> As of 30 June 2023, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported 370 323 self-organised refugee returns to Syria since 2016.<sup>123</sup> The actual numbers could however be greater, as there is also return movement via informal routes.<sup>124</sup>

GoS forces and affiliated militias continued to ‘detain, disappear, and mistreat’ former refugees who had returned to reconquered areas,<sup>125</sup> including persons who had coordinated their return with a GoS ‘reconciliation committee’.<sup>126</sup> Numerous arrests of returnees were reported at the Syrian-Lebanese border (notably the al-Masnaa border crossing),<sup>127</sup> including of individuals returning from Lebanon under a voluntary repatriation scheme after agreeing to security settlements with the GoS. Further concentrations of arrests were reported at the Syrian-Turkish border, especially at the Kasab border crossing.<sup>128</sup> Those detained included returnees who were wanted for opposition to the GoS,<sup>129</sup> draft evasion<sup>130</sup> or defection from the Syrian military during the conflict.<sup>131</sup> There were also cases of returnees being arrested for the purpose of exacting bribes in exchange for their release.<sup>132</sup>

According to a report by the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), returnees were not targeted based on whether they were actually opposed to the GoS, but ‘rather simply because they are refugees or belong to an environment that opposes the regime’. The same report added that ‘due to the lack of proper coordination between agencies’ there was no guarantee that a returnee would be spared from being targeted by intelligence services. Moreover, given

<sup>121</sup> Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Migration and Displacement in the Arab World Demands a More Equitable Response, 3 May 2023, [url](#)

<sup>122</sup> HRW, World Report 2023 – Syria, 12 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>123</sup> UNHCR, Operational Data Portal – Syria Regional Refugee Response, last updated 30 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>124</sup> Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Migration and Displacement in the Arab World Demands a More Equitable Response, 3 May 2023, [url](#)

<sup>125</sup> HRW, World Report 2023 – Syria, 12 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>126</sup> SOHR, Despite giving “guarantees for return” | Regime security services arrest three people after entering Syrian territory, 22 August 2022, [url](#); UNCOI, “No End in Sight”: Torture and ill-treatment in the Syrian Arab Republic 2020-2023, A/HRC/53/CRP.5, 10 July 2023, [url](#), para. 77; HRW, World Report 2023 – Syria, 12 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>127</sup> SNHR, At Least 226 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in May, Including Six Children and 11 Women, 2 June 2023, [url](#), pp. 4, 9; SNHR, At Least 158 Arbitrary Arrests/Detention Documented in April, Including Five Children and Eight Women, 2 May 2023, [url](#), pp. 4, 9

<sup>128</sup> SNHR, At Least 2,221 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in 2022, Including 148 children and 457 Women (Adult Female), with 213 Cases Documented in December, 3 January 2023, [url](#), p. 10

<sup>129</sup> New York Times (The), As Assad’s Isolation Lifts, Syrian Refugees Fear Pressure to Return Home, 5 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>130</sup> New York Times (The), As Assad’s Isolation Lifts, Syrian Refugees Fear Pressure to Return Home, 5 June 2023, [url](#); SNHR, At Least 158 Arbitrary Arrests/Detention Documented in April, Including Five Children and Eight Women, 2 May 2023, [url](#), p. 9

<sup>131</sup> New York Times (The), As Assad’s Isolation Lifts, Syrian Refugees Fear Pressure to Return Home, 5 June 2023, [url](#); Syria Direct, 1,100 Syrian refugees arrested, 600 deported from Lebanon in unprecedented crackdown, 4 May 2023, [url](#)

<sup>132</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/52/69, 7 February 2023, [url](#), para. 68; SOHR, Having been deported from Lebanon | Regime security services arrest nearly 40 civilians to collect ransoms, 22 April 2023, [url](#)



the involvement of the General Intelligence Directorate in the coordination of returns, a returnee may incidentally be wanted by this agency and thus fall into its hands upon return.<sup>133</sup>

The UNCOI in a July 2023 report covering the period from January 2020 to April 2023, noted that the GoS authorities arrested returnees at checkpoints for carrying outdated or inadequate papers and inflicted torture to coerce confessions from returnees, including about their previous involvement in protests.<sup>134</sup> Some individuals who attempted to reach Europe by sea were captured, arrested and forcibly returned to Syria.<sup>135</sup>

## 1.2. Persons fearing recruitment by the government armed forces, military draft evaders, deserters and defectors

For detailed background information and developments prior to August 2022, please see the [EUAA COI Report on Syria: Military service \(April 2021\)](#) and [EUAA COI Report: Syria - Targeting of individuals \(September 2022\)](#). The following sections focus mainly on recent developments.

### 1.2.1 Changes to the military service law

No significant changes to the military service law were reported during the reference period. All men between 18 and 42 years of age are required to perform military service for a duration of between 18 and 21 months, depending on their level of education. Once military service is completed, men can be called for reserve duty until 42 years of age.<sup>136</sup> Sources have reported in previous years on cases where men past the age of 42 were conscripted or called up for reserve service.<sup>137</sup> Ali Aljasem<sup>138</sup> stated in a July 2023 interview that he did not have knowledge of conscripts serving in the SAA past the age of 42 but knew numerous cases of persons over 42 serving in SAA-affiliated militias.<sup>139</sup>

### 1.2.2 Recruitment of conscripts and reservists

Recruitment of conscripts and reservists in the SAA continues to take place according to the existing laws regarding compulsory and reserve service.<sup>140</sup> The need for reservists is at its minimum because SAA's need for manpower is low and the GoS also relies on affiliated militias

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<sup>133</sup> TIMEP, The Selective Return of Syrian Refugees, 23 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>134</sup> UNCOI, "No End in Sight": Torture and ill-treatment in the Syrian Arab Republic 2020-2023, A/HRC/53/CRP.5, 10 July 2023, [url](#), para. 74

<sup>135</sup> UNCOI, "No End in Sight": Torture and ill-treatment in the Syrian Arab Republic 2020-2023, A/HRC/53/CRP.5, 10 July 2023, [url](#), para. 76

<sup>136</sup> EUAA, Country of Origin Information Report, Syria: Military Service, April 2021, [url](#), p. 13

<sup>137</sup> EUAA, Country of Origin Information Report, Syria: Military Service, April 2021, [url](#), p. 19; Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Algemeen ambtsbericht Syrië [Country report Syria], May 2022, [url](#), p. 53

<sup>138</sup> Ali Aljasem is a PhD student at the Center for Conflict Studies - History of International Relations at Utrecht University and focuses on paramilitarism in Syria. For more information see [Bibliography](#).

<sup>139</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023

<sup>140</sup> AlMustafa, M., email correspondence 11 July 2023; online interview 17 July 2023.



for operations, who are more efficient and cheaper.<sup>141</sup> The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) also stated in an interview with the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) that conscripts are called up for military service in much higher numbers than reservists.<sup>142</sup>

After turning 18, men must report for military service and get their military booklet at a local recruitment division office.<sup>143</sup> All Syrian men receive a military service booklet after turning 18.<sup>144</sup> Syrians living abroad have to report to a Syrian embassy or consulate to fill in a specific form which would serve as a substitute for the military booklet until their return to Syria.<sup>145</sup> Military exemptions and deferrals are recorded in the military booklet.<sup>146</sup>

Between the months of January and May, the GoS announces the lists of men who need to report for military service during that year.<sup>147</sup> These lists are also announced on official government TV channels and posted at the office of the local *mukhtar* (mayor).<sup>148</sup> The recruitment division office also sends written notifications to the address of the person eligible to start military service informing him about the drafting date.<sup>149</sup>

Failure to report to the military recruitment division within the period specified results in a fine<sup>150</sup> and a potential extension of the military service period with additional months.<sup>151</sup> In an interview with DIS, SOHR stated that, if a person does not report for military service, the *mukhtar* will notify his family and subsequently the military police will visit his house and deliver a notification to report to the military recruitment division.<sup>152</sup> SNHR also stated that the military police may visit the person's house to notify him to report for military service, although this rarely occurs in practice.<sup>153</sup> Those who do not report within one year of becoming eligible for military service or do not start their military service, are registered in a national database as draft evaders.<sup>154</sup>

<sup>141</sup> Aljaseem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023.

<sup>142</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [source: SOHR], July 2023, [url](#), p. 19

<sup>143</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [source: Suhail al-Ghazi], July 2023, [url](#), p. 24

<sup>144</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [sources: SOHR, SNHR, Suhail al-Ghazi], July 2023, [url](#), pp. 19, 20, 23

<sup>145</sup> Syrian Ministry of Defence, General Recruitment Directorate, المكلفون الموجودون خارج أراضي الجمهورية العربية السورية [Taxpayers located outside the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic], [url](#)

<sup>146</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [sources: SOHR, SNHR, Suhail al-Ghazi], July 2023, [url](#), pp. 19, 21, 25

<sup>147</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [source: Suhail al-Ghazi], July 2023, [url](#), p. 23

<sup>148</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [sources: Suhail al-Ghazi, SOHR], July 2023, [url](#), pp. 18, 23

<sup>149</sup> Syrian Ministry of Defence, General Recruitment Directorate, المكلفون الموجودون خارج أراضي الجمهورية العربية السورية [Taxpayers located outside the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic], [url](#)

<sup>150</sup> AlMustafa, M., email correspondence 11 July 2023; online interview 17 July 2023.

<sup>151</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [source: Suhail al-Ghazi], July 2023, [url](#), p. 24; Syrian Ministry of Defence, General Recruitment Directorate, الخدمة الإلزامية [Compulsory Military Service], [url](#)

<sup>152</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [source: SOHR], July 2023, [url](#), p. 18

<sup>153</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [source: SNHR], July 2023, [url](#), p. 21

<sup>154</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [source: Suhail al-Ghazi], July 2023, [url](#), p. 24





According to Ali Aljaseem, new conscripts will get a maximum of 45 days training and are then considered ready for deployment.<sup>155</sup> However, Syrian researcher Suhail al-Ghazi<sup>156</sup> stated that training of conscripts lasts six months.<sup>157</sup>

#### a) Recruitment through reconciliation agreements/settlement of status

The SAA is also recruiting conscripts through ‘reconciliation’ agreements which are announced periodically. These conscripts are either incorporated directly in the SAA or in affiliated militias.<sup>158</sup>

For instance, in June 2023, the GoS initiated a settlement in Dar’a governorate for draft evaders, those wanted for reserve service and for military defectors.<sup>159</sup> Persons wanted for military service and reserve service who underwent the status settlement were granted a six-month deferment period before having to join the military, while military defectors were granted a similar one-month deferment.<sup>160</sup> All those who underwent the settlement had the possibility to obtain official travel documentation and travel outside the country. Sources noted that in this way the GoS is incentivising young men from Dar’a to leave the country<sup>161</sup> while also gathering information on opposition members<sup>162</sup> and extorting money from those who undergo the process.<sup>163</sup> While the GoS announced that around 15 000 men underwent the settlement by mid-June,<sup>164</sup> other sources reported that over 50 % of those wanted in Dar’a boycotted the settlement. Military defectors particularly expressed distrust of the settlement.<sup>165</sup>

In Sweida governorate, the local Druze population has largely resisted compulsory and reserve conscription in the SAA throughout the conflict.<sup>166</sup> The number of draft evaders in the governorate is estimated at around 30 000.<sup>167</sup> In October 2022, the GoS initiated a ‘security settlement’ in the governorate for persons wanted for compulsory and reserve service. The settlement granted those who underwent it an administrative postponement for a period of six months after which they would be required to join SAA units deployed in southern Syria. It also granted those who conclude it a ‘settlement card’ which allows them freedom of movement and to approach state institutions for issuing travel documents without the fear of arrest and

<sup>155</sup> Aljaseem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023

<sup>156</sup> Suhail al-Ghazi is a Syrian researcher who focuses on security and military developments in Syria in addition to governance and economical aspects of the Syrian conflict. His work has been published in various media outlets and think-tanks such as the Atlantic Council, ORSAM, Alsharq Forum and TIMEP.

<sup>157</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts’ duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [source: Suhail al-Ghazi], July 2023, [url](#), p. 26

<sup>158</sup> Jusoor for Studies, email correspondence 11 July & 24 July 2023; Aljaseem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023.

<sup>159</sup> Syria Direct, Wave of new Daraa settlements amid Arab normalization efforts, 9 June 2023, [url](#); Enab Baladi, New security settlement to enhance regime grip on Daraa: activists, displaced, 14 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>160</sup> Syria Direct, Wave of new Daraa settlements amid Arab normalization efforts, 9 June 2023, [url](#); Enab Baladi, New security settlement to enhance regime grip on Daraa: activists, displaced, 14 June 2023, [url](#); NPA, Daraa youth doubt Syrian government promises, boycott settlement, 13 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>161</sup> Syria Direct, Wave of new Daraa settlements amid Arab normalization efforts, 9 June 2023, [url](#); Enab Baladi, New security settlement to enhance regime grip on Daraa: activists, displaced, 14 June 2023, [url](#); NPA, Daraa youth doubt Syrian government promises, boycott settlement, 13 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>162</sup> Enab Baladi, New security settlement to enhance regime grip on Daraa: activists, displaced, 14 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>163</sup> Enab Baladi, New security settlement to enhance regime grip on Daraa: activists, displaced, 14 June 2023, [url](#); NPA, Daraa youth doubt Syrian government promises, boycott settlement, 13 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>164</sup> SANA, Hundreds of citizens in Daraa join the settlement process, 14 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>165</sup> NPA, Daraa youth doubt Syrian government promises, boycott settlement, 13 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>166</sup> EUAA, Country of Origin Information Report, Syria: Military Service, April 2021, [url](#), p. 17

<sup>167</sup> Ezzi, M., What’s New About the Sweida Protests in Southern Syria?, EUI, 12 December 2022, [url](#); NPA, Popular rejection to government-imposed settlements in Syria’s Suwayda, 30 October 2022, [url](#)







detention.<sup>168</sup> Sources reported that only between 1 000<sup>169</sup> and 2 500 out of 30 000 men wanted for compulsory and reserve service have undergone the security settlement.<sup>170</sup>

### b) Recruitment of conscripts in SAA-affiliated forces

In practice, an alternative to the military service in the SAA is joining a pro-GoS militia.<sup>171</sup> According to Ali Aljasem, joining a militia is not a legal alternative to the military service, but rather one that ensures mobilisation of manpower for the GoS. Those who join militias do so for better salaries and incentives,<sup>172</sup> as well as for being promised that they would be serving in their area of origin and be exempted from military service under further notice.<sup>173</sup> However, when the SAA is involved in active fighting and has need for manpower, such as it was the case in February 2020 in Idlib and northern Hama, militias would also be deployed to the frontlines to take part in the confrontations as auxiliary forces to the SAA.<sup>174</sup> Once their service in the militias is completed, individuals still risk being conscripted by the SAA under the pretext of avoiding mandatory military service.<sup>175</sup> Such cases have been reported occurring in Deir Ez-Zor governorate.<sup>176</sup>

### c) Recruitment of reservists

Reservists continue to be called up for service<sup>177</sup>, albeit in smaller numbers compared to previous years due to the reduction of armed confrontations.<sup>178</sup> The law details four categories of reservists (first line, second line, third line and general reserve) and the contexts in which they can be called up for particular duties. The duration of reserve service as prescribed by the law is of five years for the categories of first line, second line and third line, and unspecified for general reserve service.<sup>179</sup> In practice there have been cases where the duration of the reserve service has reached nine years.<sup>180</sup>

Reservists are called up for service in the same way as conscripts.<sup>181</sup> When a reservist is called up, the military recruitment division announces the birth year of the reservist and the specific number of the military training course that they passed when they were conscripts.<sup>182</sup> According to SNHR, the reservist is called up 'by military recruitment division via the *mukhtar* who may

<sup>168</sup> Ezzi, M., What's New About the Sweida Protests in Southern Syria?, EUI, 12 December 2022, [url](#)

<sup>169</sup> NPA, Popular rejection to government-imposed settlements in Syria's Suwayda, 30 October 2022, [url](#)

<sup>170</sup> Ezzi, M., What's New About the Sweida Protests in Southern Syria?, EUI, 12 December 2022, [url](#)

<sup>171</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023; DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [source: Suhail al-Ghazi], July 2023, [url](#), p. 23; EUAA, COI Report: Syria – Military service, April 2021, [url](#), pp. 16-17

<sup>172</sup> Jusoor for Studies, email correspondence 11 July & 24 July 2023; EUAA, COI Report: Syria – Military service, April 2021, [url](#), p. 16

<sup>173</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023

<sup>174</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023

<sup>175</sup> Jusoor for Studies, email correspondence 11 July & 24 July 2023; Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023.

<sup>176</sup> Jusoor for Studies, email correspondence 11 July & 24 July 2023.

<sup>177</sup> Netherlands (The), MFA, Country of origin information report Syria, May 2022, [url](#), p. 53; AlMustafa, M., email correspondence 11 July 2023; online interview 17 July 2023.

<sup>178</sup> Netherlands (The), MFA, Algemeen ambtsbericht Syrië [Country report Syria] [source: confidential sources interviewed in March and April 2023], August 2023, [url](#), p. 54

<sup>179</sup> Syrian Arab Republic, Legislative Decree 30 of 2007 Military service law, 12 May 2007, [url](#), Articles 15-20

<sup>180</sup> AlMustafa, M., email correspondence 11 July 2023; online interview 17 July 2023.

<sup>181</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [source: SOHR], July 2023, [url](#), p. 19

<sup>182</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [source: SOHR], July 2023, [url](#), p. 19



approach the person at his residence'.<sup>183</sup> According to Suhail Al-Ghazi, individuals with specific skills such as tank crewmen are more likely to be called up for reserve service. The same source further stated that reservists from former opposition-held areas are increasingly called up for service, as the GoS wants to assert more control over these areas.<sup>184</sup> If those who are called up for reserve service do not report within the given deadline, their name will be added to wanted lists and they would risk being arrested by the authorities.<sup>185</sup> During the reference period, sources reported that GoS security forces arrested men wanted for reserve service, including in Rural Damascus<sup>186</sup> and Idlib governorates.<sup>187</sup> Reservists cannot choose their place of deployment.<sup>188</sup>

### 1.2.3 Deployment of conscripts and reservists

According to Omran Center for Strategic Studies researcher Muhsen AlMustafa,<sup>189</sup> military operations and the GoS' need of manpower are the main factors influencing the deployment of conscripts and reservists.<sup>190</sup> Conscripts and reservists cannot choose their place of deployment.<sup>191</sup> Conscripts may be able to pay a bribe to the commander of the division to be assigned to a specific division or avoid specific duties.<sup>192</sup> Bribing an officer to serve in a non-field position or not to serve at all is also a common practice.<sup>193</sup>

The GoS tends to deploy its forces in areas that pose the greatest threat to its control, for instance in northwestern Syria (Idlib and northern Aleppo).<sup>194</sup> Conscripts may be assigned to do their military service in units that have been involved in human rights violations including war crimes throughout the conflict, such as the Special Forces, the Republican Guard, the Fourth Armoured Division, the Air Force Intelligence or Military Intelligence.<sup>195</sup> The conscripts do not have the possibility to choose the unit in which they are to serve.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [sources: SNHR, Suhail Al-Ghazi], July 2023, [url](#), pp. 22, 26

<sup>184</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [source: Suhail al-Ghazi], July 2023, [url](#), p. 26; Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023.

<sup>185</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [source: SNHR], July 2023, [url](#), p. 22

<sup>186</sup> MEMO, Syria regime forces launch campaign of arrests in Damascus, 17 August 2023, [url](#)

<sup>187</sup> NPA, Government arrests dozens in Syria's Idlib for military reserve service, 9 August 2023, [url](#)

<sup>188</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023; AlMustafa, M., email correspondence 11 July 2023; online interview 17 July 2023; DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [sources: SOHR, SNHR, Suhail al-Ghazi], July 2023, [url](#), pp. 19-20, 23, 27

<sup>189</sup> Muhsen AlMustafa is a researcher at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies focusing on security, military, and governance in Syria. His work has been published in various outlets and think-tanks such as TIMEP, Italian Institute for International Studies and Tawazun. For more information see [Bibliography](#).

<sup>190</sup> AlMustafa, M., email correspondence 11 July 2023; online interview 17 July 2023.

<sup>191</sup> EUAA interview with Ali Aljasem, online interview, 10 July 2023; AlMustafa, M., email correspondence, 11 July 2023; online interview, 17 July 2023; DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [sources: SOHR, SNHR, Suhail al-Ghazi], July 2023, [url](#), pp. 19-20, 23, 27

<sup>192</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [sources: SOHR, SNHR, Suhail al-Ghazi], July 2023, [url](#), pp. 20, 23, 27; EUAA interview with Ali Aljasem, online interview, 10 July 2023.

<sup>193</sup> Al Mustafa, M., email correspondence, 11 July 2023; online interview, 17 July 2023; Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023; Jusoor for Studies, email correspondence 11 July & 24 July 2023.

<sup>194</sup> Jusoor for Studies, email correspondence 11 July & 24 July 2023.

<sup>195</sup> DIS, Syria – The Special Forces and the elite units, April 2023, [url](#), pp. 8-9, 12-14

<sup>196</sup> DIS, Syria – The Special Forces and the elite units, April 2023 [sources: SNHR, A Human Rights Organisation], [url](#), p. 26



Traditionally, the Republican Guard and Fourth Armoured Division have recruited mostly Alawites into their ranks,<sup>197</sup> with the vast majority of officers in the Fourth Armoured Division being Alawite.<sup>198</sup> However, sources reported in 2023 that the Fourth Armoured Division's recent recruitment practices have also targeted Sunni conscripts and former opposition fighters into its ranks, particularly in Dar'a governorate,<sup>199</sup> as well as draft evaders and deserters in Homs governorate.<sup>200</sup> According to Muhsen AlMustafa, conscripts from former opposition areas would not be selected to serve in sensitive positions such as in intelligence agencies where conscripts who are viewed as loyal to the GoS would be preferred.<sup>201</sup>

According to Suhail al-Ghazi, conscripts may be sent to the frontlines irrespective of their fighting experience or military skills.<sup>202</sup> Sources interviewed by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs assessed that conscripts originating from former opposition held areas would be disproportionately sent to the frontlines despite receiving minimal training, as punishment for their perceived lack of loyalty to the GoS.<sup>203</sup> Ali Aljasem noted that most of the casualties suffered by the SAA on active frontlines (such as Idlib in early 2020) were conscripts who originated from former opposition held areas (such as Dar'a, Darraya, Douma) and had little fighting experience. The expert noted that at this stage of the conflict the GoS expects even conscripts who are not viewed as loyalists to fight and contribute to its victory.<sup>204</sup>

According to Muhsen AlMustafa, a conscript's level of education influences the rank he receives during the compulsory military service. Persons with university degrees of four (graduation rate of 75 % or more), five or six years and those with master's degrees or above are given the officer rank of lieutenant and those with university degrees of four years the rank of warrant officer, while those with lower education certificates get lower ranks such as corporal, sergeant and first sergeant. Recruits which have minimum or partial disability will be attributed a rank one level lower than the one they would be awarded if they didn't have any disability.<sup>205</sup> According to a source interviewed by ACCORD in December 2021, persons with a university degree will be more likely to have to work in an office, while someone without a degree is more likely to be deployed to the front.<sup>206</sup>

<sup>197</sup> DIS, Syria – The Special Forces and the elite units, April 2023 [sources: SNHR, A Human Rights Organisation], [url](#), pp. 12, 23

<sup>198</sup> DIS, Syria – The Special Forces and the elite units, April 2023 [sources: SNHR, A Human Rights Organisation], [url](#), p. 12, 23; Alghadawi, A., The Fourth Division: Syria's Parallel Army, MEI, September 2021, [url](#)

<sup>199</sup> Shahhoud A., Abulhusn, M., Syria's 4th Division: A Threat to Stability, New Lines Institute, March 2023, [url](#), pp. 9-10

<sup>200</sup> Enab Baladi, Fourth Division strengthens "smuggling economy" with military deserters, 17 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>201</sup> AlMustafa, M., email correspondence, 11 July 2023; online interview, 17 July 2023.

<sup>202</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [source: Suhail al-Ghazi], July 2023, [url](#), p. 27

<sup>203</sup> Netherlands (The), MFA, Algemeen ambtsbericht Syrië [Country report Syria] [source: confidential sources interviewed in March and April 2023], August 2023, [url](#), p. 59

<sup>204</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023. The use of conscripts from former opposition-held areas in active fighting that took place in early 2020 was also documented in the EUAA, COI Report: Syria – Military service, April 2021, [url](#), p. 23

<sup>205</sup> AlMustafa, M., email correspondence, 11 July 2023; online interview, 17 July 2023.

<sup>206</sup> Austria, BFA Staatendokumentation, Anfragebeantwortung der Staatendokumentation zu Syrien: Wehrdienst [query response on Syria: military service] [source: Kheder Khaddour], 27 January 2022, [url](#), p. 19



## 1.2.4 Demobilisation of conscripts and reservists

Throughout the current conflict, conscripts and reservists have served beyond the compulsory period of military service.<sup>207</sup> During the reference period of this report, three administrative orders were issued to discharge certain groups of conscripts and reservists who had already served a certain number of years.<sup>208</sup>

In August 2022, an administrative order ended the retention and recall of certain categories: reserve officers (doctors, dentists, and pharmacists), officers (doctors, dentists, and pharmacists) who are serving under compulsory service shall be discharged upon the completion of their compulsory service. Upon completing their mandatory or reserve service, specialist doctors in anaesthesia, intensive care, and emergency medicine would also be discharged.<sup>209</sup>

In late August 2022, an administrative order ended the retention and recall of the following categories, effective from 1 October 2022: retained conscripted officers, retained conscripted officer cadets from all specialties, reserve officers and officer cadets ('enlisted attendees') who have completed at least one year of actual reserve service until 31 August 2022. Additionally, officers and conscripted officer cadets would be discharged upon completion of mandatory military service. Reserve ranks and personnel who have completed six and a half or more years of reserve service years, and reserve ranks and personnel who were born in 1983 and completed two or more years of reserve service until 31 August 2022, would also be discharged from 1 October 2022.<sup>210</sup>

In July 2023, the president of Syria issued an administrative order ending the retention and recall of non-commissioned officers and reservist soldiers who have completed six and a half years of actual service until 31 July 2023. The order was effective from 1 September 2023.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> EUAA, Targeting of individuals, September 2022, [url](#), pp. 40-41; EUAA, Country of Origin Information Report, Syria: Military Service, April 2021, [url](#), p. 26; Kinaan, N., An Exile Returns to Find Syria Changed Forever, New Lines Magazine, 29 November 2022, [url](#)

<sup>208</sup> Syria Ministry of Defence, Administrative Order No. /16492-1/ dated 10/8/2022 AD issued by the General Command of the Army and Armed Forces, 10 August 2022, [url](#); SANA, الرئيس الأسد يصدر أمراً إدارياً بإنهاء الاحتفاظ والاستدعاء والتسريح للضباط المجندين الاحتياطيين وصف الضباط والأفراد الاحتياطيين [President al-Assad issues an administrative order to end the retention, call-up and demobilization of the reserve enlisted officers and the description of the reserve officers and personnel], 27 August 2022, [url](#); SANA, President al-Assad issues administrative order to end military personnel retention of some soldiers, 17 July 2023, [url](#)

<sup>209</sup> Syria Ministry of Defence, Administrative Order No. /16492-1/ dated 10/8/2022 AD issued by the General Command of the Army and Armed Forces, 10 August 2022, [url](#); Enab Baladi, Ending reserve service in regime forces; Move to reduce financial, political pressure, 27 July 2023, [url](#)

<sup>210</sup> SANA, الرئيس الأسد يصدر أمراً إدارياً بإنهاء الاحتفاظ والاستدعاء والتسريح للضباط المجندين الاحتياطيين وصف الضباط والأفراد الاحتياطيين [President al-Assad issues an administrative order to end the retention, call-up and demobilization of the reserve enlisted officers and the description of the reserve officers and personnel], 27 August 2022, [url](#)

<sup>211</sup> SANA, President al-Assad issues administrative order to end military personnel retention of some soldiers, 17 July 2023, [url](#); Enab Baladi, Ending reserve service in regime forces; Move to reduce financial, political pressure, 27 July 2023, [url](#)



## 1.2.5 Implementation in practice of legal exemptions and deferrals

It is not possible to conscientiously object to conscription,<sup>212</sup> although Legislative Decree 30/2007 allows deferrals for compulsory service and exemptions for certain persons, which are discussed below.<sup>213</sup> According to the USDOS, in 2022, the ‘government continued to exempt Christian and Muslim religious leaders from military service based on conscientious objection’. However, Muslim religious leaders were required to pay a levy for exemption.<sup>214</sup>

According to the Conscription law, a person is exempted from military service if he has completed at least 10 years of service in the internal security services, including in the police.<sup>215</sup> This period was reduced to five years by Legislative Decree No. 1 of 2012. Those who do not serve the full five years are still required to complete their military service. However, anyone who is accepted into the police signs a 10-year contract.<sup>216</sup>

The law also permits exemptions from military service for certain categories of individuals. The only male child of a family and students may be exempted and there may be exemptions on health grounds.<sup>217</sup> The law also allows for the payment of an exemption fee; however, this only applies for people residing abroad.<sup>218</sup>

Generally, the exemptions from military service are being enforced in practice by the GoS.<sup>219</sup> However, sources noted that, at times, the GoS resorts to blackmail<sup>220</sup> and extortion<sup>221</sup> of individuals seeking to obtain or renew exemptions. According to Muhsen AlMustafa, it is advisable for persons to carry the necessary documents pertaining to their exemptions or deferrals from military service at all times. Issues may arise if a person doesn’t have relevant documents on him when questioned by authorities. Such a situation may lead to the person being mistakenly enlisted, which can be time consuming to rectify.<sup>222</sup> According to Suhail al-Ghazi, showing the military booklet when questioned by the authorities is usually sufficient to prove the exemption/deferral. However, if the military booklet presents any suspicion to the authorities checking it, other documents proving the exemption/deferral need to be presented.<sup>223</sup>

Military service exemptions are granted for medical reasons related to a person’s inability to handle military duties (such as heart conditions and visual impairments). Examples of such illnesses may exempt the person from military service or assign him to ‘non-combatant roles’, such as administrative positions that do not require physical exertion that would conflict with their health condition.<sup>224</sup> A person wishing to make use of this exemption has to undergo a

<sup>212</sup> ICMP, Syria: Towards Addressing The Issue Of Missing Persons, 15 July 2021, [url](#), p. 10; Al-Monitor, Syrians dodge military conscription, 16 May 2022, [url](#)

<sup>213</sup> TIMEP, TIMEP Brief: Conscription Law, 22 August 2019, [url](#)

<sup>214</sup> USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria, 15 May 2023, [url](#)

<sup>215</sup> Netherlands (The), MFA, Country of origin information report Syria, May 2022, [url](#), p. 56

<sup>216</sup> Netherlands (The), MFA, Country of origin information report Syria, May 2022, [url](#), p. 56; ACCORD, Anfragebeantwortung zu Syrien: Wehrdienstverweigerung und Desertion, 8 September 2022 [Al-Mustafa, Muhsen: E-Mail-Auskunft, 8 August 2022], [url](#), p. 22

<sup>217</sup> EUAA, Country of Origin Information Report, Syria: Military Service, April 2021, [url](#), pp. 28-32

<sup>218</sup> EUAA, Country of Origin Information Report, Syria: Military Service, April 2021, [url](#), pp. 28-32

<sup>219</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts’ duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [source: SNHR], July 2023, [url](#), p. 21; Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023; AlMustafa, M., email correspondence, 11 July 2023.

<sup>220</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023.

<sup>221</sup> Jusoor for Studies, email correspondence 11 July & 24 July 2023.

<sup>222</sup> AlMustafa, M., email correspondence, 11 July 2023; online interview, 17 July 2023.

<sup>223</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts’ duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [source: Suhail al-Ghazi], July 2023, [url](#), p. 25

<sup>224</sup> Jusoor for Studies, email correspondence 11 July & 24 July 2023.



medical examination which would need to determine that he has a medical issue that would make him only eligible for administrative tasks.<sup>225</sup>

Obtaining an exemption from military service for medical reasons<sup>226</sup> or being assigned to non-combatant roles is increasingly difficult and issues of bribery and extortion are common.<sup>227</sup> In some cases, if authorities discover that the medical exemption was wrongfully granted (e.g. via paying a bribe) they would require the person to undergo another medical examination.<sup>228</sup> Residents 'determined to serve in a non-field service' in the military because of their specific health conditions can pay a fee of USD 3 000 to be exempted from military service.<sup>229</sup>

Syrians who reside abroad for one, two, three or four years may pay USD 10 000, 9 000, 8 000 or 7 000 respectively to be exempted from military service.<sup>230</sup> Exemption from reserve service is also acquirable by Syrians who have been residing abroad for at least one year and pay a fee of USD 5 000.<sup>231</sup> The exemption fee can be paid either from abroad at a Syrian embassy or consulate, or by a proxy (for instance a family member) in Syria. In both cases, the exemption will have to be registered in the military booklet of the person. If the exemption fee is paid by a proxy, the person will have to send his military booklet to the proxy in Syria. After paying the fee and receiving a receipt, the proxy will approach the military recruitment division that will register the exemption in the military booklet. If the person pays the exemption fee himself from abroad, he will receive a receipt which he will have to show upon his return to Syria as proof of being exempted from military service. Once back in Syria, the person will have to approach the military recruitment division to have the exemption registered in his military booklet.<sup>232</sup>

Several sources stated that the GoS does not forcibly conscript persons who paid the exemption fee.<sup>233</sup>

According to a Refugee Protection Watch (RPW) 2022 survey based on face-to-face interviews with refugee returnees currently residing in Homs, Rural Damascus and Damascus, 40 % of respondents stated that they were concerned that either them, friends or relatives were at risk of forced conscription in the SAA despite the fact that in some cases they had served in the SAA prior to the current conflict or paid the exemption fee. Around 18 % of respondents stated

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<sup>225</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [source: Suhail al-Ghazi], July 2023, [url](#), p. 25

<sup>226</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [sources: Suhail al-Ghazi], July 2023, [url](#), pp. 24-25; Jusoor for Studies, email correspondence, 11 July 2023.

<sup>227</sup> Jusoor for Studies, email correspondence 11 July & 24 July 2023.

<sup>228</sup> AIMustafa, M., email correspondence, 11 July 2023; online interview, 17 July 2023.

<sup>229</sup> Syria, Legislative Decree 31, President Bashar Al-Assad issues the LD # 31/2020, amending some articles of the LD# 30 date 03/05/2007, as amended, which contains the Military Service Law, [url](#), art. 1; AIMustafa, M., Fight or Flight: The Syrian Conscription Nightmare, ISPI, 5 June 2023, [url](#); DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [source: Suhail al-Ghazi], July 2023, [url](#), p. 25

<sup>230</sup> SLJ, Legal Briefing – November 2020, 3 December 2020, [url](#); Syria, Legislative Decree 31, President Bashar Al-Assad issues the LD # 31/2020, amending some articles of the LD# 30 date 03/05/2007, as amended, which contains the Military Service Law, [url](#), art. 1; AIMustafa, M., Fight or Flight: The Syrian Conscription Nightmare, ISPI, 5 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>231</sup> AIMustafa, M., Fight or Flight: The Syrian Conscription Nightmare, ISPI, 5 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>232</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [source: SNHR], July 2023, [url](#), pp. 21-22

<sup>233</sup> AIMustafa, M., email correspondence, 11 July 2023; online interview, 17 July 2023; Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023; DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [source: SNHR], July 2023, [url](#), p. 21; Sweden, Migrationsverket, Syrisk militärtjänst (version 2.0) [Syria Military service] [source: former officer in the Syrian army; Syrian lawyer active in Damascus], 22 April 2022, [url](#), p. 8; Netherlands (The), MFA, Algemeen ambtsbericht Syrië [Country report Syria] [source: confidential sources interviewed in November 2022 and March 2023], August 2023, [url](#), pp. 55-56



that they were interrogated by security forces upon returning, including as follow up on exemptions to military service.<sup>234</sup>

Men who have evaded compulsory military service and have not paid the exemption fee before reaching the age of 43, must pay a fee of USD 8 000<sup>235</sup> or they risk having their property seized without notification or the opportunity to challenge the decision.<sup>236</sup> If they do not have any properties or real estate, the reserve seizure will be executed on the properties of their family members.<sup>237</sup> While older reports noted that the Ministry of Finance froze the assets of draft evaders and their family members,<sup>238</sup> Jusoor for Studies<sup>239</sup> claimed that in practice the seizure of assets has not been implemented.<sup>240</sup> Muhsen AlMustafa stated that he had no knowledge of cases of asset seizure of individuals under the aforementioned law. The expert further assessed that the law has not been implemented because most men either have not reached the age of 43 yet, have paid the exemption fee or have already completed their military service. However, since the asset seizure is prescribed by the law, the expert expects that it will be implemented in the future.<sup>241</sup>

Palestinian refugees claimed that Palestinian draft evaders were denied access to their properties in Yarmouk camp. No further information on the reason behind the denial of access was provided.<sup>242</sup>

Students can postpone their conscription on a yearly basis while they are studying.<sup>243</sup> The GoS issued a decision prohibiting students from repeating their final year of college more than three times, as it was discovered that some students deliberately failed in the last year of college in order to delay their enlistment in the military.<sup>244</sup> A student in such a situation would not be granted exemption from military service and would risk conscription.<sup>245</sup>

In August 2022, the GoS issued a decree whereby students and graduates of medical and health schools who committed themselves to serve in public institutions for a 10-year period were exempted from military service.<sup>246</sup> Muhsen AlMustafa attributed the decision to the significant shortage of medical personnel in Syria resulting from emigration.<sup>247</sup> According to Ali Aljasem, because of the GoS's shortage of medical personnel, doctors would not be able to bribe authorities to get exempted from military service or influence their deployment.<sup>248</sup>

<sup>234</sup> RPW, Endless Refuge and Unsafe Homecoming, 7 December 2022, [url](#), p. 29

<sup>235</sup> AlMustafa, M., The Selective Return of Syrian Refugees, TIMEP, 23 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>236</sup> USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 27; HRW, Syrian 'Military Evaders' Face Unlawful Seizure of Property, Assets, 9 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>237</sup> Jusoor for Studies, email correspondence 11 July & 24 July 2023.

<sup>238</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/48/70, 13 August 2021, [url](#), para. 42

<sup>239</sup> Jusoor for Studies is an independent institution specializing in information management and conducting studies and research related to the Syrian political and social affairs in particular and the Middle East region in general.

<sup>240</sup> Jusoor for Studies, email correspondence 11 July & 24 July 2023.

<sup>241</sup> AlMustafa, M., email correspondence, 11 July 2023; online interview, 17 July 2023.

<sup>242</sup> AGPS, Syrian Regime Deprives Military Service Evaders of Their Property in Yarmouk Camp, 3 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>243</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 58; Syrian academic, email correspondence, 25 April 2022

<sup>244</sup> Jusoor for Studies, email correspondence 11 July & 24 July 2023.

<sup>245</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023.

<sup>246</sup> AlMustafa, M., Fight or Flight: The Syrian Conscription Nightmare, ISPI, 5 June 2023, [url](#); SANA, الرئيس الأسد يصدر الرئييس الأسد يصدر مرسوماً يقبول عدد من طلاب كليات الطب ومن حملة الإجازة في الطب كملتزمين بالخدمة لدى الجهات العامة [President al-Assad issues a decree accepting a number of students of medical schools and holders of medical degrees as committed to serving with public authorities], 29 August 2022, [url](#)

<sup>247</sup> AlMustafa, M., email correspondence, 11 July 2023; online interview, 17 July 2023.

<sup>248</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023.



University students who transit between areas held by GoS and SDF stated that they risk conscription by both parties since the identity documentation and military deferments issued by one administration are not recognised by the other.<sup>249</sup> SOHR reported in April 2023 that four students were arrested in Damascus for evading military service despite having valid deferral documents.<sup>250</sup>

## 1.2.6 Implementation practice for amnesties

The GoS regularly announces amnesties which cover offences of army desertion or evasion from military service.<sup>251</sup> According to Jusoor for Studies, amnesties do not cover those who evaded reserve service.<sup>252</sup> Most amnesties are partial and selective in nature and several exemptions ‘end up excluding the release of detainees who were arrested for their role in the uprising or for their political position’. Their implementation often takes place ‘with a considerable level of corruption and extortion’.<sup>253</sup> According to Ali Aljasem, individuals who want to make use of the amnesties must also generally undergo a ‘reconciliation’/settlement process.<sup>254</sup> Those who benefit from the amnesties are still required to perform compulsory military service.<sup>255</sup>

In early 2022, Decree 3/2022<sup>256</sup> was announced by the GoS. It stipulated that persons who present themselves to officials within three months, if they are inside the country or four months if they are abroad, are granted an amnesty for the full penalty stipulated in Articles 100 (“internal desertion”) and 101 (“external desertion”) of the Military Penal Code.<sup>257</sup> Regarding the implementation of Decree 3/2022, SNHR documented the release of at least nine individuals from detention centres under the control of the GoS and their conscription into mandatory military service. Additionally, 36 individuals residing in GoS-held areas presented themselves to recruitment centres and were enlisted into mandatory military service.<sup>258</sup>

In December 2022, Assad issued Legislative Decree 24 which provided amnesty for the penalty stipulated in Articles 100 (“internal desertion”) and 101 (“external desertion”) of the Military Penal Code<sup>259</sup> if deserters reported for military service within three to four months. Those inside Syria had to report within three months while those abroad had to report within four months.<sup>260</sup> Regarding the implementation of Legislative Decree No. 24/2022, SNHR documented the release of at least 14 individuals from detention centres under the control of the GoS and their

<sup>249</sup> Enab Baladi, Northeastern Syria students are target of double recruitment campaigns, 15 August 2022, [url](#)

<sup>250</sup> SOHR, To undergo compulsory service | Extensive security mobilization of regime searching for wanted people, 5 April 2023, [url](#)

<sup>251</sup> EUAA, Targeting of individuals, September 2022, [url](#), pp. 42-43; Both, Pieter, Manipulating National Trauma: The Assad Regime’s Wartime Instrumentalisation of Presidential Amnesties, EUI, October 2021, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>252</sup> Jusoor for Studies, email correspondence 11 July & 24 July 2023.

<sup>253</sup> SACD, Normalisation of Horror - Security and Living Conditions in Assad-held Syria, 9 August 2021, [url](#), p. 27

<sup>254</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023.

<sup>255</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023; AlMustafa, M., email correspondence, 11 July 2023; online interview, 17 July 2023; EUAA, Targeting of individuals, September 2022, [url](#), pp. 42-43

<sup>256</sup> See SANA, [President al-Assad grants a general amnesty for crimes of internal and external flight committed before 25-1-2022], 25 January 2022, [url](#)

<sup>257</sup> Enab Baladi, General amnesty: Syrian regime’s trap to capture military defectors, 18 January 2022, [url](#); COAR, IS Prison Raid, Biggest Attack since '19, Displaces 45,000, 31 January 2022, [url](#)

<sup>258</sup> Reuters, Syria's Assad issues conditional amnesty for draft dodgers, 21 December 2022, [url](#); Asharq Al Awsat, Syria's Assad Issues Conditional Amnesty for Draft Dodgers, 21 December 2022, [url](#)

<sup>259</sup> Syrian Arab Republic, Parliament, 2022-12-21 الرئيس الأسد يصدر مرسوماً بمنح عفو عام عن الجرائم المرتكبة قبل تاريخ 21-12-2022 [President al-Assad issues a decree granting a general amnesty for crimes committed before 12-21-2022], 21 December 2022, [url](#)

<sup>260</sup> Reuters, Syria's Assad issues conditional amnesty for draft dodgers, 21 December 2022, [url](#); Asharq Al Awsat, Syria's Assad Issues Conditional Amnesty for Draft Dodgers, 21 December 2022, [url](#)





conscription into mandatory military service. Additionally, 24 individuals presented themselves to recruitment centres and were enlisted into mandatory military service.<sup>261</sup>

According to Muhsen AlMustafa, amnesties such as Decree 24 of 2022 generally provide pardons for crimes outlined in Article 100 and 101 of the Military Penal Code but do not cover offences listed in subsequent articles such as Articles 102 ('fleeing to the enemy', 'fleeing upon facing the enemy'), 103 ('flight by conspiracy and flight in times of war'), and 104 ('joining a foreign country to escape military duties').<sup>262</sup> As a result, defectors who try to make use of these amnesties may be charged with additional offences which fall outside their scope.<sup>263</sup> According to Jusoor for Studies, amnesties issued by GoS do not exonerate defectors but rather criminalise them because of 'their dealings with external entities'. Defectors are still subject to prosecution, investigation, and compulsory residence for those who are older and whose have bad health conditions.<sup>264</sup>

### 1.2.7 Treatment of draft evaders, deserters and defectors

Draft evaders are mainly apprehended at checkpoints<sup>265</sup> where their ID's and military booklet is verified<sup>266</sup> or when applying for a service at state institutions.<sup>267</sup> According to Ali Aljasem, currently the authorities do not carry out house raids to search for draft evaders.<sup>268</sup> Those who are caught are sent to the military police and from there to military bases for training and deployment.<sup>269</sup>

During the reference period, sources reported that GoS security forces arrested men wanted for conscription at checkpoints in Rural Damascus<sup>270</sup>, Dar'a<sup>271</sup> and Deir Ez-Zor governorates.<sup>272</sup> Young men who gathered to watch the Qatar 2022 World Cup in Damascus were arrested by security forces for evading conscription.<sup>273</sup> For instance, on 22 November 2022, local media reported that 35 young males were arrested in the Damascus suburb of Babila.<sup>274</sup> Arrest campaigns targeting persons wanted for military service were also reported in reconquered areas in Idlib governorate.<sup>275</sup>

<sup>261</sup> SNHR, email correspondence, 24 July 2023.

<sup>262</sup> Syrian Arab Republic, Law No. 61 of 1950, as amended (Military Penal Code) [UNHCR unofficial translation], 16 February 2017, [url](#), pp. 3-4

<sup>263</sup> AlMustafa, M., email correspondence, 11 July 2023; online interview, 17 July 2023.

<sup>264</sup> Jusoor for Studies, email correspondence 11 July & 24 July 2023.

<sup>265</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [source: Suhail al-Ghazi], July 2023, [url](#), p. 24

<sup>266</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023

<sup>267</sup> DIS, Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs [source: SOHR], July 2023, [url](#), p. 19; Netherlands, MFA, Country of origin information report Syria, May 2022, [url](#), p. 36; EUAA, COI Report: Syria – Military service, April 2021, [url](#), pp. 20-21

<sup>268</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023

<sup>269</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023

<sup>270</sup> New Arab (The), Syrian regime arrests dozens of football fans at World Cup screening venues in forced conscription operation, 30 November 2022, [url](#)

<sup>271</sup> NPA, Government forces arbitrarily arrest 10 people in Syria's Daraa, 10 September 2022, [url](#)

<sup>272</sup> SOHR, To undergo compulsory service | Extensive security mobilization of regime searching for wanted people, 5 April 2023, [url](#)

<sup>273</sup> New Arab (The), Syrian regime arrests dozens of football fans at World Cup screening venues in forced conscription operation, 30 November 2022, [url](#); USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 57

<sup>274</sup> New Arab (The), Syrian regime arrests dozens of football fans at World Cup screening venues in forced conscription operation, 30 November 2022, [url](#)

<sup>275</sup> NPA, Government forces arrest 50 individuals in Syria's Idlib, 21 August 2023, [url](#)





Draft evaders who are apprehended by the authorities will ultimately be sent to military service.<sup>276</sup> Draft evaders can also make use of the ‘reconciliation’/settlement deals that the GoS initiates regularly, whereby if they report for military service within a period of time prescribed by the settlement and do not have additional security issues they will not incur any punishment.<sup>277</sup> The treatment of draft evaders who have other security issues pending with the GoS apart from evading military service would depend on the nature and gravity of the issues.<sup>278</sup> Those who do not solve their security issues, especially prominent figures, would risk arrest and forced disappearance.<sup>279</sup> According to a confidential source interviewed in March 2023 by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, draft evaders originating from former opposition-held areas would be viewed with suspicion and be more likely to be imprisoned or sent to the front.<sup>280</sup>

The treatment of defectors by GoS authorities depends on their individual situation such as rank and previous activities (e.g. how they defected, joining an opposition group, participation in military activities against GoS etc.)<sup>281</sup> According to Muhsen AIMustafa, deserters and defectors will be dealt by the GoS based on the nature of their escape (internal or external) and the penalties imposed by the Penal Code (Articles 100 to 104).<sup>282</sup>

According to Muhsen AIMustafa, a defector who turns himself in would be tried by a military court and imprisoned. After finishing his prison sentence/or if an amnesty is granted he will be taken to serve in the military unit where he defected from.<sup>283</sup> According to Ali Aljasem, deserters and defectors usually enter ‘reconciliation’ deals with the authorities whereby they join or form a militia or a military formation that is affiliated with the SAA or intelligence services.<sup>284</sup> Examples of SAA-affiliated units where defectors have been integrated include the 25<sup>th</sup> Division (previously Tiger Forces)<sup>285</sup> and the Eight Brigade.<sup>286</sup> Paying bribes to GoS authorities for facilitating the return and integration of defectors into SAA affiliated units is also reported.<sup>287</sup>

Entering into a ‘reconciliation’/settlement with the GoS does not guarantee that the deserter/defector will be safe in the future.<sup>288</sup> According to Ali Aljasem, there are cases where neighbours denounce the person who underwent ‘reconciliation’/settlement to the intelligence services for previous activities. This situation would create additional security issues for the person which would have to be dealt by interacting with the intelligence services.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Jusoor for Studies, email correspondence 11 July & 24 July 2023; Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023; AIMustafa, M., email correspondence, 11 July 2023; online interview, 17 July 2023.

<sup>277</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023.

<sup>278</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023.

<sup>279</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023.

<sup>280</sup> Netherlands (The), MFA, Algemeen ambtsbericht Syrië [Country report Syria] [source: confidential source interviewed in March 2023], August 2023, [url](#), p. 58

<sup>281</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023; AIMustafa, M., email correspondence, 11 July 2023; online interview, 17 July 2023.

<sup>282</sup> AIMustafa, M., email correspondence, 11 July 2023; online interview, 17 July 2023.

<sup>283</sup> AIMustafa, M., email correspondence, 11 July 2023; online interview, 17 July 2023.

<sup>284</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023.

<sup>285</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023.

<sup>286</sup> Al-Jabassini, A., Dismantling Networks of Resistance and the Reconfiguration of Order in Southern Syria, EUI, October 2021, [url](#), p. 6; Al-Jabassini, A., The Eighth Brigade: Striving for Supremacy in Southern Syria, EUI, December 2020, [url](#), pp. 7-8

<sup>287</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023; Waters, G. The Lion and The Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army’s Destruction and Rebirth, MEI, 18 July 2019, [url](#); Waters, G., From Tiger Forces to the 16th Brigade: Russia’s evolving Syrian proxies, MEI, 16 September 2022, [url](#)

<sup>288</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023; EUAA, Country of Origin Information Report, Syria: Military Service, April 2021, [url](#), pp. 36-37

<sup>289</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023.





Arrests, detention<sup>290</sup> and torture<sup>291</sup> of defector returnees were reported by sources during the reference period of this report. In a report documenting torture and ill treatment in Syria between 1 January 2020 and 30 April 2023, the UNCOI reported on cases where testimonies claimed that, in 2020, military defectors detained by the Air Force Intelligence at its facility at Kuweires airport (Aleppo governorate) showed signs of physical abuse and stated that they were beaten with electric cables and sticks as punishment for defecting.<sup>292</sup> In another documented case, a military defector who was arrested in 2020 and held ‘entirely outside the legal system’ was subsequently released following payment of a bribe of thousands of dollars by his family and tribe. In a third case, in 2020, the brother of an army defector from Raqqa governorate who was arrested for defection in 2019, received the death certificate of the defector without any further details.<sup>293</sup> SNHR stated in a June 2023 statement that the GoS takes revenge on defectors through arbitrary arrest, torture and enforced disappearance.<sup>294</sup>

Sources interviewed by EUAA for this report stated that issues related to military service (e.g. draft evasion, desertion, defection) do not currently lead to direct repercussions for family members.<sup>295</sup> However, according to Ali Aljasem, in cases where the persons wanted by the GoS are higher profile, their family members would also be at risk.<sup>296</sup>

### 1.3. Trafficking in human beings

In accordance with Decree No. 3/2010,<sup>297</sup> some forms of sex and labour trafficking are prohibited and punished at minimum with seven years of imprisonment and a fine,<sup>298</sup> although the law does not include a clear definition of trafficking.<sup>299</sup> The Decree established a Department to Combat Human Trafficking at the Ministry of the Interior and a national plan to combat trafficking and provide care for victims.<sup>300</sup> An UN study published in 2018 reported that, despite several measures undertaken by the government to implement the anti-trafficking law, several gaps in its application persist such as: inconsistent application of the law by the Courts; anti-trafficking law not included in the Faculties of Law’s learning programs; lack of specialised centres for victims of trafficking and the centralisation of the Department to Combat Trafficking in Persons.<sup>301</sup>

<sup>290</sup> Syria Direct, 1,100 Syrian refugees arrested, 600 deported from Lebanon in unprecedented crackdown, 4 May 2023, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 17 August 2022, [url](#), para. 19

<sup>291</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 17 August 2022, [url](#), para. 19

<sup>292</sup> UN Human Rights Council, “No End in Sight”: Torture and ill-treatment in the Syrian Arab Republic 2020-2023, 10 July 2023, [url](#), para. 26

<sup>293</sup> UN Human Rights Council, “No End in Sight”: Torture and ill-treatment in the Syrian Arab Republic 2020-2023, 10 July 2023, [url](#), paras 26, 31

<sup>294</sup> SNHR, We Urge Lebanese Authorities Not to Forcibly Repatriate Syrian Regime Army Defector Saleh Nemer al-Samar to Syria, Which Would Put His Life at Risk, 13 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>295</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023; Jusoor for Studies, email correspondence 11 July & 24 July 2023. See also EUAA, Targeting of individuals, September 2022, [url](#), p. 46

<sup>296</sup> Aljasem, A., online interview, 10 July 2023

<sup>297</sup> Syrian Arab Republic, Decree 3/2010, [url](#), no English translation available

<sup>298</sup> USDOS, Trafficking in persons report 2023, 15 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>299</sup> Antislavery in domestic legislation, Syrian Arab Republic, [url](#); USDOS, Trafficking in persons report 2023, 15 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>300</sup> UN Human Rights Council, National report submitted in accordance with paragraph 15 (a) of the annex to Human Rights Council resolution 5/1\*, \*\*, 2 September 2011, [url](#), pp. 7, 15, paras 24, 73

<sup>301</sup> UNDP, Syria Gender Justice, Assessment of laws affecting gender equality and protection against gender-based violence, 2018, pp. 19-20, [url](#)



In its Trafficking in persons Report published in June 2023 and covering the period between April 2022 and March 2023, USDOS observed that the GoS did not undertake any clear action to ensure law enforcement. Likewise, notwithstanding the anti-trafficking law, no measure has been taken by the government either to protect victims of trafficking or to prosecute traffickers. On the contrary, the source highlighted the complicity of the state in human trafficking.<sup>302</sup> In its Organized Crime Report, the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime highlighted that the inactivity of the state and the facilitation of human trafficking resulted in an increased vulnerability of persons to exploitation. The same source observed that most criminal markets in Syria are run by actors affiliated with the GoS, including the National Defense Forces (NDF) and Tiger Forces.<sup>303</sup>

The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime defined the human trafficking market in Syria as ‘flourishing’ with forced labour and sexual exploitation as being ‘pervasive’ across the country. Trafficking in persons occurred all across the country though Deir Ez-Zor and Al Qaim, an Iraqi town on border with Syria, have been identified as the major trafficking hubs.<sup>304</sup>

Girls, boys and women were subjected to exploitation by armed groups, community members and criminal gangs.<sup>305</sup> The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) noted an escalation in terms of exploitation of women and girls and a growing incidence of child labour among adolescent girls due to the deteriorating levels of poverty and food insecurity across the country.<sup>306</sup> Moreover, the devastating earthquakes of February 2023 exacerbated the vulnerability to sex trafficking, forced labour and recruitment or use of children by armed groups.<sup>307</sup> Children, divorced and widowed women, and displaced persons were more exposed to exploitation. Unaccompanied minors were also more likely to be involved in forced child labour to access basic needs when compared to other children with caregivers.<sup>308</sup> Children recruited by armed groups were used by combatants in child labour as informants, exposing them to retaliation by other combatants.<sup>309</sup> Child labour also exposed children to exploitation, sexual and psychological violence.<sup>310</sup>

Children who had been victims of trafficking continued to be detained by the GoS, NDF, SDF and Syrian National Army (SNA) on the basis of their alleged association with armed or terrorist groups.<sup>311</sup> In a statement released in March 2023, the UN expressed concerns about the risk of trafficking and enslavement of children held captive in north-eastern Syria.<sup>312</sup> According to

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<sup>302</sup> USDOS, Trafficking in persons report 2023, 15 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>303</sup> Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, Global organized crime index, Syria, 2021, [url](#), pp. 3-4

<sup>304</sup> Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, Global organized crime index, Syria, 2021, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>305</sup> USDOS, Trafficking in persons report, 15 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>306</sup> UNFPA, GPC, Whole of Syria Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility: Voices from Syria 2023 - Assessment Findings of the Humanitarian Needs Overview, [url](#), p. 67, 28 March 2023

<sup>307</sup> USDOS, Trafficking in persons report, 15 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>308</sup> UNFPA, GPC, Whole of Syria Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility: Voices from Syria 2023 - Assessment Findings of the Humanitarian Needs Overview, 28 March 2023, [url](#), p. 68

<sup>309</sup> USDOS, Trafficking in persons report, 15 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>310</sup> UNFPA, GPC, Whole of Syria Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility: Voices from Syria 2023 - Assessment Findings of the Humanitarian Needs Overview, 28 March 2023, [url](#), p. 68

<sup>311</sup> USDOS, Trafficking in persons report, 15 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>312</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Children in Northeast Syria must be urgently repatriated: UN experts, 31 March 2023 [url](#)



USDOS, victims of trafficking are reportedly detained, arrested and abused by GoS for trafficking-related crimes, including child soldiers.<sup>313</sup>

In areas where the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has a presence and exerts a degree of control, girls and women are forced into marriage with fighters, subjected to domestic servitude, sexual slavery and early marriage, especially for those belonging to minority communities. In such areas, women and girls exposed to early child marriage are also at higher risk of sexual slavery and forced labour.<sup>314</sup>

Due to the lack of livelihoods, women, girls and female-households are more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).<sup>315</sup> IDPs and persons with disabilities are more at risk of trafficking and sex exploitation in exchange for food or money by armed groups, community members and criminal gangs.<sup>316</sup> The overpopulation in IDP camps, informal settlements and collective centres further exposes girls and women to exploitation, especially persons with disabilities.<sup>317</sup>

Freedom House noted that IDPs and refugees are also more subjected to sexual and labour exploitation in relatively stable GoS-controlled areas due to the limited access to employment and investment opportunities.<sup>318</sup> Syrian refugees are also highly vulnerable to sex trafficking and forced labour in neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Türkiye. An estimated number of 6 000 women and children, mainly Yazidis, who had been previously abducted and transferred to Syria by ISIL, have been sold into sex trafficking.<sup>319</sup>

## 1.4. Children

In its Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023 covering the period between January 2022 and January 2023, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) observed that children ‘continue to be greatly affected by the crisis in Syria’ and exposed to violations in the hostilities.<sup>320</sup> As indicated in the June 2023 report by the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly, 2 438 grave violations against 2 407 children (2 059 boys, 312 girls, 36 sex unknown) occurred throughout 2022. The same source recorded for 2022 the killing (307) and maiming (404) of 711 children, mostly perpetrated by unidentified actors, GoS and affiliated forces. The main reasons behind the casualties are explosive ordnance (375), ground shelling (217), air strikes (63) and live ammunition.<sup>321</sup> In the first half of 2023, SNHR recorded the killing of at least 71 children.<sup>322</sup> Most of the casualties were the result of landmines, explosions and killings by unidentified actors.<sup>323</sup> According to UNOCHA, in the period between 1 January and

<sup>313</sup> USDOS, Trafficking in persons report, 15 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>314</sup> USDOS, Trafficking in persons report, 15 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>315</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023, December 2022, [url](#), p. 97

<sup>316</sup> USDOS, Trafficking in persons report, 15 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>317</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023, Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), p. 84

<sup>318</sup> Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2023 - Syria, 2023, [url](#)

<sup>319</sup> USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria, 15 May 2023, [url](#)

<sup>320</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), p. 18

<sup>321</sup> UN Secretary General, Report by the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly, Children and armed conflict, 5 June 2023, [url](#), p. 24, paras 191, 194

<sup>322</sup> SNHR, Most notable human rights violations in Syria in June and the first half of 2023, [url](#), p. 15

<sup>323</sup> SNHR, 501 Civilians, including 71 Children, 42 women and 20 individuals who died due to torture documented killed in Syria in the first half of 2023, 2 July 2023, [url](#), p. 8



30 September 2022, the leading source of death and maiming of children is related to the extensive contaminations of ERWs in large areas of Syria.<sup>324</sup> The UN Secretary-General report covering 2022 also identified explosive ordnance as the main reason behind the casualties (375).<sup>325</sup> In the period between March 2011 and 4 April 2023, SNHR documented the killing of 889 children due to explosions of landmines.<sup>326</sup> For the period between April and May 2023, the UN Security Council reported the continuing killing of children due to explosion of landmines and ERW in areas under control of different actors.<sup>327</sup> In the period between 1 July and 31 December 2022, UNCOI reported cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence perpetrated by SNA.<sup>328</sup>

In north-eastern Syria, SDF continue to detain persons with perceived affiliation to ISIL, including children. UNOCHA reported that more than 1 000 children with perceived affiliation to armed groups are detained without due legal process in north-eastern Syria,<sup>329</sup> while the UN stated that more than 600 children were under detention in north-eastern Syria at the end of 2022.<sup>330</sup> Some 56 000 persons, most of them children under 12 years old<sup>331</sup> and wives or widows of allegedly former ISIL combatants, are interned in camps in northeast Syria in 'horrid conditions'.<sup>332</sup> The situation in such camps continues to deteriorate with extremely limited access to adequate health care and education, especially affecting children with disabilities<sup>333</sup> and with a high rate of violence targeting women and children.<sup>334</sup> Human Rights Watch stated that the conditions of children in Al Roj and Hoj Camps 'may amount to torture' as the situation is 'life-threatening, deeply degrading, and in many cases, inhuman'.<sup>335</sup> Moreover, adolescent girls with disabilities experience an heightened risk of gender-based violence.<sup>336</sup>

### *Children in IDP camps*

As of December 2022, UNICEF recorded 3 000 000 IDP children to be present in Syria.<sup>337</sup> The population of IDP children continues to grow due to the hostilities, facing increased

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<sup>324</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), p. 18

<sup>325</sup> UN Secretary General, Report by the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly, Children and armed conflict, 5 June 2023, [url](#), p. 25, para. 194

<sup>326</sup> SNHR, On the international day for mine awareness and assistance in mine action: landmines continue to plague large areas of Syria and threaten the lives of millions, 4 April 2023, [url](#), p. 18

<sup>327</sup> UN Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General [S/2023/464], 22 June 2023, [url](#), p. 5, para. 23

<sup>328</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/52/69], 7 February 2023, [url](#), p. 15, para. 96

<sup>329</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), p. 80

<sup>330</sup> UN Secretary General, Report by the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly, Children and armed conflict, 5 June 2023, [url](#), p. 25, para. 193

<sup>331</sup> HRW, Revictimizing the Victims: Children Unlawfully Detained in Northeast Syria, 27 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>332</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Gendered impact of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic on women and girls, 12 June 2023, [url](#), pp. 3, 11

<sup>333</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/52/69], 7 February 2023, [url](#), p. 18, para. 116

<sup>334</sup> UN Secretary General, Report by the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly, Children and armed conflict, 5 June 2023, [url](#), p. 25, para. 205

<sup>335</sup> HRW, Revictimizing the Victims: Children Unlawfully Detained in Northeast Syria, 27 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>336</sup> UNFPA, GPC, Whole of Syria, Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility: Voices from Syria 2023 - Assessment Findings of the Humanitarian Needs Overview, 28 March 2023, [url](#), p. 43

<sup>337</sup> UNICEF, Humanitarian Action for Children 2023 – Syrian Arab Republic, 5 December 2022, [url](#)



vulnerability to abuses<sup>338</sup> whereby the overcrowded and harsh living conditions worsen SGBV risks.<sup>339</sup>

### *Negative coping-mechanisms*

The growing inability to meet basic needs and the widespread poverty induce households across the country to rely on negative coping mechanisms. In this context, female-headed households and children are affected disproportionately.<sup>340</sup> The UNCOI highlighted the increasing number of female-headed households as a result of the protracted conflict and massive displacement.<sup>341</sup>

Child labour, child recruitment and child marriage have a devastating impact on children, including on their level of attendance to school.<sup>342</sup> Displaced children are particularly exposed to forced labour, especially by organised begging rings.<sup>343</sup> Child labour is particularly common among IDPs living out of camps. UNOCHA reported that female-headed households are twice as likely to report a complete inability to meet basic needs in comparison with male-headed households. The same source observed a higher reliance on child labour of children aged 15-17 years old (7 %) in female-headed households compared to male-headed households (2 %).<sup>344</sup> More frequently, in female-headed households, women are unable to transmit the nationality to their children exposing them to risk of statelessness, mostly in areas outside GoS control and among IDPs in GoS-controlled areas. The lack of civil documentation and nationality has multifaceted consequences on the life of the children affected, hindering their access to education and health services and exposing them to ‘exploitation, abuse and trafficking’.<sup>345</sup>

An increasing number of children born out of wedlock are abandoned by their mothers for fear of stigmatisation by the society. Child marriage is reportedly increasing due to the conflict, and it is widespread across the country.<sup>346</sup> Child marriage is deployed as a coping mechanism to face financial hardship and as a tool of ‘traditional protection’, especially in IDP camps.<sup>347</sup> Around 84 % of children live in locations where child marriage is an issue for girls aged 15 to 17 years.<sup>348</sup> This practice is used to face economic hardship and as a tool to mitigate reputational risks for family honour.<sup>349</sup>

<sup>338</sup> USDOS, Human Rights Report 2022 Syria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 85

<sup>339</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), p. 49; UNFPA, GPC, Whole of Syria Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility: Voices from Syria 2023 - Assessment Findings of the Humanitarian Needs Overview, 28 March 2023, [url](#), pp. 71, 78

<sup>340</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), p. 70

<sup>341</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Gendered impact of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic on women and girls, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>342</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), p. 9

<sup>343</sup> USDOS, Trafficking in persons report 2023, 15 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>344</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), p. 61

<sup>345</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Gendered impact of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic on women and girls, 12 June 2023, [url](#), p. 12

<sup>346</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Gendered impact of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic on women and girls, 12 June 2023, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>347</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), p. 79

<sup>348</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), p. 40

<sup>349</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Gendered impact of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic on women and girls, 12 June 2023, [url](#), pp. 2



Unregistered customary marriage is also reportedly increasing, in some cases involving girls younger than 15 years old.<sup>350</sup> Children and girls are also reportedly vulnerable to forced early marriage, including with ISIL fighters. In ISIL-controlled areas, girls are subjected to domestic servitude, sexual slavery, rape and other forms of sexual violence.<sup>351</sup>

### *Child recruitment by government armed forces and other armed groups*

Recruitment of children is prohibited according to Act No. 11 of 2013 which amended the Penal Code.<sup>352</sup> The law prescribes the criminalisation of all forms of recruitment under the age of 18 by armed forces and armed groups.<sup>353</sup> However, the government did not take any evident action to prevent child recruitment by armed opposition groups and designated terrorist organisations. On the contrary, according to USDOS, the GoS reportedly showed official complicity in child recruitment, not undertaking any action to prosecute government officials and being itself an actor of recruitment.<sup>354</sup> The June 2023 report published by the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly states that a total of 1 696 children (of whom 1 593 boys and 103 girls) were recruited in 2022. Figures shows that children in Syria are increasingly recruited,<sup>355</sup> notwithstanding the de-escalating fighting in most parts of the country.<sup>356</sup> Cases of children as young as 14 being recruited are also reported,<sup>357</sup> UNICEF indicated that over 2 400 grave violations against children were verified, including recruitment by armed groups throughout 2022.<sup>358</sup> USDOS observed that each of GoS forces, pro-GoS militias and armed non-state actors recruit children.<sup>359</sup>

Those responsible for recruitment were identified both in state actors and in non-state armed groups. The majority of children were recruited and used by SDF and affiliated armed groups (637), SNA (611), HTS (383), GoS and affiliated armed groups (25).<sup>360</sup>

In an interview with AP News, the Director of Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), an independent NGO documenting human rights violations in Syria, observed that forced

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<sup>350</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Gendered impact of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic on women and girls, 12 June 2023, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>351</sup> USDOS, Trafficking in persons report 2023, 15 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>352</sup> ILO, NATLEX, Database of national labour, social security and related human rights legislation, Syrian Arab Republic, General provisions, [url](#)

<sup>353</sup> Syrian Arab Republic, Act No. 11 of 2013 amending the Penal Code No. 148 of 1949, [url](#), no English translation available; ILO, NATLEX, Database of national labour, social security and related human rights legislation, Syrian Arab Republic, General provisions, [url](#); UNDP, Syria Gender Justice, Assessment of laws affecting gender equality and protection against gender-based violence, December 2019, p. 12, [url](#)

<sup>354</sup> USDOS, Trafficking in persons Report 2023, 15 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>355</sup> UN Secretary General, Report by the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly, Children and armed conflict, 5 June 2023, [url](#), pp. 24, 26; paras 192, 201

<sup>356</sup> AP News, Recruitment of children by armed groups in Syria is on the rise, even as fighting subsides, 28 June 2023, [url](#); there were 813 documented child recruitment cases in 2020; 1 296 in 2021, 1 696 in 2022, based on data published in: UN Report by the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly, Children and armed conflict, 6 May 2021, [url](#), p.24, para. 179; UN Secretary General, Report by the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly, Children and armed conflict, 23 June 2022, [url](#), p. 25, para. 189; UN Secretary General, Report by the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly, Children and armed conflict, 5 June 2023, [url](#), p. 24, para. 192

<sup>357</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, [url](#), 13 March 2023, p. 17, para. 107

<sup>358</sup> UNICEF, Whole of Syria Humanitarian Situation Report, January-December 2022, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>359</sup> USDOS, Trafficking in persons report 2023, 15 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>360</sup> UN Secretary General, Report by the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly, Children and armed conflict, 5 June 2023, [url](#), pp. 24-25; para. 192





recruitment is still in place in some cases, while in other cases children enrol to armed groups to respond to the economic needs for their households.<sup>361</sup> According to Suhail Al-Ghazi, interviewed by DIS in October 2022, the recruitment of children by SNA is ‘very common’ in SNA-controlled areas where the main target is poor children.<sup>362</sup> Pro-GoS militias such as Hezbollah and NDF forcibly recruit children as young as six years old. Children recruited by armed groups can also be used to fight in Libya. ISIL recruits children in Al-Hoj and Roj camps. HTS and ISIL have used children as ‘human shields, suicide bombers, snipers, and executioners’. In north-western Syria, the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG and YPJ) recruit and use boys and girls as young as 12 years old from IDP camps in north-eastern Syria.<sup>363</sup>

In an interview with DIS held in October 2022, Suhail Al-Ghazi stated that HTS recruits minors to a lesser extent than in the past. Reportedly, its recruitment methods are rely on an ideological basis through local mosques and sheikhs in IDP camps. Children recruited by HTS are as young as 12-14 years old.<sup>364</sup>

Notwithstanding the action plan signed in June 2019 with the UN that aimed to end the recruitment and use of children in conflict,<sup>365</sup> SDF continue to recruit children, whose number increased in 2022.<sup>366</sup> With a total of 637 verified cases in 2022, the UN reported an increase of child recruitment by the SDF, with most of the children being recruited into the YPG or the women’s units YPJ.<sup>367</sup>

### *Access to education*

According to UNICEF, there are 6 400 000 children (50 % of them girls) in need of education assistance in Syria. This includes 2 400 000 out-of-school children,<sup>368</sup> nearly 40 % of whom are girls.<sup>369</sup> The rate of self-reported school attendance was 88 % for children from 6 to 17 years old.<sup>370</sup> Out of school children are more likely exposed to child labour, early and forced marriage, trafficking, and recruitment into the fighting.<sup>371</sup> As stated by UNICEF, there are 1 600 000 children at risk of dropping out.<sup>372</sup> The UN Security Council also states that the figures are likely to increase following the February 2023 earthquakes.<sup>373</sup>

<sup>361</sup> AP News, Recruitment of children by armed groups in Syria is on the rise, even as fighting subsides, 28 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>362</sup> DIS, Recruitment to opposition groups, December 2022, [url](#), p. 18

<sup>363</sup> USDOS, Trafficking in persons 2023, 15 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>364</sup> DIS, Recruitment to opposition groups, December 2022, [url](#), pp. 9, 15

<sup>365</sup> UN News, New UN-Syrian Action Plan signals an ‘important day’ for child protection, says UN envoy, 1 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>366</sup> UN Secretary General, Report by the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly, Children and armed conflict, 5 June 2023, [url](#), p. 26, para. 201

<sup>367</sup> UN Secretary General, Report by the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly, Children and armed conflict, 5 June 2023, [url](#), para. 192, 201

<sup>368</sup> UNICEF, Humanitarian Action for Children 2023 - Syrian Arab Republic, 5 December 2022, [url](#); UNICEF, Whole of Syria, Humanitarian Situation Report January – June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>369</sup> UNICEF, Whole of Syria, Education response, January to May 2023, [url](#)

<sup>370</sup> UNOCHA, 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), p. 25

<sup>371</sup> UNICEF, Every Day Counts, Children of Syria cannot wait any longer, [url](#)

<sup>372</sup> UNICEF, Humanitarian Action for Children 2023 – Syrian Arab Republic, 5 December 2022, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>373</sup> UN Security Council, Humanitarian needs in the Syrian Arab Republic, Report of the Secretary-General, 9 June 2023, [url](#), para. 35, p. 8





In IDP camps in north-western Syria, 57 % of children do not have access to primary school, while 80 % do not have access to secondary school.<sup>374</sup> In north-eastern Syria, 47 % of the households interviewed by UNOCHA<sup>375</sup> stated that their children did not attend school for the year 2021-2022. In SDF-controlled areas, teachers and education personnel have been reportedly intimidated and harassed.<sup>376</sup> In Al-Hol camp access to education is severely limited.<sup>377</sup>

UNICEF identified several barriers for children to return to school such as: limited access to education premises for vulnerable children (including children with disabilities) and poor capacity to include children with disabilities in learning programmes; low quality of education programmes; limited modalities to reach and document the status of out of school children; poor economic capacities for families to support enrolment in learning programme; early marriages for girls and child labour for boys.<sup>378</sup> Additionally, UNOCHA observed constraints related to the overcrowding of learning spaces, lack of teachers, shortage of school after primary level. Among the governorates, Hasaka (24 %), Raqqa (22 %), Deir Ez-Zor (19 %), Aleppo (16 %) and Idlib (15 %) registered the highest level of children non-attendance rates to school.<sup>379</sup>

For the year 2022, the UN verified 13 attacks on schools resulting from ground shelling, air strikes and live ammunition, which were mainly attributed to GoS and affiliated forces and unidentified perpetrators. Schools were also being used for military purposes, particularly by YPG/YPJ.<sup>380</sup> UNICEF indicated that one in three schools in Syria is no longer used for educational purposes as they have been 'destroyed, damaged, continue to shelter displaced families or are being used for military purposes'.<sup>381</sup> For the period between January and May 2023, UN Security Council did not report any confirmed attack on education facilities.<sup>382</sup>

The devastating impact of the prolonged conflict, the economic constraints and widespread poverty across the country are factors hindering access to education as the children are compelled to work to support the households.<sup>383</sup> Around 48 % of families surveyed by

<sup>374</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), pp. 84, 92

<sup>375</sup> The data collected in HNO 2023 are based on the Multi Sector Needs Assessment (MSNA), a household assessment aimed at showing needs across Syria, and are the result of 34 065 interviews conducted with households in July-August 2022. More information on the methodology used can be found in UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023, [url](#), p. 118

<sup>376</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), pp. 20, 21, 84

<sup>377</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/51/45], 17 August 2022, [url](#), para. 98, p. 16; UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), pp. 20, 21, 84

<sup>378</sup> UNICEF, Whole of Syria, Education response, January to May 2023, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>379</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), p. 92

<sup>380</sup> UN Secretary General, Report by the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly, Children and armed conflict, 5 June 2023, [url](#), p. 26; paras 196, 197, 203

<sup>381</sup> UNICEF, Every Day Counts, Children of Syria cannot wait any longer, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>382</sup> UN Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General [S/2023/127], 21 February 2023, [url](#), para. 34; UN Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General [S/2023/284], 20 April 2023, [url](#), para. 33; UN Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General [S/2023/464], 22 June 2023, [url](#), p. 6, para. 28

<sup>383</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), pp. 88-89; UNICEF, Whole of Syria, Education response, January to May 2023, [url](#)





UNOCHA stated that the main reason their child was not attending school was to support the household.<sup>384</sup>

In north-western Syria, the devastating earthquakes of February 2023 also resulted in massive damage to school infrastructure. Save the Children estimated that in north-western Syria 54 % of schools and 37 % of teaching and learning spaces were affected by the earthquake.<sup>385</sup>

Children with disabilities experience additional barriers to education due to restriction of movements, lack of tailored learning programmes and proper education facilities.<sup>386</sup>

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<sup>384</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), p. 40

<sup>385</sup> Save the Children, The impact of the earthquake on implementing education programmes in Northwest Syria, 15 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>386</sup> UNFPA, GPC, Whole of Syria Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility: Voices from Syria 2023 - Assessment Findings of the Humanitarian Needs Overview, 28 March 2023, [url](#), p. 43



## 2. Socio-economic situation in Damascus city

### 2.1. Mobility and admittance

#### 2.1.1. International flight connections

The Damascus Airport website shows international flight connections with Iran (Tehran), Iraq (Al Najaf, Erbil, Baghdad, Basra), Jordan (Amman), Lebanon (Beirut), the UAE (Sharjah, Abu Dhabi, Dubai), Oman (Muscat), Qatar (Doha), Kuwait (Kuwait city), Libya (Misurata), Sudan (Khartoum), Côte d'Ivoire (Abidjan), Pakistan (Karachi, Lahore) and Russia (Moscow).<sup>387</sup> The flight tracker FlightConnections, which provides information about current flight connections, indicated that, as of 29 August 2023, international flights were being operated to 10 cities in 5 countries, including the UAE (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah), Iraq (Baghdad, Erbil, Al Najaf, Basra), Pakistan (Karachi), Iran (Tehran) and Venezuela (Caracas).<sup>388</sup> Flightradar24 also showed flights arriving or scheduled to arrive from Moscow, Muscat, Kuwait city and Athens.<sup>389</sup> Greek City Times and Agenzia Nova had reported in March and June 2023, respectively, that the Greek Air Mediterranean airline would start operating flights between Athens and Syria.<sup>390</sup> In June 2023, the Lebanese website Al-Modon reported that Saudi Arabia had agreed to resume direct flights to Syria.<sup>391</sup>

According to the USDOS, the Syrian government 'routinely' ordered the closure of the Damascus airport allegedly because of violence or the threat of violence.<sup>392</sup>

At least two attacks on the capital's airport occurred during the reporting period, including an Israeli airstrike on Damascus International Airport on 17 September 2022. There was no immediate confirmation whether airport operations had been affected by the airstrike.<sup>393</sup> The Guardian noted with reference to the SOHR that the airstrike was targeted at Iranian-backed groups based near the airport.<sup>394</sup> Another Israeli airstrike on the airport reportedly occurred on 2 January 2023. News articles stated that the airport was out of service for several hours but resumed operations later the same day.<sup>395</sup>

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<sup>387</sup> Damascus international airport, Destinations, n.d., [url](#), accessed on 31 August 2023

<sup>388</sup> FlightConnections, Direct flights to Damascus (DAM), last updated 20 July 2023, [url](#)

<sup>389</sup> Flightradar24, Damascus International Airport Syria (DAM/OSDI): Arrivals: 19 to 21 July 2023, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>390</sup> Agenzia Nova, The Syrian civil aviation announces a weekly flight connection with Greece, 7 June 2023, [url](#); Greek City Times, Greece's Air Mediterranean to inaugurate first flight from Europe to Syria in over a decade!, 8 March 2023, [url](#)

<sup>391</sup> Al-Modon, Saudi Arabia Agrees to Resume Flights from Damascus, The Syrian Observer, 9 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>392</sup> USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 62

<sup>393</sup> Al Jazeera, Syria says five killed in Israeli air attack on Damascus airport, 17 September 2022, [url](#); Reuters, Israel attacks Damascus airport, five soldiers killed, Syria says, 17 September 2022, [url](#)

<sup>394</sup> Guardian (The), Israeli airstrike on Damascus airport kills five Syrian troops – reports, 17 September 2022, [url](#)

<sup>395</sup> Al-Monitor, Israeli strikes on Syria put Damascus airport briefly out of service, kill two, 2 January 2023, [url](#); DW, Syria says Israeli strike briefly paralyzed Damascus airport, 2 January 2023, [url](#)



## 2.1.2. Beirut – Damascus land route

The main road connecting the capital cities of Beirut and Damascus runs through the Al-Masnaa (Lebanon) / Jdeidet Yabous (Syria) border crossing, located 60 km from Damascus and 110 km from Beirut,<sup>396</sup> and constituting the largest border crossing between the two countries.<sup>397</sup> Asharq Al-Awsat<sup>398</sup> indicated in January 2023 that the route, which formed part of a larger route connecting Beirut with Iran’s capital Tehran, was being controlled by pro-Iranian militias, but that the GoS was working on regaining control over parts of the road.<sup>399</sup>

In an article of January 2023, Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, the Arabic version of the London-based news site The New Arab, quoted the political activist Suleiman Al-Ali describing a journey from Lebanon to Damascus and Tartous in Syria. According to him, the journey began with the required exchange of 100 US dollars per person for Syrian pounds at the (much lower) official rate established by the Syrian Central Bank, followed by hours of waiting for criminal and security checks. Passengers who received their papers and were able to continue their journey along the road from the Lebanese border to Damascus, passed several checkpoints controlled by different units, including from the Military and Air Force Intelligence Directorates, the Political Security Directorate, State Security and the Fourth Division.<sup>400</sup>

In March 2023, Sawt Al-Asimah<sup>401</sup> reported that a group linked to the Qalaa Security Company and owned by a Syrian businessman known as Abu Ali Khader had established a checkpoint on the Syrian side of the Beirut-Damascus road close to the Masnaa / Jdeidet Yabous border crossing. According to a driver quoted by Sawt Al-Asimah, an officer of the Fourth Division was also permanently present. Checkpoint staff reportedly searched the luggage of arriving passengers for electronics and electric household appliances, charged fees for letting them pass and confiscated devices of those who failed to pay. According to the same driver, arriving passenger cars had to pass six or seven checkpoints, including the Qalaa checkpoint, state security, military security and customs checkpoints and a checkpoint recently established by the SAA’s Fourth Division on the Jdeidet Yabous road. According to other sources quoted by Sawt Al-Asimah, officers at the Qalaa checkpoint also checked arriving cars and asked drivers about their destination and place of residence. This procedure reportedly also applied to Lebanese cars and drivers.<sup>402</sup> The Qalaa Security Company (Al-Qalaa Security and Protection, CPS) was reportedly closely affiliated with the Fourth Division

<sup>396</sup> WFP, Logistics Cluster, n.d., 2.3.1. Land Border Crossing Al Masnaa, [url](#)

<sup>397</sup> CMI, National and international migration policy in Lebanon, 1 December 2022, [url](#), p. 13

<sup>398</sup> Asharq Al-Awsat is a pan-Arab London-based newspaper and part of the Saudi-Arabian SRMG media group. Asharq Al-Awsat, About us, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>399</sup> Asharq Al-Awsat, Will Damascus Undermine Tehran’s Mediterranean Dream?, 28 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>400</sup> Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, الحواجز الأمنية في سورية: مراكز ابتزاز تزيد معاناة المدنيين [Security checkpoints in Syria: extortion centers increase civilian suffering], 22 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>401</sup> Sawt Al-Asimah describes itself as an independent media organisation established in 2016 by a group of “activists and amateur journalists” from Damascus and with a focus on news about Damascus and its countryside, as well as about Syrian refugees across the world. Sawt Al-Asimah, من نحن [Who are we], n.d., [url](#)

<sup>402</sup> Sawt Al-Asimah, شركة القلعة الأمنية تنشأ حاجزاً على طريق بيروت – دمشق [Qalaa Security Company establishes a barrier on the Beirut-Damascus road], 14 March 2023, [url](#)



commander Maher Assad,<sup>403</sup> the brother of President Assad, and the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and was managed by former SAA and police officers.<sup>404</sup>

## 2.1.3. Freedom of movement

### (a) Location of checkpoints

In its 2023 report, Freedom House described a ‘proliferation’ of checkpoints by government and militia forces, severely restricting the population’s freedom of movement.<sup>405</sup> According to a report of March 2023 by researchers Annsar Shahhoud and Muhanad Abulhusn, the SAA’s Fourth Division had checkpoints at the entrances of urban centres, including Damascus, where they also had the mandate to function as parallel customs police. Moreover, the Fourth Division controlled checkpoints at international border crossings [Lebanon (Qalamoun/Bekaa Valley), Jordan (Naseeb), and Iraq (Abu Kamal)], at all border crossings into opposition-controlled areas as well as at the entrances of the ports of Latakia and Tartous.<sup>406</sup> The Kurdish North Press Agency (NPA) reported five checkpoints along the 110km road between Damascus and Sweida, including Qaser Al-Motamarat, Al-Adliyah, Al-Masmiyah, Hazem and, eventually, Tel Shihan, close to the city of Shahba in Sweida governorate.<sup>407</sup> Al-Araby Al-Jadeed stated in an article of January 2023 that there were eight security checkpoints between Damascus International Airport and the city of Sweida, with the first one before leaving the airport premises and the last one near the city of Shahba, which belonged to the National Defence Forces (NDF) and was staffed with members of the government’s security branches. Moreover, Al-Araby Al-Jadeed noted that the Fourth Division controlled entrances to Damascus as well as to other main urban areas via checkpoints established in the area west of Damascus and in the greater region, where they sometimes collaborated with other affiliated forces.<sup>408</sup>

In an article of April 2023, Vedeng News<sup>409</sup> described the removal of several security checkpoints in Damascus city, including in the vicinity of Umayyad Square - the starting point for several roads leading to the neighbourhoods of Abu Rummaneh, Maliki and Al-Muhajireen and connecting to main roads such as the Mezzeh highway, Beirut Road and People’s Palace Road.<sup>410</sup> Orient Net<sup>411</sup> reported with reference to a local correspondent that the removed security checkpoints had been under the control of state and military security branches.

<sup>403</sup> ISW and CTP, Iran Update, May 23, 2023, 23 May 2023, [url](#)

<sup>404</sup> Diyaruna, IRGC hides behind Syria private security companies, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>405</sup> Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2023 – Syria, 2023, [url](#)

<sup>406</sup> Shahhoud, A. and Abulhusn, M., Syria’s 4th Division: A Threat to Stability, New Lines Institute, March 2023, [url](#), p. 13

<sup>407</sup> NPA, Locals say government exploits insecurity in Suwayda for increased control, 31 May 2023, [url](#); see also Shaam Network, New cases of kidnapping of civilians from Sweida on the Damascus road were recorded, 20 May 2023, [url](#)

<sup>408</sup> Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, [مراكز ابتزاز تزيد معاناة المدنيين](#) [Security checkpoints in Syria: extortion centers increase civilian suffering], 22 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>409</sup> Vedeng News was founded in 2015 by media professionals in Syria and describes itself as an independent media agency focusing on Syrian affairs and ‘as the first platform for individuals in Syria to express, write and blog freely outside the boundaries of editorial agendas’. Vedeng News, [من نحن](#) [Who we are], 2 September 2022, [url](#)

<sup>410</sup> Vedeng News, [إزالة حواجز أمنية من مناطق حيوية في دمشق... ما السبب؟](#) [Security checkpoints removed from vital areas in Damascus... What is the reason?], 18 April 2023, [url](#)

<sup>411</sup> Orient Net describes itself as an independent Syrian media organization, owned and funded by the Dubai-based Ghassan Abboud Trading Group. Orient Net, Home, n.d., [url](#)



Checkpoints at the entry roads to Damascus city, in the vicinity of the capital and in towns across Rural Damascus governorate remained in place.<sup>412</sup> Similarly, a Syrian academic interviewed for this report noted that the number of checkpoints had significantly decreased and remained limited to a few major city entrances.<sup>413</sup>

### **(b) Specific groups/impact on civilians**

According to the USDOS, the Syrian government extensively banned international travel of opposition members. Moreover, journalists and human rights or civil society activists were often banned from travelling abroad,<sup>414</sup> or were interrogated upon return. USDOS noted that the GoS restricted in-country movements and established checkpoints to monitor travels inside the areas under its control. Legal and cultural restrictions limited women's freedom of movement in many areas.<sup>415</sup> According to USDOS, the law allowed certain male relatives to prohibit women from travelling,<sup>416</sup> and UNFPA stated that women and girls faced movement restrictions imposed by male family members in the households, often justified with the fear of violence against females in public space and the social stigma placed on women, especially widows and divorcees.<sup>417</sup>

In its October 2022 report on arrests and detentions, SNHR indicated that it had recorded the detention of IDPs and returnees from abroad who were trying to return to their original places of residence in territory under control of the GoS. Most of the arrests reportedly took place at Damascus airport, Damascus city and at the border crossings with Lebanon.<sup>418</sup> For further information on the detention of civilians and alleged draft evaders, see sections [1.1.2](#) and [1.2.7](#) above.

### **(c) Procedures at checkpoints**

According to a Syrian academic, checkpoints generally tended to focus on asking more questions (for example, on current address or occupation) to individuals coming from areas that were loosely controlled by the GoS, such as Dar'a governorate, or from rebel-held areas such as Idlib and northern Aleppo.<sup>419</sup>

Having identity documents, birth certificates and other personal documents was essential for being able to move freely.<sup>420</sup>

The media outlet Middle East Monitor (MEMO) noted in June 2023 that the government's military checkpoints had taken up the practice of extorting residents, public transport vehicles

<sup>412</sup> Orient Net, [إزالة حواجز أمنية إضافية في دمشق.. وطرده ميليشيا أسد من بلدة حدودية مع لبنان](#) [Removing additional security checkpoints in Damascus. Assad's militia expelled from a border town with Lebanon], 1 May 2023, [url](#)

<sup>413</sup> Syrian academic, email correspondence, 22 June 2023

<sup>414</sup> USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 62

<sup>415</sup> UNFPA and Global Protection Cluster, Whole of Syria Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility: Voices from Syria 2023 - Assessment Findings of the Humanitarian Needs Overview, 28 March 2023, [url](#), p. 34

<sup>416</sup> USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), pp. 59-60

<sup>417</sup> UNFPA and Global Protection Cluster, Whole of Syria Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility: Voices from Syria 2023 - Assessment Findings of the Humanitarian Needs Overview, 28 March 2023, [url](#), p. 34

<sup>418</sup> SNHR, At Least 208 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in October 2022, Including Seven Children and Five Women, Mostly at the Hands of Syrian Regime Forces, 2 November 2022, [url](#), p. 10

<sup>419</sup> Syrian academic, email correspondence, 22 June 2023

<sup>420</sup> UNHCR, UNHCR Legal Assistance in Syria. January – December 2022, 2 May 2023, [url](#), p. 3



and others for money and fees.<sup>421</sup> According to researchers Annsar Shahhoud and Muhanad Abulhusn, it was the SAA's Fourth Division as well as affiliated militia groups and businesses who had come to solely profit from this practice. Payments were reportedly demanded from many civilians as well as from entities and business owners for all cargo crossing the checkpoint, regardless of ownership. Fees were calculated according to the cargo's weight and content, and non-payment resulted in the cargo's confiscation.<sup>422</sup> In May 2023, SOHR reported on a checkpoint run by the Military Intelligence Directorate on the road between the cities of Jadida Artouz and Qatna in Rural Damascus governorate. Checkpoint staff reportedly imposed fees (payments that had to be made in order to be allowed to pass) amounting to 30 000 to 50 000 Syrian pounds (USD 2.3<sup>423</sup> to 3.8)<sup>424</sup> on passers-by, threatening to confiscate cars and motorbikes in case of refusal to pay.<sup>425</sup> Similarly, Al-Araby Al-Jadeed stated in an article of January 2023 that staff at all checkpoints along the road from Damascus International Airport to the city of Sweida reportedly demanded fees from those arriving from the airport and for every vehicle transporting goods and vegetables from Damascus to Sweida. According to a driver quoted by Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, each checkpoint had its own tariffs depending on the type of goods and rate of the US dollar, and while some accepted also in-kind payment, others insisted on cash payments. Drivers who refused to pay were forced to unload their entire cargo for inspection.<sup>426</sup>

Ransom payments for the release of civilians previously detained at checkpoints under the control of the Fourth Division and the Republican Guard constituted another source of income, according to the SNHR in an interview with the DIS in August 2022. Other violations against civilians as described by the SNHR included intimidations such as threats, insults, physical and psychological violence, the robbery of personal property and executions of civilians for allegedly not stopping at a checkpoint or because they refused to hand over their property or make any payments.<sup>427</sup>

#### **2.1.4. Accessibility from Damascus airport to the city**

According to a Syrian academic questioned for this report, the airport was generally accessible from and to the city. There had been instances in the past where Israeli airstrikes

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<sup>421</sup> MEMO, Syria regime arrests university students near Damascus, 1 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>422</sup> Shahhoud, A. and Abulhusn, M., Syria's 4th Division: A Threat to Stability, New Lines Institute, March 2023, [url](#), p. 12

<sup>423</sup> All currency calculations in this report (except where otherwise stated) are based on the informal exchange rate of SYP 13 000 per US dollar as of 26 July 2023, according to the Black Market Tracker, a tracking tool developed by researcher Karam Shaar, that regularly collects and analyses data from three exchange rate online platforms widely used by Syrians. Shaar, K., Hourly black market exchange rates and gold prices in Syria by city, n.d., [url](#), accessed 26 July 2023. For further details on the methodology, see Shaar, K., Hourly black market exchange rates and gold prices in Syria by city: Motivation and Methodology, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>424</sup> It was decided to base currency calculations throughout this report on the – at the point of writing – latest available informal exchange rate instead of the official rate to better reflect the actual costs for the persons concerned. For more information on the development of official and informal exchange rates, see section [2.2.1](#) below.

<sup>425</sup> SOHR, Rif Dimashq - Regime checkpoint imposes royalties on passengers and threatens to confiscate vehicles, 23 May 2023, [url](#)

<sup>426</sup> Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, [مراكز ابتزاز تزيد معاناة المدنيين](#) [Security checkpoints in Syria: extortion centers increase civilian suffering], 22 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>427</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria - The Special Forces and the elite units. Annex I: Meeting Minutes. Skype meeting with the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), 23 August 2022, April 2023, [url](#), pp. 24-25





temporarily disrupted the operations of the airport. For example, in January 2023, there were reported airstrikes that affected the airport's functioning (for more information, see section 2.1.1 above on International flight connections). The roads between Damascus and the airport, however, remained accessible.<sup>428</sup> According to reports from official sources, efforts were underway to improve and repair the roads leading to the airport.<sup>429</sup> For information on the presence of checkpoints near Damascus International Airport, see section 2.1.3 above.

Further information on accessibility from Damascus airport to the city could not be found.

## 2.1.5. Restrictions on access and return to certain areas

The UNCOI pointed in February 2023 to reports of returnees who had to pay bribes to members of the local administration in order to access their properties. In case of refusal to pay, they were reportedly denied access to their homes. Other returnees reported that neighbours had taken over their property and threatened them when they tried to get it back. In one case, neighbours reportedly severely damaged the house before returning it. The UNCOI noted that remedies were 'lacking or ineffective' as in some cases local authorities did not react to complaints from returnees, while in other cases, returnees refrained from submitting complaints for fear of reprisals.<sup>430</sup> Similarly, in April 2023, The Guardian reported on alleged schemes to deprive persons who fled abroad of their property by forging sales documents for vacant houses and have them confirmed by courts involved in the scheme without the knowledge of the houses' owners. Networks involved in these schemes reportedly included up to 50 persons, among them lawyers, judges, and military officials – in particular, according to some of The Guardian's interviewees, members of the Fourth Division.<sup>431</sup>

Diyaruna reported in March 2023 that members of Iranian-aligned Hezbollah and IRGC were buying up or confiscating property in areas of strategic interest to them, such as Damascus and its surrounding areas. Acquisitions reportedly took place with the help of Syrian traders and brokers, who in some cases were exploiting the real estate owners' difficult financial or economic circumstances to buy property for the families of Iranian militia members.<sup>432</sup>

### (a) Yarmouk

The Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF)<sup>433</sup> stated in a report of November 2022 that the GoS had for several years prevented the return of residents of the Yarmouk camp to their homes.

<sup>428</sup> Syrian academic, email correspondence, 22 June 2023

<sup>429</sup> Syria, Ministry of Transport, المواصلات الطرقية تباشر صيانة بعض الأجزاء من طريق مطار دمشق الدولي [Road Transport Begins Maintenance of Some Parts of Damascus International Airport Road], 12 June 2023, [url](#); SANA, بدء صيانة الأجزاء المتضررة من طريق مطار دمشق الدولي [Maintenance of damaged parts of Damascus International Airport Road begins], 12 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>430</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/52/69, 7 February 2023, [url](#), para. 69

<sup>431</sup> Guardian (The), Scandal of Syria's stolen homes: fraudsters use courts to legitimise thefts from refugees, 24 April 2023, [url](#)

<sup>432</sup> Diyaruna, Hizbullah scoops up Syria real estate, taking advantage of war-shocked population, 28 March 2023, [url](#)

<sup>433</sup> The Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF) is a German political foundation based on the principles of liberalism and named after the German liberal politician Friedrich Naumann. FNF, The Foundation for Freedom in Germany and the World, n.d., [url](#)





Residents wishing to return were required to obtain a security approval and had to prove the ownership and structural safety of their houses, even though most of the buildings had been affected by the large-scale destruction of the camp.<sup>434</sup> According to UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) estimates, close to 4 000 individuals (1 200 families) had returned as of June 2022, including about 800 Palestinian families.<sup>435</sup>

According to the Syria Indicator,<sup>436</sup> former residents of Yarmouk claimed that potential returnees had to provide proof of ownership as well as the payment of all services payment of all services since 2012, including electricity, water, telephone, and other services before having to undergo a security check.<sup>437</sup> The Syria Report, a website focused on business and economic news from Syria, noted that residents applying for return to Al-Hajar Al-Aswad were rejected security approval if they failed to provide ownership documents, despite following a procedure recommended by the city municipality, namely, to obtain a record from the police station, proof of payment of water or electricity bills, and a document from their neighbourhood *mukhtar* with the testimonies of two witnesses from the area that the applicant was a local property owner.<sup>438</sup>

Sawt Al-Asimah indicated in March 2023 that residents of Yarmouk and Al-Hajar Al-Aswad camps were no longer required to appear in person at the Palestinian branch of the Military Intelligence Directorate and the National Security Office to apply for approval to return to their homes. Instead, residents now had to submit a written request to a newly established Military Intelligence detachment on Thalateen Street in Yarmouk camp. According to Sawt Al-Asimah, the Military Intelligence detachment published a bulletin with the names of 100 people whose applications for return to Yarmouk camp had been approved. Moreover, 50 people received permission to return to Al-Hajar Al-Aswad. Persons with pending security cases or who had previously been arrested were denied the right to return. Similarly, persons with children wanted by the government, living in Northern Syria or having links to the armed groups controlling the area, or who were wanted for forced conscription were banned from returning to their homes.<sup>439</sup> Syria Direct quoted a resident as saying that during the application process she had been asked about the origins of her family and whether any member of her family was missing. According to her, anyone with a person missing in their family would be banned from entering the camp.<sup>440</sup> In April 2023, 15 people were reportedly detained by a Military Intelligence patrol in Yarmouk for allegedly entering the area without having security approvals to return to or visit the area for more than 24 hours.<sup>441</sup>

<sup>434</sup> FNF, Demographic Engineering in the Course of Syria's War, November 2022, [url](#), p. 48

<sup>435</sup> UNRWA, Yarmouk (unofficial camp), n.d., [url](#)

<sup>436</sup> Syria Indicator describes itself as an independent journalism project with journalists from inside and outside Syria that produces investigative reports on economic, social, and environmental cases. Syria Indicator, About Sindicador, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>437</sup> Syria Indicator, The Fall of Yarmouk: War Economy Laws Leave Capital of Palestinian Diaspora in Ruins, 28 April 2023, [url](#)

<sup>438</sup> Syria Report (The), Some Displaced Residents Allowed to Return to New Neighbourhoods in Al-Hajar Al-Aswad, 6 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>439</sup> Sawt Al-Asimah, فرع فلسطين يلغي شرط مراجعته للعودة إلى مخيم اليرموك والحجر الأسود [Palestine Branch Cancels Requirement to Review Return to Yarmouk and Hajar Al-Aswad Camp], 16 March 2023, [url](#)

<sup>440</sup> Syria Direct, The battle for Yarmouk continues: Damascus' laws, decisions threaten property rights, 22 March 2023, [url](#)

<sup>441</sup> Sawt Al-Asimah, اعتقالات في مخيم اليرموك بسبب دخوله دون موافقة أمنية مسبقة [Arrests in Yarmouk Camp for Entering Without Prior Security Approval], 27 April 2023, [url](#)





The Syria Report noted in January 2023 that the government made an ambiguously worded announcement that Yarmouk residents and property owners were required to visit the Yarmouk Services Department to remove their damaged or destroyed buildings within one month. Otherwise, the property would be removed at the owners' cost.<sup>442</sup> Given that the majority of the camp's residents were displaced and would have problems to prove their ownership, this provision might lead to residents being dispossessed from their properties,<sup>443</sup> or in the unlawful appropriation of debris by the government.<sup>444</sup> The announcement was reportedly withdrawn a few days later.<sup>445</sup> Residents claimed that looting of homes in Yarmouk presumably happened with support or knowledge of authorities.<sup>446</sup>

### **(b) Jobar and Qaboun**

In an article of April 2023, Syria Direct described the situation of former residents of the Damascus Jobar neighbourhood, most of whom had been displaced by the time the government retook control of the area from opposition forces in 2018. According to one former resident, authorities did not allow residents' access to the area. Local media noted that the government has not officially announced such a ban but that the Damascus Provincial Council made an 'unannounced' decision to permanently ban returns under the directive of security services.<sup>447</sup> Similarly, a displaced resident of Qaboun neighbourhood noted that access to the area was banned and the neighbourhood was surrounded by checkpoints.<sup>448</sup>

In June 2022, Jobar and surrounding areas, including Qaboun, were reportedly included in urban development plan No. 106.<sup>449</sup> By law, residents of the areas affected were granted a 30-day period following the announcement of the new urban development plan to submit objections to the plan or to prove ownership of their property. In practice, however, this was difficult, according to STJ, as many of them were displaced or abroad and/or feared being targeted if they appeared in person. On the other hand, obtaining a security clearance to issue a power of attorney for someone to represent them was time-consuming and prone to fail in case the property owner had security problems or had been sentenced in absentia.<sup>450</sup> A lawyer quoted by Syria Direct noted that, due to Jobar's, and other areas' inclusion in the development plan, some of the former residents were to lose all or part of their property to make way for the construction of new buildings and infrastructure. Moreover, according to the

<sup>442</sup> Syria Report (The), Governorate Orders Property Owners in Yarmouk Camp to Remove Damaged Damascus Buildings, 31 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>443</sup> New Arab (The), Syrian regime removes Palestinian symbols from 'obliterated' Yarmouk camp, 13 April 2023, [url](#)

<sup>444</sup> STJ, Damascus: The Governorate's Announcement on Removing Yarmouk Rubble Violates Ownership Right, 27 April 2023, [url](#)

<sup>445</sup> Syria Direct, The battle for Yarmouk continues: Damascus' laws, decisions threaten property rights, 22 March 2023, [url](#)

<sup>446</sup> Syria Direct, 'Locusts': Organized looting, destruction of displaced Syrians' homes by 'demolition forces' and regime-affiliated groups, 26 May 2023, [url](#); Syria Direct, The battle for Yarmouk continues: Damascus' laws, decisions threaten property rights, 22 March 2023, [url](#)

<sup>447</sup> Syria Direct, Awaiting reconstruction: For displaced residents of Damascus' Jobar neighborhood, no return until redevelopment, 27 April 2023, [url](#)

<sup>448</sup> SACD, From the heart of the capital Damascus: "We lost hope of returning to our homes, and we are trying to leave in search of a decent life.", 26 April 2022, [url](#)

<sup>449</sup> Other areas included in development plan No. 106 were Aqsaab Mosque neighbourhood, Irbin, Zamalka and Ein Tarma.

<sup>450</sup> STJ, Syria: Urban Scheme for Jobar – a New Attempt to Seize Residents' Properties Based on Legislative Decree No.5, 1 September 2022, [url](#)



Damascus Director of Development and Urban Planning, residents would not receive alternative housing as compensation but shares in the new development project.<sup>451</sup> This was also reflected in a statement made by a displaced resident from Qaboun neighbourhood in Damascus – an area that was included in an urban redevelopment zone under Law No. 10. The buildings of those who failed to provide proof of ownership were to be confiscated by the authorities.<sup>452</sup> Moreover, many of the former residential buildings that were reportedly still standing when the GoS retook control over Qaboun in May 2017, were later demolished. The demolitions were explained by the GoS with the need to detonate mines left by militants, while former residents considered the demolitions a ‘revenge’ by the GoS since Qaboun had been an opposition stronghold during the war.<sup>453</sup>

### 2.1.6. Administrative requirements for settling in Damascus

According to a Syrian academic interviewed for the report, applying for security clearance was a prerequisite for establishing residence in any part of Damascus city. The security screening process for IDPs relocating to Damascus was stricter than that applied to existing Damascus residents undergoing intra-city moves. The approval of an individual's security clearance was influenced by various factors, including their background, place of origin, and activities over the past years. More often than not, the *mukhtar* played a role in the process. Prospective residents had to first submit their leasing agreements and related documentation to the *mukhtar*, who subsequently forwarded these materials to the relevant security authorities for review. In some cases, prospected returnees submitted their applications directly to security services. Generally, returnees had to prove ownership of property to settle in the area in which they lived prior to displacement.<sup>454</sup>

In an article of November 2022, The Syria Report noted that it remained difficult for forcibly displaced people to return to their homes. Apart from the need to fulfil a set of requirements, return also depended on whether the area had been rehabilitated and basic services installed. As part of the requirements, applicants had to submit documents proving ownership of their home, a familial civil registration extract and copies of each family member's ID cards. Based on these documents, security services approved or rejected the application. In case of approval, applicants were required to obtain an engineering report for their house from the public safety committee, which was linked to the local administrative unit. The committee decided whether a house was in a stable condition and inhabitable. In case the house was declared safe, the potential returnee had to apply to the municipality for permission to do any necessary repair work. According to The Syria Report, the role of public safety committees was not clearly defined, and critics claimed that security services were intervening in their

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<sup>451</sup> Syria Direct, Awaiting reconstruction: For displaced residents of Damascus' Jobar neighborhood, no return until redevelopment, 27 April 2023, [url](#)

<sup>452</sup> SACD, From the heart of the capital Damascus: “We lost hope of returning to our homes, and we are trying to leave in search of a decent life.”, 26 April 2022, [url](#)

<sup>453</sup> SACD, From the heart of the capital Damascus: “We lost hope of returning to our homes, and we are trying to leave in search of a decent life.”, 26 April 2022, [url](#); The Guardian, ‘It’s a kind of revenge’: Damascus suburb demolished as Assad builds a ‘new Syria’, 23 March 2022, [url](#)

<sup>454</sup> Syrian academic, email correspondence, 23 August 2023



work. In practice, however, it was these committees that made the final decision over the preservation or demolition of a building.<sup>455</sup>

In another report of October 2022, The Syria Report noted that, given the conditions for security approval, only property owners who lived in areas under GoS-control and were not wanted by the security services would eventually be allowed to return. Other returnees had to agree to a ‘security settlement’ that may involve extensive investigations, arrest in case of pending search warrants and military conscription for men who had so far failed to do military service.<sup>456</sup>

For further information regarding procedures for settling in Damascus, see section 2.5. of the [EUAA COI Report: Syria - Socio-economic situation in Damascus city \(August 2022\)](#).

## 2.2. Socio-economic overview

### 2.2.1. Economy

Very few information could be found during the reporting period on the economic situation in Damascus city specifically. This section therefore mainly deals with the general economic situation in areas under GoS control.

In a speech to the UN Security Council in January 2023, the UN Special Envoy for Syria noted that, after 12 years of war, the financial collapse in Lebanon, the Covid-19 pandemic, sanctions and other events, the country was facing an economic crisis ‘of epic proportions’.<sup>457</sup> UNOCHA noted in its 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview for Syria that the ‘crippled economy’, marked by high inflation, currency devaluation and rising prices, remained ‘one of the biggest drivers of need’.<sup>458</sup>

In January 2023, the Central Bank of Syria (CBS) increased the official exchange rate from SYP 3 015 per US dollar to SYP 4 522 per US dollar<sup>459</sup> in an apparent attempt, as AP noted, to make more people use the official exchange rate than trade in the black market.<sup>460</sup> The average informal market exchange rate was at SYP 6 520 per US dollar as of January 2023.<sup>461</sup> At the beginning of February 2023, the CBS split the official exchange rate in two: the Banks Exchange rate, which continued using the original exchange rate for foreign exchange transactions, and the Money Transfer and Cash Foreign Exchange (MTC) rate. The MTC rate was a new floating exchange rate specifically for remittances and earthquake aid-related funds that reflected the informal (parallel) market exchange rate.<sup>462</sup> According to the World

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<sup>455</sup> Syria Report (The), Some of the main HLP-related factors impacting the return of displaced people during the first half of 2022, 1 November 2022, [url](#)

<sup>456</sup> Syria Report (The), Damascus Governorate to Begin Granting Restoration Permits in Qaboun, 25 October 2022, [url](#)

<sup>457</sup> UN Special envoy for Syria Geir O. Pedersen, Briefing to the Security Council, 25 January 2023, [url](#), para. 3

<sup>458</sup> UNOCHA, 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>459</sup> WFP Syria, Market Price Watch Bulletin January 2023, 9 March 2023, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>460</sup> AP News, EXPLAINER: Why has Syria’s economic crisis hit a new low?, 5 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>461</sup> WFP Syria, Market Price Watch Bulletin January 2023, 9 March 2023, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>462</sup> Syria Report (The), Central Bank brings Forex rate closer to Black Market, UN Agencies and NGOs to benefit, 14 February 2023, [url](#)





Food Programme (WFP), the MTC rate and the parallel rate ‘have moved in tandem’ since the former’s introduction.<sup>463</sup> In July 2023, the Syrian pound was devalued for a third time since the beginning of 2023 and was officially traded at SYP 8 542 per US dollar. On the parallel market, it was traded at SYP 13 180 per US-dollar, indicating a loss of 51 % of its value since the beginning of 2023, of 69 % within one year and of 95 % since October 2019, the onset of the economic crisis in Lebanon.<sup>464</sup> As of 26 July 2023, the MTC rate was at SYP 9 900 per US dollar according to the CBS,<sup>465</sup> while it was SYP 13 000 per US dollar on the parallel market in Damascus.<sup>466</sup> According to Etana Syria, a Syrian civil society organisation striving for democratic change, the Syrian pound lost more than 35 % of its value since Syria was readmitted into the Arab League in May 2023 alone.<sup>467</sup> While the devaluation of the Syrian pound continued, the CBS raised the threshold for daily withdrawals from SYP 15 million to SYP 25 million (USD 1 153.8 to USD 1 923) in August 2023.<sup>468</sup>

In a March 2023 report, the World Bank indicated that currency devaluation and in particular the increase in food prices have contributed to rising inflation since early 2022. According to the World Bank, since the war on Ukraine, food prices in Syria have been increasing faster than global food prices, partly due to a reduction of state subsidies, a ‘record-low’ domestic agricultural production, and shortages caused by supply-chain interruptions, which also contributed to higher prices for some food and energy goods.<sup>469</sup> Food prices, however, had been increasing already before: according to the WFP, they had increased by 532 % in the period from 2020 to 2022,<sup>470</sup> or by almost 12 times in the period from 2020 to 2023.<sup>471</sup>

Several sources reported of severe fuel shortages due to delayed fuel imports<sup>472</sup> in the winter of 2022/23: WFP described that some of its staff in Syria had difficulties commuting to their offices or heating their homes, and some monitoring visits had to be cancelled due to a lack of fuel.<sup>473</sup> The Washington Post noted that a black market for fuel had developed along the border to Lebanon.<sup>474</sup> In Damascus, the streets were almost devoid of traffic.<sup>475</sup> Moreover, households in Damascus continued to face recurring electricity cuts,<sup>476</sup> and difficulties in

<sup>463</sup> WFP Syria, Market Price Watch Bulletin May 2023, 2 July 2023, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>464</sup> WFP Syria, Market Price Watch Bulletin June 2023, 7 August 2023, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>465</sup> CBS, Money Transfers and Cash Foreign Exchange Quotations, 26 July 2023, [url](#)

<sup>466</sup> Karam Shaar, Hourly black market exchange rates and gold prices in Syria by city, n.d. [url](#), accessed 26 July 2023

<sup>467</sup> Etana Syria, Brief: Syria’s Currency Collapse & Political Discontent, 1 August 2023, [url](#)

<sup>468</sup> Makki, D., Syria’s economic freefall continues despite Arab League return, MEI (Middle East Institute), 16 August 2023, [url](#)

<sup>469</sup> World Bank, Syria Economic Monitor: Syria’s Economy in Ruins after a Decade-long War, Winter 2022/23, 17 March 2023, [url](#), p. 16

<sup>470</sup> European Commission - ECHO, Syria: life in the time of food insecurity, 14 October 2022, [url](#)

<sup>471</sup> WFP, Hunger soars to 12-year high in Syria, WFP chief calls for urgent action, 27 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>472</sup> Syria used to be an oil-exporting country until 2011 but lost control over oil fields during the war, most of which are located in the country’s east, in Kurdish-controlled areas under US protection. Meanwhile, the GoS has to import fuel, with Iran being the main provider. AP News, EXPLAINER: Why has Syria’s economic crisis hit a new low?, 5 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>473</sup> WFP Syria, Situation Report 12 – December 2022, 20 February 2023, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>474</sup> Washington Post (The), ‘No life’ in Syrian cities as fuel crisis plunges country into darkness, 20 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>475</sup> AP News, EXPLAINER: Why has Syria’s economic crisis hit a new low?, 5 January 2023, [url](#); Washington Post (The), ‘No life’ in Syrian cities as fuel crisis plunges country into darkness, 20 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>476</sup> AP News, EXPLAINER: Why has Syria’s economic crisis hit a new low?, 5 January 2023, [url](#); Washington Post (The), ‘No life’ in Syrian cities as fuel crisis plunges country into darkness, 20 January 2023, [url](#); National (The), Syrians suffer patchy electricity supply as summer heat pushes up demand, 22 June 2023, [url](#)





heating their homes, with some reportedly resorting to burning pistachio shells<sup>477</sup> or old clothes, shoes and plastic bags (despite the health risks) to stay warm.<sup>478</sup>

According to Etana Syria, more than 50 % of factories and commercial stores in GoS-controlled areas closed in 2022 due to electricity shortages.<sup>479</sup> In Damascus city, half of the city's privately-run bakeries stopped working due to the shortage of fuel, according to the head of the bakers' association quoted by Agence France-Presse (AFP).<sup>480</sup> Electricity remained in short supply in 2023, with people in the GoS-controlled areas reportedly getting just about one hour of electricity per day.<sup>481</sup>

Middle East Eye (MEE) noted that also money transfer systems were affected by the February 2023 earthquake, as transfer offices were overwhelmed with requests to transfer money to the affected areas. The Western Union office in Aleppo was reportedly closed due to the war and people had to travel to Damascus (or Latakia) to pick up the money.<sup>482</sup>

### 2.2.2. Humanitarian situation and assistance

According to a statement to the UN Security Council by Ms. Ghada Eltahir Mudawi, UNOCHA's Deputy Director of the Operations and Advocacy Division of 30 May 2023, almost 70 % of Syria's population, or 15.3 million people, needed humanitarian assistance. More than 330 000 people remained displaced after the February 2023 earthquakes.<sup>483</sup> Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) pointed to the fact that the presence of humanitarian aid organisations in Damascus and other areas under GoS-control was very limited. Moreover, MSF had not received authorisation to work in the country's northwest, despite seeking registration for years.<sup>484</sup>

UNOCHA noted that displacement to Damascus governorate and three other governorates began a few days after the earthquakes of 6 February 2023 and lasted for two to three weeks. By the end of February, about 455 families from Aleppo and Latakia had found shelter with their relatives or in homes provided by local communities in Damascus and the other three governorates, before some of these families returned to their home governorates in March. In addition, UNOCHA pointed to concerns over the structural safety of residential buildings and services facilities in the conflict-affected areas of Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates, as several buildings collapsed a few days after the earthquake and others sustained damages. Moreover, there were pre-existing tunnels in some areas in these two governorates, which might affect structural safety.<sup>485</sup>

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<sup>477</sup> AFP, Syria fuel crisis slows down life in Damascus, 18 December 2022, [url](#)

<sup>478</sup> Reuters, Syrians brace for long, cold winter as fuel crisis bites, 8 December 2022, [url](#)

<sup>479</sup> Etana Syria, Syria's Economic Crisis in 2022 – A Year in Review, 9 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>480</sup> AFP, Syria fuel crisis slows down life in Damascus, 18 December 2022, [url](#)

<sup>481</sup> Al-Monitor, Syrians in Damascus spend Ramadan in darkness, 28 March 2023, [url](#)

<sup>482</sup> Makki D., Syria earthquake relief efforts bring vital foreign remittance system to its knees, MEE, 17 February 2023, [url](#)

<sup>483</sup> UNOCHA, Ms. Ghada Eltahir Mudawi, Deputy Director Of The Operations And Advocacy Division For The Office For The Coordination Of Humanitarian Affairs, On Behalf Of Under-Secretary-General For Humanitarian Affairs And Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. Martin Griffith, Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria, 30 May 2023, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>484</sup> MSF, The necessary renewal of the UN cross-border resolution for Syria, December 2022, [url](#), p. 14

<sup>485</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Update, Issue 10, March 2023, 4 May 2023, [url](#), p. 6



The pro-GoS newspaper Athr Press<sup>486</sup> noted that according to the head of the Damascus branch of the Pharmacists Syndicate, the city's pharmacies' stock of infant formula has temporarily decreased by 50 % since much of the available stock has been distributed to families in the areas affected by the earthquake.<sup>487</sup>

Further information specifically on the humanitarian situation in Damascus city could not be found.

### 2.2.3. Employment

Access to employment was reportedly often dependent on personal, communal, or political affiliations, making it particularly hard for IDPs to find work. IDPs were therefore at greater risk of labour exploitation.<sup>488</sup>

The World Bank observed that, due to the increasingly difficult economic situation of households, more vulnerable persons had entered the labour market in 2022 to support their families. People were increasingly forced to accept any kind of work, irrespective of its quality. With reference to data from UNHCR's Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme, the World Bank noted that 12.6 % of households had reported to rely on high risk and/or exploitative work in 2022, in comparison to 5.4 % in 2021.<sup>489</sup>

In its 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview, UNOCHA noted that 94 % of households interviewed for the report in the framework of a Multi-Sector Needs Assessment (MSNA)<sup>490</sup> indicated that at least one household member was employed.<sup>491</sup> At the same time, in 51 % of households, only one member was employed. Those most affected by unemployment were IDP households living outside camps: 25 % of such households interviewed for the report did not have a single member earning an income.<sup>492</sup>

According to a survey on the socio-economic situation in the cities of Damascus, Aleppo and Homs, conducted for the Country of Origin Information (COI) Unit of the Austrian Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, the unemployment rate among respondents<sup>493</sup> was lowest

<sup>486</sup> Athr Press is a pro-government Syrian newspaper. The Syrian Observer, After Destruction of Manufacturing Facility: Source Reveals to Athr Press Specifications of HTS Drones, 30 May 2023, [url](#)

<sup>487</sup> Athr Press, "تخفيض حصة دمشق من حليب الأطفال مقابل زيادتها في المناطق المنكوبة: نقابة الصيدالوجي لـ 'أثر'" [Reducing Damascus' Share Of Infant Formula In Exchange For Increasing It In The Affected Areas. Pharmacists Syndicate For "Athr": Breakthrough At The Beginning Of March], 20 February 2023, [url](#)

<sup>488</sup> Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2023 – Syria, 2023, [url](#)

<sup>489</sup> World Bank, Syria Economic Monitor: Syria's Economy in Ruins after a Decade-long War, Winter 2022/23, 17 March 2023, [url](#), p. 22

<sup>490</sup> The MSNA was conducted in the period from July to August 2022 and comprised interviews with 34,065 households across all sub-districts in Syria. The four main population groups covered by the MSNA were IDPs in and out of camps, returnees and vulnerable residents. UNOCHA, 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), pp. 7, 10

<sup>491</sup> UNOCHA, 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), p. 36

<sup>492</sup> UNOCHA, 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), p. 89

<sup>493</sup> The survey included 300 respondents, 100 each per city, equally representing men and women between 16 and 35 years old. Statistics Lebanon Ltd. and Austria, Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, Syria: Socio-Economic Survey 2022, 2022, [url](#), p. 2





in Damascus city (3 %). Damascus was also the city with the highest number of respondents working in full-time jobs (58.5 %).<sup>494</sup>

No further information could be found on the situation regarding employment/unemployment in Damascus city specifically.

## 2.2.4. Poverty

Specific information on poverty levels in Damascus city could not be found during the reporting period.

According to UN data, 90 % of the Syrian population were living below the poverty line as of June 2023.<sup>495</sup> UNOCHA pointed to the existence of and potential increase in ‘working poor’ households who were unable to cover living costs despite having an income: in areas under GoS control, incomes would need to increase by 67 % to cover the rising costs of basic needs.<sup>496</sup>

In Damascus governorate, 74 % of households reported being either completely unable or insufficiently able to meet basic needs. UNOCHA also pointed to the ‘increasingly desperate’ coping mechanisms to cover basic needs, including buying on credit, borrowing, and relying on protracted debt, remittances and humanitarian assistance. In Damascus governorate, 66 % of households reported relying on remittances, while particularly IDPs were relying on humanitarian aid.<sup>497</sup> Similarly, AP quoted Joseph Daher, a researcher and professor at the European University Institute (EUI), as observing that most people lived on remittances, humanitarian aid or worked in two or three jobs since they could not live on their wages alone.<sup>498</sup> Remittances sent to Syria from Syrians abroad were estimated at USD 5 to 7 (and sometimes up to 10) million per day, according to Ali Kanaan, a professor of finance and banking at the University of Damascus quoted by the pro-government newspaper Al-Watan.<sup>499</sup> By comparison, in the year 2010 – newer data are not available – personal remittances received in Syria amounted to USD 1.6 billion, according to World Bank estimates.<sup>500</sup>

The Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB) – a monetary threshold for what a family of five needs in a month to cover its essential needs, including goods, services, utilities, and resources – was SYP 1346 638 (USD 103,6) as of June 2023, according to the WFP. Compared to June 2022, this represented an increase of 74 %. At the same time, due to the high inflation, the monthly minimum wage corresponded to only 7 % of the costs of the MEB.<sup>501</sup> The average public sector monthly salary was USD 22, according to Etana Syria,<sup>502</sup> while Asharq Al-Awsat, a London-based Pan-Arab newspaper, stated that it was SYP 150 000 (roughly USD 11.5) ‘at

<sup>494</sup> Statistics Lebanon Ltd. and Austria, Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, Syria: Socio-Economic Survey 2022, 2022, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>495</sup> UN, Briefers Stress to Security Council Syria’s Worsening Situation Needs Fully Funded Humanitarian Response Plan, 12-Month Extension of Cross-Border Aid Mechanism, 29 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>496</sup> UNOCHA, 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), p. 88

<sup>497</sup> UNOCHA, 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), pp. 37, 39-40

<sup>498</sup> AP News, EXPLAINER: Why has Syria’s economic crisis hit a new low?, 5 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>499</sup> Al-Watan, Expatriates Remittances Help Syrian Economy, The Syrian Observer, 20 April 2023, [url](#)

<sup>500</sup> World Bank, Personal remittances, received (current US\$) - Syrian Arab Republic, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>501</sup> WFP Syria, Market Price Watch Bulletin June 2023, 7 August 2023, [url](#), pp. 1-2

<sup>502</sup> Etana Syria, Syria’s Economic Crisis in 2022 – A Year in Review, 9 January 2023, [url](#)



best'.<sup>503</sup> Etana Syria observed that since the price of a litre of fuel at the black market was USD 3, it was impossible for public sector employees to pay for a full tank of an average vehicle. Therefore, an increasing number of employees stayed at home rather than paying for transport to a job that earned them less than their expenses,<sup>504</sup> or were searching for other positions within Syria or abroad.<sup>505</sup> As of mid-August 2023, state salaries were increased to SYP 200 000 (USD 15.4), which pushed prices further up: while the subsidised price of 20 litres of gasoline increased from SYP 75 000 (USD 5.8) to SYP 160 000 (USD 12.3), the same amount of fuel was sold on the black market for more than SYP 300 000 (USD 23).<sup>506</sup>

In March 2023, Al-Monitor noted that several shopkeepers in Damascus who used to close their shops for some days at the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan left them open in 2023. One shop owner was quoted as saying that closure was impossible due to the inflation and that if he closed the shop now, he would not open again.<sup>507</sup> The city's director of social affairs confirmed an increase in the number of beggars, including children, in Damascus. Many children were collecting plastic and other materials from garbage containers to sell them for recycling and thus contribute to their families' income.<sup>508</sup> In a survey on the socio-economic situation in the cities of Damascus, Aleppo and Homs, 10 % of respondents from Damascus stated that their children worked / contributed to the household income.<sup>509</sup>

In an article from September 2022, Syria Direct quoted a public official in Damascus as saying that he was unable to register the youngest of his five children in kindergarten since he was unable to afford the fees and expenses. Paying for his oldest son's books and supplies for high school alone reportedly took nearly half of his monthly salary of SYP 175 000 (USD 39.50, according to the then current black market exchange rate).<sup>510</sup>

## 2.2.5. Food security

As of April 2023, 12.1 million people were food insecure, according to the WFP.<sup>511</sup> These included the 2 million people living in camps. Moreover, an additional 2.9 million people were estimated to be at risk of food insecurity. Food was the third-most reported unmet need in Damascus governorate, according to UNOCHA's 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview, while it was the most reported one in the majority of the other governorates.<sup>512</sup>

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<sup>503</sup> Asharq Al-Awsat, جنوب سوريا يقنات على تحويلات مغتربيه. [Southern Syria feeds on expatriate remittances], 25 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>504</sup> Etana Syria, Syria's Economic Crisis in 2022 – A Year in Review, 9 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>505</sup> Arab Weekly (The), As living costs surge, Syria's civil servants head for the exits, 23 September 2022, [url](#)

<sup>506</sup> Makki, D., Syria's economic freefall continues despite Arab League return, MEI (Middle East Institute), 16 August 2023, [url](#)

<sup>507</sup> Al-Monitor, Syrians in Damascus spend Ramadan in darkness, 28 March 2023, [url](#)

<sup>508</sup> Baladi News, Female Official from Damascus: Rising Percentage of Children Beggars in Capital, The Syrian Observer, 22 May 2023, [url](#)

<sup>509</sup> Statistics Lebanon Ltd. and Austria, Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, Syria: Socio-Economic Survey 2022, 2022, [url](#), p. 18

<sup>510</sup> Syria Direct, In Damascus, students go back to school and families go without, 6 September 2022, [url](#)

<sup>511</sup> WFP Syria, Situation Report 4 – April 2023, 7 June 2023, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>512</sup> UNOCHA, 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), pp. 39, 95



The price of the standard average food basket<sup>513</sup> in April 2023 was SYP 511 686 (USD 39.4) and therefore – for the first time in nine months – almost the same as in the previous month, but 61 % higher than in April 2022, according to WFP. In Damascus governorate, the price of an average food basket was slightly higher, at SYP 554 067 (USD 42.6).<sup>514</sup> On the other hand, Kassiou, the website of the Syrian People’s Will Party,<sup>515</sup> put the minimum monthly costs of basic food for a family of five at SYP 2 127 650 (USD 163.7) at the end of March 2023, based on the average prices of these basic food items<sup>516</sup> at local markets in Damascus. According to Kassiou, prices for these items increased between 3.7 % (rice<sup>517</sup>) and 67.5 % (meat<sup>518</sup>) from January 2023 to the end of March 2023.<sup>519</sup> The WFP, comparing prices per kilogram on a year-on-year basis, pointed to ‘soaring’ prices for rice (up by 129 %), sugar (up by 86 %) and lentils (up by 62 %) as of April 2023 and noted that the minimum wage covered only one-fifth of the food basket.<sup>520</sup> The price of chicken was SYP 50 000 (USD 3.8), according to El País, which quoted a resident of Damascus as saying that an average family needed about SYP 1 million (USD 76.9) to survive and twice as much if they wanted to buy meat or fresh fruit as well.<sup>521</sup> According to the latest numbers provided by WFP, as of June 2023, the price of the standard average food basket was SYP 530 028 (USD 40.8) and was slightly higher in Damascus governorate, with SYP 556 334 (USD 42.8).<sup>522</sup>

According to a survey conducted by the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) in six Syrian cities<sup>523</sup> in 2022, food accounted for the largest share of the total consumption of families in all six cities. In Damascus, the rate of spending on food was 42 % of families’ total consumption. 81 % of respondents in Damascus stated that their entire income (including money transfers and aid) was not sufficient to cover their basic needs.<sup>524</sup> According to a survey on the socio-economic situation in the cities of Damascus, Aleppo and Homs, conducted for the Country of Origin Information (COI) Unit of the Austrian Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, 43 % of respondents in Damascus said they ‘just about’ managed to buy sufficient food for their families, 21 % said the ‘hardly’ managed and 3 % said they were unable to do so. Only one

<sup>513</sup> The standard food basket includes food items necessary to provide 2,060 kcal per day for a family of 5 for one month. It includes 37kg bread, 19 kg rice, 19 kg lentils, 5 kg of sugar, and 7 litres of vegetable oil.

<sup>514</sup> WFP Syria, Market Price Watch Bulletin April 2023, 2 June 2023, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>515</sup> The party describes itself as the party of the Syrian working class and the ‘inheritor and the extension of the Syrian Communist Movement’. PWP, About PWP, 28 November 2013, [url](#)

<sup>516</sup> Food items included in Kassiou’s basic food basket are meat, sweets, cheese, eggs, vegetables, fruits, rice and bread. Kassiou calculated the content of the basic food basket on the daily need of about 2,400kcal per person.

<sup>517</sup> From SYP 945 (USD 0.12) to SYP 980 (USD 0.13) for 70g.

<sup>518</sup> From SYP 2,888 (USD 0.37) to SYP 4,838 (USD 0.63) for 75g of red meat and chicken.

<sup>519</sup> Kassiou, 5.6 Million is the Average Cost of Living for the Syrian Family at the Beginning of Ramadan, 26 March 2023, [url](#)

<sup>520</sup> WFP Syria, Market Price Watch Bulletin April 2023, 2 June 2023, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>521</sup> El País, In Syria, people fear hunger more than bombs, 30 March 2023, [url](#)

<sup>522</sup> WFP Syria, Market Price Watch Bulletin June 2023, 7 August 2023, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>523</sup> Damascus, Aleppo (both under GoS control), Qamishli, Raqqa (both under control of the Autonomous Administration of North Eastern Syrian, AANES), Azaz (controlled by the Syrian Interim Government, SIG), and Idlib (controlled by Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham, HTS). FES, Mechanisms of Exploitation: Economic and Social Changes in Syria During the Conflict, September 2022, [url](#), p. 18

<sup>524</sup> FES, Mechanisms of Exploitation: Economic and Social Changes in Syria During the Conflict, September 2022, [url](#), pp. 84-85



third (33 %) of respondents in Damascus said they were able to buy sufficient food for their families.<sup>525</sup>

UNOCHA pointed to harmful changes in food consumption due to the economic crisis, including buying less expensive or less preferable food, and/or reducing the size of their meals at least once a week. These practices were particularly common among female-headed households, where 19 % also reported that at least one household member would go to bed hungry due to a lack of food.<sup>526</sup> Similarly, Syria TV reported of residents of Damascus city suffering hunger,<sup>527</sup> and skipping meals as food had become too expensive.<sup>528</sup> Half of the privately-run bakeries in Damascus stopped working in December 2022 and about a third (30 %) were only working partially due to fuel shortages. One-fifth (20 %) were working despite high prices.<sup>529</sup>

In June 2023, the WFP announced that it would have to cut its assistance in Syria by about half – from 5.5 million to 3 million people – due to lack of funding and after exhausting other options, including the gradual downsizing of monthly rations to half the standard size.<sup>530</sup> Already in March 2023, Al-Araby, the Arab-language website of The New Arab, had reported of the exclusion of 5 000 families in Damascus from the food assistance programme.<sup>531</sup>

## 2.2.6. Housing, water, and sanitation

### (a) Housing

According to UN-Habitat estimates, about 328 000 houses have been destroyed or damaged beyond repair as a result of the war, while a further 600 000 up to 1 million buildings have been ‘moderately or lightly’ damaged. In Damascus governorate, the estimated total damage of housing units was 12 %, or 56 792 housing units.<sup>532</sup> The UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) pointed in its Annual Report for 2022 to the presence of explosives in 140 buildings in Damascus and Rural Damascus.<sup>533</sup>

UNOCHA explained that in Damascus governorate, shelter assistance was the fifth most reported unmet need.<sup>534</sup> According to the survey conducted by the FES in six Syrian cities in

<sup>525</sup> Statistics Lebanon Ltd. and Austria, Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, Syria: Socio-Economic Survey 2022, 2022, [url](#), p. 13

<sup>526</sup> UNOCHA, 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), p. 40

<sup>527</sup> Syria TV, “Darkness, Cold, Hunger, and no Transportation”: What’s Happening in Damascus?, The Syrian Observer, 8 December 2022, [url](#)

<sup>528</sup> Syria TV, "سكان في دمشق يحذفون وجبات غذائية من موائدهم" ["For fear of hunger". Damascus residents remove meals from their tables], 29 October 2022, [url](#)

<sup>529</sup> UNOCHA, Syria Humanitarian Update December 2022, 2 February 2023, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>530</sup> WFP, WFP forced to scale down operations in Syria, as donors gather in Brussels ahead of a major conference, 13 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>531</sup> Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, برنامج الأغذية العالمي يستبعد آلاف الأسر السورية [WFP excludes thousands of Syrian families ], 20 March 2023, [url](#)

<sup>532</sup> UN-Habitat, Considerations for a housing sector recovery framework in Syria, Urban Recover Framework, July 2022, [url](#), pp. 8, 18

<sup>533</sup> UNMAS, Annual Report 2022, 5 April 2023, [url](#), p. 107

<sup>534</sup> UNOCHA, 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), pp. 37-39



2022, the quality of housing and its assets, including the availability of electricity and furniture, was considered best in Damascus city.<sup>535</sup>

In January 2023, the opposition website Al-Souria Net, quoting from a government newspaper, reported about an increase in house rents by up to 200 %, especially in Damascus city. Thus, in some neighbourhoods, the rent for an apartment was SYP 500 000 (USD 38.5), while in a prestigious neighbourhood it amounted to up to SYP 2 million (USD 153.8). In comparison, the rent for a small (50sqm) apartment in Rural Damascus was SYP 200 000 (USD 15.4), and SYP 500 000 (USD 38.5) for an 80sqm apartment, according to a local real estate office quoted in the article.<sup>536</sup>

### **(b) Water and sanitation**

The UN Secretary-General noted in a May 2023 report that the availability of drinking water in the country had decreased by 40 % since the beginning of the conflict. Moreover, access to water was hampered by a lack of electricity and fuel to run water pumping stations, as well as drought. An outbreak of cholera with thousands of suspected cases<sup>537</sup> was related to poor water quality.<sup>538</sup> In this context, the pro-GoS Athr Press reported in September 2022 that some farmers in Damascus and its countryside used to irrigate their fields with sewage water. Due to this practice, after the cholera outbreak, authorities in Rural Damascus governorate ordered the destruction of several thousand square metres of vegetable crops to prevent them from being sold on Damascus' markets.<sup>539</sup>

According to the survey conducted by the FES in six Syrian cities in 2022, the availability of drinking water was rated lowest in Damascus city, while the sanitation system was considered good in all six cities, especially in Damascus.<sup>540</sup> Most families in all six cities resorted to buying water from private tanks to cope with the water shortage, further straining families' household budgets.<sup>541</sup> According to a survey on the socio-economic situation in the cities of Damascus, Aleppo and Homs, conducted for the Country of Origin Information Unit (COI) of the Austrian Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, 77 % of respondents in Damascus said that they had access to clean drinking water. The survey, however, did not further specify the modes of access.<sup>542</sup>

UNOCHA stated in a report of August 2022 that 35 % of households had to spend more than 5 % of their monthly income to pay for water; some sub-districts in Damascus governorate

<sup>535</sup> FES, Mechanisms of Exploitation: Economic and Social Changes in Syria During the Conflict, September 2022, [url](#), pp. 76-77

<sup>536</sup> Al-Souria Net, Newspaper: Increase of 200% in House Rents in Damascus, The Syrian Observer, 4 January 2023, [url](#)

<sup>537</sup> For further details, see below, sub-section [2.2.7](#) on health care.

<sup>538</sup> UN Security Council, Protection of civilians in armed conflict, S/2023/345, 12 May 2023, [url](#), para. 84

<sup>539</sup> Athr Press, Price of Leafy Greens Drops 80 Percent due to Cholera Outbreak, The Syrian Observer, 28 September 2022, [url](#)

<sup>540</sup> FES, Mechanisms of Exploitation: Economic and Social Changes in Syria During the Conflict, September 2022, [url](#), pp. 77-78

<sup>541</sup> FES, Mechanisms of Exploitation: Economic and Social Changes in Syria During the Conflict, September 2022, [url](#), p. 80

<sup>542</sup> Statistics Lebanon Ltd. and Austria, Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, Syria: Socio-Economic Survey 2022, 2022, [url](#), p. 19



were among the most affected.<sup>543</sup> In May 2023, the state news agency SANA and the Syrian media platform 7al reported that the General Company for Water Bottling – a company reportedly indirectly affiliated with the Ministry of Industry<sup>544</sup> – published a new price list for bottled drinking water: consumers were to pay from SYP 925 (USD 0.07) - for a bottle of half a litre – to SYP 5 800 (USD 0.4) for a 10 litre bottle of drinking water.<sup>545</sup> In February 2023, the German company Gauff Engineering reported on its website that it had been commissioned by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to conduct a ‘diagnosis and feasibility study for the rehabilitation of the Fijeh and Barada water supply’, two of the main water springs in Syria and source of drinking water for the population of Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates. These two water systems had been severely damaged between 2015 and 2017.<sup>546</sup>

## 2.2.7. Health care

According to a report of May 2023 by the UN Secretary-General on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, only 53 % of health centres were operational in Syria.<sup>547</sup> In December 2022, a representative of the World Health Organisation (WHO) noted that almost 30 % of the country’s public health facilities remained non-functional. He also pointed to the ‘chronic shortage of health care staff’.<sup>548</sup> According to WHO estimates, up to 50 % of the health workforce had left the country and the remaining health workers were unequally distributed across the country, with Damascus being among the governorates with a comparably higher ratio of health personnel per population than other governorates such as Hasaka, Raqqqa or Dar’a.<sup>549</sup>

The Syrian newspaper Al-Watan and the international news site Al-Araby Al-Jadeed reported on a lack of medical supplies in hospitals, including in Damascus city, requiring patients to purchase them in pharmacies.<sup>550</sup> Al-Araby Al-Jadeed noted that this put additional financial strain especially on patients with chronic or complex medical conditions, who in some cases stopped treatment as they could no longer afford it. Moreover, prices of medicines had reportedly been increased several times during the last months, including an increase by 50 % in March 2023.<sup>551</sup> A second 50 %-increase was decided in August 2023, probably motivated

<sup>543</sup> UNOCHA, Response to the Water Crisis in Syria - Critical Response and Funding Requirements, 15 September 2022, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>544</sup> 7al, “ترتفع كل صيف”، أسعار جديدة للمياه المعدنية في سوريا .. “Rises every summer”. New prices for mineral water in Syria], 25 May 2023, [url](#)

<sup>545</sup> SANA, لائحة أسعار جديدة للمياه المعدنية [New bottled water price list], 24 May 2023, [url](#)

<sup>546</sup> Gauff Engineering, Rehabilitation of the Fijeh and Barada drinking water supply systems in Syria, 17 February 2023, [url](#)

<sup>547</sup> UN Security Council, Protection of civilians in armed conflict, S/2023/345, 12 May 2023, [url](#), para. 23

<sup>548</sup> WHO, Cholera further exacerbates vulnerabilities in Syria, 8 December 2022, [url](#)

<sup>549</sup> WHO, Syrian Arab Republic: Public Health Situation Analysis (PHSA) Long Form, 18 August 2022, [url](#), pp. 2, 39

<sup>550</sup> Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, “سوداء أيام”... هياكل مستشفيات [Hospitals Structures... "Black days" for patients in Damascus and its countryside], 20 April 2023, [url](#); Al-Watan, “الكفوف وحتى الموضعي والمخدر «القسطرة» منها النفيس ابن في عامين منذ مفقودة ضرورية مواد زيتون ... للمشافي طبية ومستلزمات الأدوية يشتري المريض [The patient buys medicines and medical supplies for hospitals ... Zeitoun: Necessary materials have been missing for two years in Ibn al-Nafis, including catheters, local anaesthetics and even the gloves!], 23 August 2022, [url](#)

<sup>551</sup> Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, “سوداء أيام”... هياكل مستشفيات [Hospitals Structures... "Black days" for patients in Damascus and its countryside], 20 April 2023, [url](#)



by a lack of hard currency and raw materials necessary for the production of medicines.<sup>552</sup> According to UNOCHA's Multi-Sector Needs Assessment (MSNA), 94 % of households in Damascus (among other governorates) stated that high costs for consultations, laboratory and diagnostic procedures were a key barrier to health access.<sup>553</sup>

In the context of a survey on the socio-economic situation in the cities of Damascus, Aleppo and Homs, respondents in Damascus indicated that access to a doctor, medical specialist and hospital was generally available. However, a significant proportion of respondents could not afford the services: 33 % could not afford the services of a doctor, 43 % could not afford the services of a medical specialist and 41 % could not afford treatment/surgery in a hospital.<sup>554</sup>

The Damascus-based state-owned newspaper Tishreen reported in May 2023 on a decreasing birth rate and an increase in requests for abortions, which were explained with high costs of living and a low income. Moreover, some doctors reportedly preferred to perform a caesarean section without indication as the prices for the operation were higher than for assistance at a natural birth. Prices reportedly ranged from SYP 800 000 (USD 61.5) to 6 million (USD 461.5) for a C-section compared with SYP 400 000 (USD 30.8) to 2 million (USD 153.9) for a natural birth.<sup>555</sup> The Syrian news site Baladi News quoted a specialist in gynaecology explaining that part of the price depended on what hospitals charged for accommodation and other services provided to the patients. Moreover, Baladi News noted that public hospitals suffered from a shortage of anaesthesiologists, who either left the country or preferred to work in private hospitals due to the higher salaries.<sup>556</sup>

According to the UN Secretary-General, as at the start of April 2023, more than 111 000 cases of watery diarrhoea had been recorded across all 14 governorates since the start of a cholera outbreak in August 2022.<sup>557</sup> The Ministry of Health (MoH) confirmed the first cases of cholera in Aleppo governorate on 10<sup>558</sup> September 2022.<sup>559</sup> In Damascus governorate, 43 suspected cases were recorded as of 19 March 2023.<sup>560</sup>

## 2.2.8. Education

According to the USDOS, the GoS granted free education to children with Syrian citizenship from primary school to (and including) university. While noncitizen children could attend public schools as well, they needed prior permission from the Ministry of Education and stateless

<sup>552</sup> Makki, D., Syria's economic freefall continues despite Arab League return, MEI (Middle East Institute), 16 August 2023, [url](#)

<sup>553</sup> UNOCHA, 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2022, [url](#), p. 102

<sup>554</sup> Statistics Lebanon Ltd. and Austria, Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, Syria: Socio-Economic Survey 2022, 2022, [url](#), pp. 23-25

<sup>555</sup> Tishreen, 6 "ملايين ليرة تكلفة" القيصرية 6 في بعض المشافي.. وأطباء يكشفون عن ازدياد لافت في محاولات الإجهاض هرباً من القادم " [6 Million Liras is the cost of "caesarean section" in some hospitals. And doctors reveal a remarkable increase in abortion attempts to escape the next], 29 May 2023, [url](#)

<sup>556</sup> Baladi News, ارتفاع أسعار عمليات الولادة القيصرية في سوريا [Prices of short deliveries rise in Syria], 4 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>557</sup> UN Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General [S/2023/464], 22 June 2023, [url](#), para. 13

<sup>558</sup> 6 September, according to another source. Syria Indicator, Investigation Uncovers Link between Damascus Vegetables and Cholera and Cancer, 7 July 2023, [url](#)

<sup>559</sup> The Syrian Ministry of Health confirmed the first cholera cases in Aleppo governorate on 10 September 2022. WHO, Syrian Arab Republic: WHO Syria Situation Report #16, Cholera Outbreak: W48 (27 November-3 December 2022), 8 December 2022, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>560</sup> UNOCHA et al., Whole of Syria: Cholera outbreak situation report No. 15, 3 April 2023, [url](#), p. 2





Kurds were excluded from receiving a degree that documented their academic achievements.<sup>561</sup>

Save the Children explained in a report of 2022 that the number of pupils per classroom in Damascus was 101 children, compared to the national average of 54 children per classroom.<sup>562</sup> On the other hand, NPA quoted teachers from different schools in Damascus saying that they had 39 and 40 pupils in class, respectively. While some parents reportedly turned to private kindergartens and schools to avoid overcrowded classrooms, these were costly. A resident of Damascus reportedly paid SYP 10 million or up to USD 2 000<sup>563</sup> per year for four children in kindergarten and school up to grade three, while another resident paid nearly SYP 6 million (USD 461.5) per year for three children at a private school.<sup>564</sup> In an article of September 2022, Syria Direct pointed to high costs for school supplies and textbooks, noting that, for example, the price for textbooks for 11<sup>th</sup> grade and baccalaureate students had increased by 36 % and 30 %, respectively, compared with 2021.<sup>565</sup>

WFP reported in its Annual Country Report for the year 2022 on its three-component school feeding programme, with one of the programme's components operational in three governorates, including Damascus.<sup>566</sup> UNHCR pointed to remedial classes and homework cafés for children that were offered in the organisation's community centres.<sup>567</sup> As of December 2022, UNHCR ran 93 community centres in all 14 governorates, including four centres in Damascus.<sup>568</sup>

For further information on access to education at country-level, see section [1.4](#).

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<sup>561</sup> USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 83

<sup>562</sup> Save the Children, Education Interrupted: Prioritising early recovery in the education sector in Syria, 2022, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>563</sup> USD 769.2, according to the informal market exchange rate of 26 July 2023. Karam Shaar, Hourly black market exchange rates and gold prices in Syria by city, n.d. [url](#), accessed 26 July 2023

<sup>564</sup> NPA, Overcrowded classrooms, new curricula in Syrian government schools, 5 October 2022, [url](#)

<sup>565</sup> Syria Direct, In Damascus, students go back to school and families go without, 6 September 2022, [url](#)

<sup>566</sup> WFP, Syrian Arab Republic Annual Country Report 2022 - Country Strategic Plan 2022 – 2023, 8 April 2023, [url](#), p. 19

<sup>567</sup> UNHCR, Education in Syria, January – December 2022, 1 May 2023, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>568</sup> UNHCR, Community Centres in Syria, January – December 2022, 1 May 2023, [url](#), p. 2







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AlMustafa, M., email correspondence 11 July 2023; online interview 17 July 2023. Muhsen. AlMustafa is a researcher at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies. He is also a former Non-resident Fellow at TIMEP focusing on security, military and governance in Syria. He has published a number of studies and articles on the Syrian military establishment, legal issues, gender and elections in the context of the Syrian army and constitution. He previously participated in Tawazun, the Index of Arab Civil-Military Relations launched by the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center.

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## Annex 2: Terms of Reference

The research should focus on the period between August 2022 – August 2023. Background information and older trends should be kept very brief and crosslinked as much as possible with previous reports published: [Targeting of Individuals \(September 2022\)](#), [Targeting of individuals \(March 2020\)](#), and [Socio-economic situation in Damascus city \(August 2022\)](#).

Research should cover the following:

### 1. Profiles

- Persons perceived to be opposing the Government of Syria (GoS)**
  - Which profiles are perceived as opposing the government?
  - Treatment of persons perceived as opposing the government
  - Treatment of family members
- Persons fearing recruitment by the government armed forces, military draft evaders, deserters and defectors**
  - Changes to the Syrian military service law, including legal status of conscientious objectors
  - Recruitment and deployment strategies of conscripts and reservists
  - Demobilisation of conscripts and reservists
  - Implementation in practice of legal exemptions and amnesties
  - treatment of draft evaders, deserters and defectors including of family members
- Trafficking in human beings**
  - Profiles subjected to trafficking in human beings
  - Actors involved in trafficking in human beings
  - Availability of state protection
- Children**
  - Targeting of children by different actors
  - Situation of children in IDP camps
  - Child recruitment by armed groups
  - Access to education

### 2. Socio-economic situation in Damascus city

Chapter should focus on Damascus city. The chapter should address internal mobility issues relating to accessibility (travel and admittance) and key socioeconomic indicators: housing, food security, water and sanitation, health care, education, livelihood opportunities such as employment.

- Mobility and admittance**





**Socio-economic overview**

- Economy
- Humanitarian situation and assistance
- Employment
- Poverty
- Food security
- Housing, water, and sanitation
- Health care
- Education



