



Home Office

Country Information and Guidance

Syria: Security and humanitarian situation

December 2014

Preface

This document provides guidance to Home Office decision makers on handling claims made by nationals/residents of – as well as country of origin information (COI) about - Syria. This includes whether claims are likely to justify the granting of asylum, humanitarian protection or discretionary leave and whether – in the event of a claim being refused – it is likely to be certifiable as ‘clearly unfounded’ under s94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.

Decision makers must consider claims on an individual basis, taking into account the case specific facts and all relevant evidence, including: the guidance contained with this document; the available COI; any applicable caselaw; and the Home Office casework guidance in relation to relevant policies.

Within this instruction, links to specific guidance are those on the Home Office’s internal system. Public versions of these documents are available at <https://www.gov.uk/immigration-operational-guidance/asylum-policy>.

Country Information

The COI within this document has been compiled from a wide range of external information sources (usually) published in English. Consideration has been given to the relevance, reliability, accuracy, objectivity, currency, transparency and traceability of the information and wherever possible attempts have been made to corroborate the information used across independent sources, to ensure accuracy. All sources cited have been referenced in footnotes. It has been researched and presented with reference to the [Common EU \[European Union\] Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information \(COI\)](#), dated April 2008, and the European Asylum Support Office’s research guidelines, [Country of Origin Information report methodology](#), dated July 2012.

Feedback

Our goal is to continuously improve the guidance and information we provide. Therefore, if you would like to comment on this document, please [e-mail us](#).

Independent Advisory Group on Country Information

The Independent Advisory Group on Country Information (IAGCI) was set up in March 2009 by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration to make recommendations to him about the content of the Home Office’s COI material. The IAGCI welcomes feedback on the Home Office’s COI material. Information about the IAGCI’s work and a list of the COI documents which have been reviewed by the IAGCI can be found on the Independent Chief Inspector’s website at <http://icinspector.independent.gov.uk/country-information-reviews/>

It is not the function of the IAGCI to endorse any Home Office material, procedures or policy.

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Section 1: Guidance

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1.1 Basis of Claim

- 1.1.1 That the general security or humanitarian situation is so severe as to make removal a breach of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).
and/or
- 1.1.2 That the security situation in Syria presents a real risk which threatens life or person such that removal would be in breach of Article 15(c) of European Council Directive 2004/83/EC of 29 April 2004 ('the Qualification Directive');

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1.2 Summary of Issues

- ▶ Is the person Syrian
- ▶ Is the person's account a credible one?
- ▶ Does the person have a well founded fear of persecution?
- ▶ Does the person fall to be excluded from a grant of protection?
- ▶ Is there indiscriminate violence in Syria which is at such a level that substantial grounds exist for believing that the person, solely by being present there, faces a real risk of harm which threatens their life or person?
- ▶ Are those at risk able to internally relocate within Syria?

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1.3 Consideration of Issues

Is the person Syrian?

- 1.3.1 Decision makers must ensure that each asylum application has been checked against previous UK visa applications. Where an asylum application has been biometrically matched to a previous visa application, details should already be in the Home Office file. In all other cases, the decision maker should satisfy themselves through CRS database checks that there is no match to a non-biometric visa. Asylum applications matches to visas should be investigated prior to the asylum interview, including obtaining the Visa Application Form (VAF) from the visa post that processed the application.
- 1.3.2 Following completion of standard actions, decision makers should if necessary consider the need to conduct language analysis testing. An Equality Act exemption came into effect on 20 February 2013, allowing the targeted testing of applicants claiming Syrian nationality. This is because there are many different nationalities involved in the Syrian conflict who may claim to be Syrian nationals.

See also:

- ▶ [Country Information](#)

and Asylum Instruction on:

- ▶ [Language Analysis](#)

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Is the person's account a credible one?

- 1.3.3 Decision makers must consider whether the material facts relating to the person's account of their experiences in Syria are reasonably detailed, internally consistent (e.g. oral testimony, written statements) as well as being externally credible (i.e. consistent with generally known facts and the country information). Decision makers should take into account all mitigating reasons why a person is inconsistent or unable to provide details of material facts, such as age; gender; mental or emotional trauma; fear and/or mistrust of authorities; education, feelings of shame; painful memories, particularly those of a sexual nature, and cultural implications.

See also:

- ▶ [Country Information](#)

and Asylum Instruction on:

- ▶ [Considering Protection \(Asylum\) Claims and Assessing Credibility](#)

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Does the person have a well founded fear of persecution?

- 1.3.4 A state of civil instability and/or where law and order has broken down does not of itself give rise to a well-founded fear of persecution for a Convention reason.
- 1.3.5 In the country guidance case of [KB \(Failed asylum seekers and forced returnees\) Syria CG \[2012\] UKUT 426 \(IAC\)](#) (21 December 2012), the Upper Tribunal found that "in the context of the extremely high level of human rights abuses currently occurring in Syria, a regime which appears increasingly concerned to crush any sign of resistance, it is likely that a failed asylum seeker or forced returnee would, in general, on arrival face a real risk of arrest and detention and of serious mistreatment during that detention as a result of imputed political opinion. That is sufficient to qualify for refugee protection. The position might be otherwise in the case of someone who, notwithstanding a failed claim for asylum, would still be perceived on return to Syria as a supporter of the Assad regime."
- 1.3.6 Since the determination of [KB](#) in 2012, Syria's civil war has worsened both in terms of the intensity and scale of human rights abuses and their spread throughout the country. The current situation is that Assad supporters (or those perceived as such), may also be at potential risk of persecution - on account of their actual or imputed political opinion - particularly in areas controlled by armed opposition groups.
- 1.3.7 Armed opposition groups intentionally target civilian localities either in retaliation for government operations or owing to those localities' perceived support of the Government. UNHCR identifies amongst its risk profiles "Real or perceived supporters of the Syrian Government, including for example Government officials; civilians of urban neighbourhoods, towns or villages (perceived to be) supporting the Government; family members of (perceived) Government supporters" and "Persons (perceived to be) opposing armed opposition groups and Kurdish armed groups in areas under the de facto control of such armed groups".

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Does the person fall to be excluded from a grant of protection?

- 1.3.8 All sides of the conflict are committing war crimes and attacks against civilians. This includes committing massacres, torture, rape, hostage-taking and enforced disappearance. Government forces have also been responsible for executions, indiscriminate shelling, barrel bomb attacks, large scale use of chemical weapons, chlorine gas attacks and airstrikes, recruiting and using children in hostilities and

targeting civilians, causing further deterioration in human rights and the humanitarian situation.

- 1.3.9 If there are serious reasons for considering that a person was involved in or associated with such acts, or with the groups concerned, decision makers must consider whether one of the exclusion clauses is applicable, seeking advice from a Senior Caseworker if necessary. Where a person is excluded from protection under the Refugee Convention they are also excluded from Humanitarian protection but if there is a real risk of a breach of Article 3 ECHR or Article 15(c) of the Qualification Directive they may be entitled to Discretionary leave or Restricted leave.

See also:

- ▶ [Country Information](#)

and Asylum Instructions on:

- ▶ [Considering Protection \(Asylum\) Claims and Assessing Credibility](#)
- ▶ [Exclusion: Article 1F of the Refugee Convention](#)

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Is there indiscriminate violence in Syria which is at such a level that substantial grounds exist for believing that the person, solely by being present there, faces a real risk of harm which threatens their life or person?

- 1.3.10 In light of the [KB](#) caselaw, it is only in cases where there are reasonable grounds for believing that the person would on return to Syria be perceived to be a supporter of the Assad regime and they do not otherwise qualify under the Refugee Convention, that decision makers need to make an assessment of the need for protection firstly under Article 3 ECHR and if that is unsuccessful, under Article 15(c) of the Qualification Directive as all other forced returnees will qualify for refugee status.

Article 3 ECHR

- 1.3.11 Decision makers need to make an assessment of whether removal of the person to Syria would be a breach of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) on the facts of the case.
- 1.3.12 Where a person who on return would be at real risk of ill-treatment contrary to Article 3 due to direct or targeted actions by the parties to the conflict, it will almost always be because of a Refugee Convention defined reason.
- 1.3.13 Decision makers must refer to the latest available country information (see [Country Information](#) and [Annex A](#) for maps and current resources) and consider how humanitarian conditions in Syria, as evidenced in the latest available country of origin information, would impact upon that person if they were returned.
- 1.3.14 In the case of [Sufi & Elmi v United Kingdom \(ECtHR\) 28 June 2011. Applications 8319/07 and 11449/07](#), the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), considered the situation where dire humanitarian conditions, widespread displacement and the breakdown of social, political and economic infrastructures were predominantly due to the direct and indirect actions of the parties to the conflict, who were using indiscriminate methods of warfare in densely populated urban areas with no regard to the safety of the civilian population. It found that regard should be had to a person's ability to cater for his most basic needs, such as food, hygiene and shelter, his

vulnerability to ill-treatment and the prospect of his situation improving within a reasonable time-frame.

- 1.3.15 A third of Syria's population is displaced and the total number of people in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria has reached 11 million. Mass daily displacements continue to occur, including multiple displacements, civilians are denied humanitarian assistance and starvation is being used as a weapon of war. All parties to the conflict have been implicated in targeting vital services resulting in interruptions to the supply of safe drinking water and electricity.
- 1.3.16 Both government forces and non-state armed groups have sought to deprive the overwhelmingly civilian population within besieged areas of the basic necessities of life, by cutting water and power supplies, denying access to food supplies, medicine and medical care, and preventing the movement of people into and from the areas under siege. Internally displaced families who have lost their sources of income, the urban poor, subsistence farmers, small-scale herders, casual labourers and petty traders are reportedly among the most affected groups.
- 1.3.17 Although the whole of Syria is affected, the majority of those in need of assistance are, according to reports, concentrated in the governorates of Aleppo, Rural Damascus and Idlib. Over 4.7 million people are living in hard-to-reach areas for humanitarian actors, in addition to 241,000 who are trapped in besieged areas, cut off from basic supplies and largely inaccessible to humanitarian actors. At the end of 2013 one fifth of the population were found to live in abject poverty, with households unable to meet even the most basic need for food, and, in the case of those living in conflict/besieged areas, facing hunger, malnutrition and starvation. Since then this figure is likely to have increased.
- 1.3.18 Decision makers must consider on the facts of the case whether a returnee may face a real risk of Article 3 harm as a result of the humanitarian crisis, by reason of his or her individual vulnerability. Factors to be taken into account include age, gender, ill- health, the effect on children, other family circumstances, and available support structures. The humanitarian crisis, which continues to deteriorate, is such that in most cases, it will reach the Article 3 ECHR threshold.

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Article 15(c) QD

- 1.3.19 Unlike Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), Article 15(c) of the Qualification Directive applies only to civilians, who must be genuine non-combatants and not those who are party to the conflict. This could include former combatants who have genuinely and permanently renounced armed activity.
- 1.3.20 An assessment of protection needs under Article 15(c) should only take place if the person is unable to establish a need for refugee protection, or for humanitarian protection on Article 3 ECHR.
- 1.3.21 Decision makers must refer to the latest available country information (see [Country Information](#) and [Annex A](#) for maps and current resources). Areas under the control, or with a presence, of armed opposition groups are subjected to shelling by government forces inflicting heavy losses of lives and massive destruction of both public infrastructure and private property. Non-State armed groups commit massacres and war crimes, including murder, execution without due process, torture, hostage-taking, violations of international humanitarian law tantamount to enforced disappearance, rape and sexual violence, recruiting and using children in hostilities and attacking protected objects. Groups have intentionally targeted civilian localities either in retaliation for government operations or owing to those localities' perceived support of the

Government. The authorities are reported to prevent food and medical supplies reaching the population in these areas. Similarly, armed opposition groups have targeted or laid siege on government-held areas.

- 1.3.22 The armed hostilities have left no area within Syria unaffected by the conflict and the resulting massive humanitarian consequences. There are countless frontlines and the level of violence is particularly fierce in and around major cities and along main lines of communication.
- 1.3.23 In general, the consistent pattern and level of indiscriminate violence in the main cities and areas of fighting is at such a level that substantial grounds exist for believing that a person, solely by being present there for any length of time, faces a real risk of harm which threatens their life or person.
- 1.3.24 Even where there may be no general Article 15(c) risk in other areas of Syria, decision makers must consider whether there are particular factors relevant to the person's individual circumstances which might nevertheless place them at risk. Such factors might include – but not limited to - the person's age, gender, health etc.
- 1.3.25 Decision makers must consider carefully whether the existence of such factors means that the harm they fear is not in fact indiscriminate, but targeted, if not at them personally, for Refugee Convention reasons.
- 1.3.26 In Elgafaji v. Staatssecretaris van Justitie, C-465/07, European Union: European Court of Justice, 17 February 2009 ('Elgafaji'), the European Court of Justice (ECJ) held that 'the more the [person] is able to show that [they are] specifically affected by reason of factors particular to [their] personal circumstances, the lower the level of indiscriminate violence required for [them] to be eligible for subsidiary protection' (see Elgafaji, paragraph 39).

See also:

- ▶ [Country Information](#) and [Annex A](#) for maps and current resources

and Asylum Instructions on:

- ▶ [Considering Protection \(Asylum\) Claims and Assessing Credibility](#)
- ▶ [Humanitarian Protection](#)
- ▶ [Exclusion: Article 1F of the Refugee Convention](#)

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Are those at risk able to internally relocate within Syria?

- 1.3.27 The consistent high level and unpredictability of violence - particularly in and around major cities and along main lines of communication - severely restricts movement throughout the country. Fighting has caused the temporary suspension of commercial flights, closed roads, impeded access to land border crossing points and led to the closure of some border crossings.
- 1.3.28 The government relies on security checkpoints throughout the country. Opposition groups also control checkpoints. Civilians have been prevented from crossing checkpoints and turned back to unsafe areas where their lives continue to be at risk. Men are reported to be unable to move around the country for fear of arrest and disappearance at checkpoints, with women being responsible for travelling between areas to seek food risking physical assault, arrest and abduction by both government and non-government forces. In some areas under non-governmental control, some

armed groups have placed movement restrictions on women, confining them to their homes.

- 1.3.29 Freedom of movement for government supporters or assumed supporters is highly restricted in rebel-held areas and in areas under siege movement is extremely restricted. Both the regime and the opposition highly discourage internal movement and travel. The violence, coupled with significant general societal discrimination, has led to severely restricted freedom of movement for women in many areas.
- 1.3.30 The possibility of internal relocation to another part of Syria is extremely unlikely to be possible or reasonable. This is due to firstly the highly limited ability to move, and move safely, from one part of Syria to another part of the country; secondly the unpredictability of the violence coupled with the humanitarian situation for those internally displaced is likely to mean that the person may not be able to reasonably stay in that part of the country.
- 1.3.31 However decision makers must consider the application of internal relocation on the facts of the case taking into full account the general circumstances prevailing in the intended place of relocation and the circumstances of the person. Where internal relocation is suggested, decision makers must also consider accessibility of the intended place of relocation.

See also:

- ▶ [Country Information](#)

and Asylum Instructions on:

- ▶ [Considering Protection \(Asylum\) Claims and Assessing Credibility](#)
- ▶ [Internal Relocation](#)

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1.4 Policy Summary

- Caselaw has established that it is likely that a failed asylum seeker or forced returnee would, in general, on return to Syria face a real risk of arrest and detention and of serious mistreatment during that detention as a result of imputed political opinion. The position might be otherwise in the case of someone who, notwithstanding a failed claim for asylum, would still be perceived on return to Syria as a supporter of the Assad regime.
- Most Syrian nationals are therefore likely to qualify for refugee protection unless excluded.
- Where a person is excluded from refugee protection they will also be excluded from Humanitarian Protection but may be entitled to Discretionary leave or Restricted Leave.
- The humanitarian crisis, which continues to deteriorate, is such that for most returnees removal would be a breach of Article 3 ECHR.
- The level of indiscriminate violence in the main cities and areas of fighting in Syria is at such a level that substantial grounds exist for believing that a person, solely by being present there for any length of time, faces a real risk of harm which threatens their life or person.

- **Internal relocation within Syria to escape any risk from indiscriminate violence is extremely unlikely to be possible or reasonable because of the highly limited ability to move, and move safely, from one part of Syria to another part of the country and the unpredictability of the violence in areas of proposed relocation coupled with the humanitarian situation for those internally displaced.**
- **Where a claim falls to be refused, it is unlikely to be certifiable as ‘clearly unfounded’ under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002**

See also the Asylum Instructions on:

- ▶ [Non-Suspensive Appeals: Certification Under Section 94 of the NIA Act 2002](#)
- ▶ [Humanitarian Protection](#)
- ▶ [Discretionary Leave](#)

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Section 2: Information

Date Updated: 16 December 2014

This section should be read in conjunction with Annex A which provides sources of the latest available maps and resources on the current conflict and humanitarian situation.

2.1 Background

2.1.1 The BBC noted that:

“The conflict has its roots in protests that erupted in March 2011 in the southern city of Deraa after the arrest and torture of some teenagers who painted revolutionary slogans on a school wall. When security forces opened fire on demonstrators, killing several, more took to the streets. The unrest triggered nationwide protests demanding President Assad's resignation. The government use of military force to crush the dissent merely hardened the protesters' resolve. By July 2011, hundreds of thousands were taking to the streets in towns and cities across the country.”¹

“Opposition supporters eventually began to take up arms, first to defend themselves and later to expel security forces from their local areas. The country descended into civil war as rebel brigades battled government forces for control of cities, towns and the countryside. Fighting reached the capital Damascus and second city of Aleppo in 2012.”²

“The opposition remains fractious and deeply divided, unable to agree much apart from the need to end President Assad's rule. On the political front, alliances have been formed to gain international recognition. But they have been weakened by power struggles, a lack of support from grassroots activists and rebels, and limited financial and military assistance.”³

“The armed rebellion has evolved significantly, with as many as 1,000 groups commanding an estimated 100,000 fighters. Secular moderates are outnumbered by Islamists and jihadists linked to al-Qaeda, whose brutal tactics have caused widespread concern and triggered rebel infighting.”⁴ It also reported that “A UN commission of inquiry has been investigating all alleged violations of international human rights law since March 2011. It has evidence showing that both sides have committed war crimes including torture, hostage-taking, murder and execution”.⁵

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¹ BBC News. Syria: The story of the conflict. 14 March 2014. 1. Protests, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-26116868> [Accessed 24 October 2014]

² BBC News. Syria: The story of the conflict. 14 March 2014. 2. Violence, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-26116868> [Accessed 24 October 2014]

³ BBC News. Syria: The story of the conflict. 14 March 2014. 3. The opposition, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-26116868> [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁴ BBC News. Syria: The story of the conflict. 14 March 2014. 3. The opposition, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-26116868> [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁵ BBC News. Syria: The story of the conflict, 14 March 2014. 4. Massacre, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-26116868> [Accessed 30 October 2014]

2.2 Timeline

2.2.1 For a timeline of events, visit the BBC's [Syria Profile](#).⁶

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2.3 The Protagonists

Overview

- 2.3.1. A May 2014 policy briefing from the Brookings Institution explains that “The conflict in Syria has become an intensely complex affair, incorporating overlapping political, religious, sectarian, ethnic, and tribal narratives. The anti-government insurgency currently involves approximately 100,000-120,000 fighters—roughly 7,000-10,000 of whom are non-Syrian nationals—divided among over 1,000 distinct armed units. A majority of these factions are further organized into an assortment of coalitions, fronts, and temporary local alliances known as ‘military operations rooms.’ Meanwhile, government forces—principally the Syrian Arab Army (SAA)—have both encouraged and adapted to the war’s sectarian overtones, primarily deploying Shia and Alawi units in front-line operations alongside increasingly professionalized paramilitaries and Shia militias composed largely of foreign fighters. All the while, both sides receive considerable levels of support from foreign states, organizations, and individuals”.⁷
- 2.3.2. The same source further notes that “The foregoing refers only to the dynamic of Sunni militias fighting against the Syrian government. The conflict, however, is by no means two-dimensional. Other elements include, but are not limited to, the role of the Kurdish autonomist group, the Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, and its armed wings, the Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) and Yekîneyên Parastina Jin; the eruption of fighting against the al-Qaeda-disavowed Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS); the interest-specific role of Lebanon-based Hizballah in backing President Bashar al-Assad; the damaging role of frequently incompatible or mutually conflicting policies of opposition-supporting Gulf states; and increasingly evident divisions within the political and military components of the two main Western-backed opposition structures, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (or Syrian National Coalition; SNC) and the Supreme Joint Military Command Council (SMC).⁸
- 2.3.3. The August 2014 Report of the UN Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic notes that “Armed groups have been simultaneously engaged on multiple fronts fighting Government forces, ISIS and among themselves. Lacking the necessary combat capabilities, they failed to reverse their adversaries’ advances in areas previously part of their major strongholds in Rif Damascus, eastern Aleppo and Dayr az Zawr governorates. Weakened by infighting, they have suffered large defections to ISIS owing to the latter’s superior financial and operational capabilities. [...] Despite multiple restructuring initiatives, they failed to integrate under a cohesive structure and leadership owing to ideological, political, tribal and personal divergences. Efforts by

⁶ BBC News. Country Profile. Time Line. 16 September 2014 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14703995> [Accessed 27 October 2014]

⁷ Brookings Institute (Charles Lister), Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape, 19 May 2014 <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/05/19%20syria%20military%20landscape%20lister/syria%20military%20landscape%20english.pdf> [accessed 30 October 2014]

⁸ Brookings Institute (Charles Lister), Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape, 19 May 2014 <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/05/19%20syria%20military%20landscape%20lister/syria%20military%20landscape%20english.pdf> [accessed 30 October 2014]

external backers to reinforce the so-called “vetted moderate armed opposition” failed to reverse the dominance of radical armed groups”.⁹

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State armed groups

2.3.4. The UN Human Rights Council’s Commission of Inquiry on Syria noted in its November 2011 report:

‘The Syrian Arab Armed Forces comprise the Army, the Navy and the Air Force. They are responsible for defending the national territory and protecting the State from internal threats. Numbering around 300,000, the armed forces are organized into three corps with a total of 12 divisions: seven armoured, three mechanized, one Republican Guard and the Special Forces. Elite units include the 10,000-man Republican Guard, under the President’s control, tasked to counter any threat from dissident military forces, and the 20,000-man Fourth Division, which is commanded by Maher Al Assad, the President’s brother.

‘The State security apparatus is reported to be large and effective, with a multitude of security forces and intelligence agencies that have overlapping missions. They play a powerful role in Syrian society, monitoring and repressing opposition to the Government. The internal security apparatus includes police forces under the Ministry of the Interior, Syrian Military Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, the National Security Bureau, the Political Security Directorate and the General Intelligence Directorate. The latter consists of 25,000 members formally under the Ministry of the Interior but reporting directly to the President and his inner circle. It includes Internal Security (also known as the State Security Service), External Security and the Palestine Division.’¹⁰

2.3.5. According to a May 2014 policy briefing from the Brookings Institution, “Prior to the outbreak of the revolution in Syria, the SAA’s [Syrian Arab Army] total active deployable manpower was estimated at 295,000 personnel. As of April 1, 2014, the SAA had incurred at least 35,601 fatalities, which when combined with a reasonable ratio of 3 wounded personnel for every soldier killed and approximately 50,000 defections, suggests the SAA presently commands roughly 125,000 personnel.”¹¹

2.3.6. In its August 2014 report the Commission of Inquiry further noted:

‘The capacity of Government forces has been enhanced through significant organizational, strategic and tactical readjustments. The Government is increasingly capable of massing all elements of military power during offensive operations targeting priority objectives. It succeeded in holding positions in governorates where it is unable or unwilling to conduct offensives, such as Idlib and Dara’a. As part of its strategy for controlling the population, it has combined long-lasting sieges with heavy aerial and artillery bombardment, leading to dozens of forced truces in Homs and Damascus and the surrounding countryside. Forced truces, a mark of the Government’s strategy of

⁹ United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. 13 August 2014. Paragraphs 13 and 15
http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf [Accessed 31 October 2014]

¹⁰ United Nations Human Rights Council. Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 23 November 2011(17th special session) paragraphs 18-19
<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/IICISyria/Pages/Documentation.aspx> [Accessed 24 October 2014]

¹¹ Brookings Institute (Charles Lister), Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria’s Military Landscape, 19 May 2014
<http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/05/19%20syria%20military%20landscape%20listers/syria%20military%20landscape%20english.pdf> [accessed 30 October 2014]

siege and bombardment, are often followed by mass arrests of men of fighting age, many of whom disappear.¹²

'The Government continues to rely on technical, training and logistical assistance provided by external allies. Government forces recently experienced shortages of combat manpower as Iraqi militia returned to fight in Iraq, which curtailed their ability to simultaneously deploy troops on multiple fronts.'¹³

National Defence Forces (NDF)

2.3.7. The Syrian government set up the NDF as an umbrella group for pro-government militias, local 'home guard' groups and popular committees opposing the anti-regime insurgency. Local groups have been trained, reorganised, and armed under the auspices of the NDF, and provide support to the regular armed forces by carrying out patrols, mounting checkpoints and sometimes engaging in combat operations. A US Senate committee heard testimony in March 2014 that the NDF's strength was about 60,000, and that its roles include holding ground, and guarding supply lines and installations, freeing up the Syrian Arab Army to carry out major combat operations. It was also claimed that training was provided by Iranian 'military advisers'.¹⁴

2.3.8. According to a May 2014 policy briefing from the Brookings Institution, "The NDF now constitutes as many as 100,000 personnel, which when combined with Hizballah (which has deployed as many as 3,500-7,000 at any one time) and other pro government militias (which constitute at least several thousand fighters), has represented a crucial loyalist infantry manpower boost".¹⁵

Qods Force (Iran)

2.3.9. The Qods Force, a unit of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) that carries out covert operations outside Iran, is alleged by the US to have had a role in the Syrian drive to suppress anti-regime unrest that flared in March 2011 and then escalated throughout the country. An executive order signed by President Barack Obama in April 2011 imposed sanctions on the Qods Force, which was said to be providing "material support" for the crackdown. The US had previously imposed sanctions on the Qods Force for providing support to the Taliban and other groups. The European Union also sanctioned the Qods Force in 2011, accusing the unit of providing "technical assistance, equipment and support to the Syrian security services to repress civilian protest movements". In September 2012, the head of the IRGC, Mohammad Ali Jafari, said that members of the Qods Force were in Syria, but denied they were involved in military work. He said that only "intellectual and advisory help" had been provided. In February

¹²United Nations Human Rights Council. Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. 13 August 2014. Paragraph 11 Page 4.
http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf [Accessed 24 October 2014]

¹³United Nations Human Rights Council Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. 13 August 2014. Paragraph 12 Page 4.
http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf [Accessed 24 October 2014]

¹⁴Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Security and Foreign Forces 16 October 2014. Subscription Source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

¹⁵Brookings Institute (Charles Lister), Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape, 19 May 2014
<http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/05/19%20syria%20military%20landscape%20lister/syria%20military%20landscape%20english.pdf> [accessed 30 October 2014]

2013, a senior commander of the Qods Force, General Hassan Shateri, was killed while travelling from Syria to Lebanon.¹⁶

Hizbullah (Lebanon)

- 2.3.10. Forces from the Lebanese Shia militia, Hizbullah, have been deployed in Syria in support of the Assad regime, fighting alongside the Syrian army in operations against the insurgents. With the Syrian army weakened by defections, the regime has relied increasingly on irregular forces such as Hizbullah and local paramilitary groups under the ambit of the National Defence Forces, to fight the insurgents. In June 2013 Hizbullah fighters played an important role in seizing the city of Qusair, near the Lebanese border, that had been held by rebels. Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah initially denied, in late 2012, that his forces were in Syria confronting rebels and opposition groups. Accurate information is unavailable as to the strength of the Hizbullah forces deployed in Syria - estimates ranged from 2,000 upwards.¹⁷
- 2.3.11. The Brookings Institution reported in May 2014 that Hizbullah "Contributes anywhere from 3,500-7,000 personnel to fighting opposition forces inside Syria at any one time".¹⁸
- 2.3.12. The Congressional Research Service, noted that "As of September 2014, Hezbollah fighters remained engaged in operations in the Qalamoun region northwest of Damascus, where the departure of some Iraqi paramilitary forces could place additional pressure on the group. The London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights in August reported that at least 561 Hezbollah fighters had been killed in Syria since early 2013. A senior Israeli military official in March 2014 stated that Hezbollah currently maintains 4,000 to 5,000 fighters in Syria. Over the past year, Hezbollah has worked with the Syrian military to protect regime supply lines by helping to clear rebel-held towns along the Damascus-Homs stretch of the M-5 highway."¹⁹

Shia Militia Groups (Iraq)

- 2.3.13. Iraqi Shia fighters from certain militant groups are reported to have been active in Syria, operating in support of the Assad regime. US think tank the Washington Institute, in an article in June 2013, said that the fighters were part of the Damascus-based Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA), which it described as one of the most significant international brigades fighting on the side of the Assad regime, with support provided by Iran's elite Qods Force.²⁰
- 2.3.14. According to a September 2014 Congressional Research Service report "Analysts estimate that there are between 2,000 and 5,000 Iraqi Shia fighting in Syria on behalf of the Syrian government. Many hail from Iraqi Shia political and militia groups including Asa'ib Ahl al Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah. Members identify their objective as the defense of Shia holy sites such as the tomb of Sayyida Zeinab, the granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammad, in southern Damascus. Other reports describe these groups

¹⁶ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Security and Foreign Forces 16 October 2014. Subscription Source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

¹⁷ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Security and Foreign Forces. 16 October 2014. Subscription Source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

¹⁸ Brookings Institution, A Glossary of Forces in the Syrian Civil War, 27 May 2014 <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/brookings-now/posts/2014/05/a-glossary-of-forces-in-the-syrian-civil-war> [accessed 30 October 2014]

¹⁹ Congressional Research Service, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 17 September 2014, Pro-Asad Forces <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/232511.pdf> [accessed 30 October 2014]

²⁰ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Security and Foreign Forces 16 October 2014. Subscription Source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

as assuming a broad operational role, noting that militias have formed sniper teams, led ambushes, established checkpoints, and provided infantry support for Syrian armored units. It is difficult to assess the motivations of individual Iraqi fighters in Syria or determine whether Asad's survival is their primary goal. Some of the fighters appear to be young volunteers driven by a desire to protect Shia holy sites, while others are trained militiamen who previously fought coalition forces in Iraq. Reports suggest that Iraqi fighters receive training in Iran before being flown in small batches into Syria, and that they work closely with Lebanese Hezbollah. However, it is unclear who ultimately exercises command and control over these militias. Clashes between Iraqi and local Syrian militias in mid-2013 resulted in some Iraqi combatants refusing to fight under Syrian command. Recent gains by ISIL in Iraq have prompted some Iraqi fighters in Syria to return home and join local militias".²¹

Suqur al-Sahara (Desert Falcons).

2.3.15. Suqur al-Sahara is a paramilitary pro-government force mainly active in Homs, Kasab, and Latakia areas. Initially, the Desert Falcons operated in desert border areas with Iraq and Jordan to counter supply networks for groups opposing the Syrian government. The militia is composed by former military officers, veterans, and volunteers drawn from other pro-government militant groups. It is considered an elite force, specialising in ambushes and special operations' missions equipped with light and medium weapons. In June 2013, the Desert Falcons took part in the battle for the capture of the town of al-Qaryatayan in Homs province.²²

Liwa Abu al-Fadhal al-Abbas (LAFA)

2.3.16. The al-Abbas Brigade is the main Shia Syrian militant group that operates in Syria, mainly around Rif Dimashq and Aleppo. The group is made up of a mixture of a small number of native Syrian Shias with a majority of foreign Shia Muslim fighters. The militia claims its role is to defend the Sayida Zaynab Shrine and surrounding Shia populated neighbourhoods located in southern Damascus, it presents itself as a Shia militant organisation, and it utilises Shia Islamic slogans to push its image of group "protecting" Shia Syrians. Although its role appears largely defensive rather than offensive according to this narrative, LAFA consists of around 10,000 fighters originating from Iranian-backed organizations, such as Iraq's Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, it has uniformed militants, and its propaganda openly identifies the group with the Lebanese Hezbollah. Moreover, there have been several reports citing Hezbollah members who fight or have fought with LAFA. While LAFA describes its enemies as "Takfiris" (infidels), it does not specifically target Sunni Muslims as a whole. Instead, the group presents all Syrian rebels as "Wahhabists", "terrorists" and/or "extremists". There are also indications that, instead of operating as an independent entity, the group is in fact being utilised as a unit of the Syrian regular army. Pictures of LAFA members posing with Syrian army and military armoured vehicles posted on pro-LAFA social media demonstrate some level of co-ordination.²³

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²¹ Congressional Research Service, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 17 September 2014, Pro-Asad Forces <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/232511.pdf> [accessed 30 October 2014]

²² Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Non-State Armed Groups. Updated 16 October 2014. Subscription source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

²³ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Non-State Armed Groups. Updated 16 October 2014. Subscription source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

Non-state armed groups

Free Syrian Army (FSA)

- 2.3.17. The FSA is an active Syrian political militant group whose principle aim is to sustain an armed insurgency within Syria in order to overthrow the government of President Bashar al-Assad. The group was officially founded on 29 July 2011 by a former colonel in the Syrian Air Force, Riyad al-Asad, who defected from the state security forces as a result of their allegedly brutal activities in targeting unarmed protesters during the political uprising in the country, which began in mid-March 2011. The FSA's first recorded attack came on 20 September 2011 when its fighters shot dead a soldier near the city of Homs in the Homs governorate. Three days later, the FSA merged with the Free Officer's Movement, and subsequently developed into a relatively organised militant movement capable of inflicting significant damage and casualties on security forces loyal to Assad. Although the FSA initially had no established links with any Syrian opposition groups, it began limited co-ordination with the main political opposition movement, the Syrian National Council (SNC) in December 2011, before including its forces within the Western-backed National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces on its formation in November 2012. Meanwhile, as the Syrian conflict progressed, the FSA's armed forces became increasingly dispersed throughout the country's 13 governorates and the FSA increasingly came to represent a label of affiliation more than a formally structured group. Although it remains the largest single armed force within the armed opposition, the emergence and expansion of militant Islamist groups - whose often superior arms and training have seen it claim several major strategic victories - has undermined the FSA's influence on the insurgency's progress.²⁴ According to a May 2014 policy briefing from the Brookings Institution, "While the Free Syrian Army (FSA) has not represented a distinct military organization for some time, it remains an important umbrella term for those groups and coalitions generally perceived to be acting in the interest of the exiled SNC opposition".²⁵
- 2.3.18. The Congressional Research Service reports in September 2014 that "As of September 2014, the term "Free Syrian Army" does not correspond to an organized command and control structure with national reach and unified procurement, intelligence, logistics, or sustainment capabilities. [...] At present, a number of fighting groups actively refer to themselves as part of a broader "Free Syrian Army" while carrying on operations independently".²⁶

Islamic State (formerly Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant: ISIL)

- 2.3.19. The Islamic State is the latest name for the group dominated by Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), a Sunni militant Islamist group that was founded in Iraq in October 2004 when the leader of Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, pledged fealty to Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and changed the name of his group. AQI subsequently formed a coalition with a few smaller jihadist factions, rebranding itself as the Islamic State of Iraq in 2007. In 2013, this designation was changed once more to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) to reflect the group's increasing activity inside Syria. ISIL operates mainly in northern and eastern Syria, where it controls a number of cities,

²⁴ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Non-State Armed Groups. Updated 16 October 2014. Subscription source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

²⁵ Brookings Institute (Charles Lister), Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape, 19 May 2014 <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/05/19%20syria%20military%20landscape%20lister/syria%20military%20landscape%20english.pdf> [accessed 30 October 2014]

²⁶ Congressional Research Service, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 17 September 2014, Syrian Opposition Coalition and Select Armed Elements p. 4 <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/232511.pdf> [accessed 30 October 2014]

including al-Raqqa, but also around Damascus, as well as in Iraq's Anbar, Baghdad, Salaheddine, Diyala, and other provinces. It has become notorious in Iraq for its use of indiscriminate, mass-casualty attacks, often including suicide bombers. In Syria, such tactics have most often been used against government targets, but by early 2014 ISIL was also using suicide attacks against rival Islamist factions when it was fighting for control of territory. In April 2013, ISIL claimed it was merging with Jabhat al-Nusra, but Jabhat al-Nusra, as well as Al-Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri himself, indicated that no such merger had been agreed. Zawahiri repeatedly ordered al-Baghdadi to dissolve ISIL, withdraw its militants from Syria, and pledge allegiance to Jabhat al-Nusra, the officially-sanctioned Al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. However, al-Baghdadi's refusal to abide by al-Zawahiri's orders pushed the dispute to a tipping point in February 2014, when Al-Qaeda's central command officially disowned ISIL and stated that the group was no longer an affiliate. Baghdadi's move exacerbated a breakdown in the relationship between the ISIL and Syrian local insurgent groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra, which has materialised during the months of infighting and multiple unsuccessful attempts to resolve the disagreement. On 29 June 2014, in the midst of the offensive that ISIL had launched in Iraq, the group's official spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, announced the establishment of the khilafa (or caliphate) in territory running from the Syrian governorate of Aleppo in the west to the Iraqi province of Diyala in the east. Adnani also announced that henceforth the official name for ISIL would be "the Islamic State", and stated that ISIL emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was the khalifa (or caliph) of this new structure.²⁷

2.3.20. According to a May 2014 policy briefing from the Brookings Institution, "Jabhat al-Nusra's comparatively pragmatic, localized, and socially-integrated approach has secured it both al-Qaeda affiliate status and strong levels of popular support—or at least acceptance—inside Syria. ISIS's actions, meanwhile, have left it increasingly perceived as imperious, self-interested, and unconcerned with taking part in a broader revolution. Its consistent brutality and refusal to participate in Islamic-court mediation efforts proposed by the opposition led to its disavowal by al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri on February 2, 2014. Given their different interests and approaches, it was unsurprising, yet extremely significant, that moderate insurgents opened up a front against ISIS in northern and eastern Syria in early January 2014. This new confrontation has had a pronounced impact on the dynamics of the conflict inside Syria. While initial anti-ISIS operations were launched by the SNC-linked Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) and the comparatively moderate Jaish al-Mujahideen, the subsequent involvement of the Islamic Front and then Jabhat al-Nusra has led to the near total isolation of ISIS within the Syrian insurgent theatre".²⁸

2.3.21. The August 2014 Report of the Commission of Inquiry notes that "Recent gains by ISIS in Iraq boosted its military capabilities, seriously affecting the power balance inside the Syrian Arab Republic, both materially and psychologically. Far better organized and financed owing to the seizure of considerable resources and military equipment in Iraq, the group has consolidated control over large areas in northern and eastern governorates, in particular oil-rich Dayr az Zawr. ISIS is increasingly battling anti-Government groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra, Kurdish armed groups, and, to a lesser extent, Government forces. Besides attracting more experienced and ideologically motivated foreign fighters since it proclaimed itself an Islamic caliphate, ISIS has drawn an increasing number of Syrians to its ranks, particularly after forming alliances with

²⁷ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Non-State Armed Groups. Updated 16 October 2014. Subscription source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

²⁸ Brookings Institute (Charles Lister), Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape, 19 May 2014 <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/05/19%20syria%20military%20landscape%20lister/syria%20military%20landscape%20english.pdf> [accessed 30 October 2014]

local tribes in Ar Raqqa, Al Hasakah and Dayr az Zawr governorates. To curb popular discontent over its harsh governance methods, ISIS has adopted a strategy based on the establishment of order through a combination of brutality and the provision of essential services, including security and employment”.²⁹

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Islamic Front

2.3.22. The Islamic Front is a coalition of seven Islamist groups that agreed to merge, so dissolving, at least nominally, the individual brigades. The Front includes some of the strongest groups involved in the Syrian conflict, which ideologically span those that have called for the establishment of a moderate state based on Shari'a (Islamic Law) to those that have advocated a strict implementation of Shari'a law. In November 2013, the Islamic Front released a founding charter outlining its goals, rejecting representative democracy and secularism, and advocating the establishment of an Islamic State ruled by a Majlis al-Shura (a consultative body) instead. Brigades belonging to the Islamic Front include: Suqur al-Sham; Liwa al-Tawhid; Jaysh al-Islam; Ahrar al-Sham; Ansar al-Sham; Liwa al-Haq; and the Kurdish Islamic Front, which is considered a small fighting force with less than 1,000 fighters. The Islamic Front is internally led by a Shari'a Council, whose members are leading figures and commanders of the constituent brigades. Although the Islamic Front remains one of the main actors in the Syrian conflict, the merger between the seven brigades has not been a smooth process, and the Islamic Front might well be considered an umbrella movement rather than a unified entity. From early January 2014, the Islamic Front, alongside the FSA and another Islamist coalition, the Army of Mujahedeen, has been involved in fighting against the Islamic State (formerly the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant: ISIL) in northern Syria. The infighting has strongly weakened the cohesion of the Islamic Front. Between January and March 2014, several members of the Islamist coalition, especially fighters from Suqour al-Sham, left in protest at the war with ISIL. Moreover, the Front has also suffered several battlefield losses at the hands of ISIL, which expelled its militants from Raqqa City in February 2014, and has lost several important Front commanders to ISIL assassinations.³⁰

2.3.23. A May 2014 policy briefing from the Brookings Institution reports that “Whatever the long-term viability of the Islamic Front’s structural unity, the sheer military clout of its 50,000-60,000 fighters makes it a pivotal actor inside Syria”.³¹

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Suqur al-Sham (Falcons of the Levant Brigade), also known as Sham Falcons Brigade.

2.3.24. Suqur al-Sham was formed in the village of Sarja in Idlib's Jabal al-Zawiya region in September 2011. The group is considered a moderate Salafist/Jihadist group, and is among the largest insurgent groups in northern Syria and a leading force within the

²⁹ United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. 13 August 2014. Paragraphs 16 and 17
http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf [Accessed 31 October 2014]

³⁰ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Non-State Armed Groups. Updated 16 October 2014. Subscription source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

³¹ Brookings Institute (Charles Lister), Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape, 19 May 2014
<http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/05/19%20syria%20military%20landscape%20lister/syria%20military%20landscape%20english.pdf> [accessed 30 October 2014]

Islamic Front. The group's leader, Ahmed Abu Issa, is also the overall leader of the coalition. Suqur al-Sham currently consists of approximately 9,000 fighters, mainly based in Idlib, but also in Aleppo and Rif Dimashq. The group was initially aligned with the Free Syrian Army (FSA). However, in December 2013 Ahmed Abu Issa released a statement announcing that his brigade was no longer part of the FSA. The group was also a founding member of the Syrian Islamic Front alongside Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya. Suqur al-Sham has been severely weakened by the infighting between ISIL and several Syrian rebel factions that broke out in January 2014. On 21 January, a leading religious figure within the group, Abu Abderrahman al-Sarmini, announced his defection to protest the fighting with ISIL, and in February its military commander, Abu Hussein al-Dik, was killed by ISIL militants. Additionally, Suqur al-Sham's most powerful founding brigade, the Suyouf al-Had Brigade, defected in February to join a new group called Jaysh al-Sham (Army of the Levant). The latter includes former members of both ISIL and Suqur al-Sham, including the leading brigade Liwaa Dawod, which declared their neutrality in the rebel infighting. Ideologically, the group is openly Islamist, it has used suicide bombers as a tactic, and it frames its propaganda in religious terms. However, the group also advocates goals such as protecting demonstrators and toppling the Syrian regime by making extensive use of a nationalist terminology not heard among other Salafist/jihadist groups.³²

Liwa al-Tawhid (Battalion of Monotheism), al-Tawhid Brigade.

2.3.25. The group was founded in July 2012 as a merger of militias from the northern Aleppo countryside. Initially, the group was composed of three brigades: the Fursan al-Jabal Brigade, the Daret Izza Brigade, and the Ahrar al-Shamal Brigade. However, in August 2013 Liwa al-Tawhid reorganised its internal structure into nearly 30 sub-factions operating in Aleppo area. By several accounts, Liwa al-Tawhid is the strongest group in Aleppo province consisting of around 11,000 fighters in total. Similar to other brigades within the Islamic Front, Liwa al-Tawhid has also suffered heavy losses at the hand of ISIL. In February 2014, ISIL militants assassinated one of the group's most important commanders, Adnan Bakkour, in a VBIED [vehicle-borne improvised explosive device] attack in northern Aleppo.

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Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam), formerly know as Liwa al-Islam or Islam Brigade.

2.3.26. The group was founded in mid-2011, and quickly emerged as the leading rebel group in the Ghouta area of Damascus. The group rose to prominence after claiming the 18 July 2012 IED attack on the National Security Bureau's headquarters in Damascus, which killed several Syrian government security officials, including the minister of defence at the time, General Dawoud Rajiha, and the deputy defence minister, Assef Shawkat. On 6 October 2012, the group reportedly captured two 9K33 Osa SAM systems in Eastern Ghouta, which were reportedly used in July 2013 to shoot down a Syrian Mil Mi-8 aircraft. In September 2013, Liwa al-Islam's leader, Zahran Alloush, announced the merger of 50 Islamist militias operating in Damascus suburbs into the new group, Jaysh al-Islam. According to Alloush, who is a former imprisoned Salafist activist released by Syrian authorities in 2011, the group was formed "to achieve unity among the units of the mujahedeen and avoid the effects produced by the divisions within the National Coalition". The bulk of the group is represented by the 30 brigades that constituted Liwa al-Islam, but the group has also absorbed other major brigades, such as Liwa Fath al-Sham, Liwa Tawhid al-Islam, Liwa al-Ansar, Islamic Army Brigades, Ghouta Shield

³² Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Non-State Armed Groups. Updated 16 October 2014. Subscription source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

Brigades, and Omar bin Khattab Brigades. After its reorganisation, Alloush aligned Liwa al-Islam with the Islamic Front, in which he is also the nominal military commander. Liwa al-Islam continues to operate mainly in Damascus area, especially in Douma and Eastern Ghouta, and it currently consists of approximately 5,000-7,000 fighters.³³

Ansar al-Sham (Partisans of the Levant), Katiba Ansar al-Sham.

2.3.27. The group was founded in September 2012 by a Latakian [region of north west Syria] veteran of the Afghan Jihad, Abu Omar al-Jamil, and it is made up of Syrian fighters from the North Latakia and Idlib provinces. The group formed out of 11 core brigades, including its current sub-faction, al-Zahir Baybars Battalion, and according to many accounts it has over 2,500 fighters at its disposal. Since its inception, Ansar al-Sham has played a crucial role in providing aid delivery in the areas where its presence is strongest, and according to local sources it has supplanted the international aid organisations in delivering humanitarian supplies to those areas. Its military commander is a Chechen fighter, Abu Musa al-Shishani, but the group consists of a mixture of local army defectors, workers, farmers and local artisans. Ideologically, the group advocates a Sunni Islamic State within Syria's border, and it rejects secularism. The group is not officially aligned with the FSA, although co-operation on an ad-hoc basis does exist between local commanders. With regard to the infighting between ISIL and other rebel groups, Ansar al-Sham has officially maintained a neutral position, although most of the group's commanders have condemned ISIL's conduct. This ambiguous and conciliatory approach, coupled with its social outreach, has reportedly made the group particularly attractive to large segments of Sunni Syrians, allowing the group to grow in strength in the last three years. In November 2013, the group allied itself with the other Islamism groups in the Islamic Front.³⁴

Liwa al-Haqq (Battalion of Truth).

2.3.28. Liwa al-Haqq was formed in Homs in August 2012 by several Islamist factions previously part of the Homs Revolutionaries Union (Ittihad Thuwwar Homs). The group originally consisted of four groups and several sub-factions, but it gradually grew more homogenous to become the second-largest faction in Homs after Kateeb al-Farouq. Liwa al-Haqq is reportedly divided into 10 divisions, which together control several thousand fighters. Ideologically, Liwa al-Haqq depicts itself as an Islamist group, but its leader, Abu Rateb, has declared that its battalions are "open to any group that fulfills basic demands of decency and morals". Before the conflict, Abu Rateb was a businessman, and he was unknown in political circles. The military wing of the group is headed by Abder Rahman Suweis, a former paratrooper officer in the Syrian Army who spent 11 years in prison, charged with being a member of outlawed Islamist group Hezb al-Tahrir. He was released in 2011 in an amnesty at the beginning of the Syrian conflict. The group had joined the Syrian Islamic Front coalition in December 2012, but after the latter's dissolution, it joined the Islamic Front. After the Syrian Army's advancements in Homs in April 2014, Liwa al-Haqq has reportedly been weakened by heavy losses within its ranks.³⁵

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³³ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Non-State Armed Groups. Updated 16 October 2014. Subscription source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

³⁴ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Non-State Armed Groups. Updated 16 October 2014. Subscription source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

³⁵ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Non-State Armed Groups. Updated 16 October 2014. Subscription source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, or the Movement of the Free People of Islamic Syria.

2.3.29. Originally formed as Ahrar al-Sham, before merging with three other groups and adopting the new name in February 2013. Also known as Kataib Ahrar al-Sham or the Battalions of the Free People of Syria. Also dominates the Islamic Front coalition³⁶.

2.3.30. Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya is a Sunni militant Islamist group that operates in Syria, and aims to overthrow the government of President Bashar al-Assad and replace it with a Sunni Islamic state ruled by Shari'a (Islamic law). Under the name Ahrar al-Sham, the group first announced its existence in January 2012, but comments made by the group's fighters suggest it had been operationally active in Idlib governorate since late 2011. The group's formation occurred against the backdrop of a popular uprising by Syria's majority Sunni Muslim population against the government of President Bashar al-Assad - a member of Syria's Shia Muslim minority - which had begun in mid-March 2011. In its initial statements, the group framed the Syrian revolution in explicitly sectarian terms, claiming that Sunni Muslim "mujahideen" were waging jihad against a "Safavid plot" by Shia Muslim Iran to project its power into the Levant. Although its initial six months of operations saw Ahrar al-Sham largely active in Idlib and carrying out predominantly ambush-type attacks with improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and brief small-arms engagements, the latter half of 2012 and early 2013 saw the group expand its operational capabilities considerably, and in 2013 Ahrar al-Sham claimed to operate a total of 83 katiba (battalions) extending throughout Syria's Idlib, Aleppo, Latakia, Tartus, Deraa, Al-Raqqa, Al-Hasakah, and Rif Dimashq governorates, and in the capital Damascus³⁷.

2.3.31. Large-scale and sustained assaults on significant security force and government targets had become increasingly prominent in the group's operations, with several notable seizures made between October 2012 and January 2013. Ahrar al-Sham announced the formation of a coalition of 11 Syrian militant Islamist groups, known as Al-Jabha al-Islamiyya al-Suriyya or the Syrian Islamic Front, on 21 December 2012. The alliance became a leading militant player within the extensive Syrian insurgency. On 1 February 2013, Ahrar al-Sham announced its merger with three constituent groups within the Syrian Islamic Front to form Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya or the Movement of the Free People of Islamic Syria. In November 2013, the Syrian Islamic Front coalition was dissolved in favour of a new coalition known simply as the Islamic Front. Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya is currently the leading group within the Islamic Front, and it has been involved in almost all of the major rebel victories over the Syrian regular army. Since December 2013, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya has been involved in the infighting between ISIL and other Islamist rebel groups. On 23 February 2014, one of the top figures of the group, Abu Khalid al-Suri, was killed in a suicide attack in Aleppo carried out by an ISIL militant. Al-Suri was reportedly sent to Syria by Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri to mediate the dispute.³⁸

2.3.32. A May 2014 policy briefing from the Brookings Institution reports that Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya is "'Avowedly Salafi" and known to coordinate with Syrian al Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra."³⁹ According to a September 2014 Congressional Research

³⁶ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Non-State Armed Groups. Updated 16 October 2014. Subscription source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

³⁷ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Non-State Armed Groups. Updated 16 October 2014. Subscription source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

³⁸ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Non-State Armed Groups. Updated 16 October 2014. Subscription source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

³⁹ Brookings Institution, A Glossary of Forces in the Syrian Civil War, 27 May 2014

<http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/brookings-now/posts/2014/05/a-glossary-of-forces-in-the-syrian-civil-war> [accessed 30 October 2014]

Service report, "On September 9, an explosion and fire killed many of the leaders of the powerful Ahrar al Sham Islamic Movement at a meeting in Idlib province, leading many observers to speculate about the group's future, in spite of its size and capabilities".⁴⁰

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Jabhat al-Nusra

2.3.33. Jabhat al-Nusra is a Sunni militant Islamist group that operates in Syria. The existence of the group first became public with the release of a video statement on militant Islamist internet forums on 24 January 2012, in which its leader, Golani, announced the group's emergence amid the anti-government uprising throughout Syria that had begun in March 2011. The group's primary objective is the overthrow of the government of President Bashar al-Assad and the creation of an Islamic state under Shari'a (Islamic law). The group is active throughout Syria and has a particularly strong presence in the governorates of Aleppo, Idlib, Deir ez Zour, and Deraa, and in the towns surrounding Damascus. Since its first claimed attack - a suicide bombing that killed 26 people in Damascus on 6 January 2012 - Jabhat al-Nusra has become the key perpetrator of suicide attacks and mass-casualty operations in the Syrian anti-government uprising. Although primarily armed with varying models of small-arms, RPGs, and other light arms, Jabhat al-Nusra's increasingly frequent leading role in sustained assaults and seizures of fixed military positions and facilities from the latter half of 2012 and throughout 2013 has seen the group take possession of large numbers of heavy weapons, and has been seen to fight with main battle tanks.⁴¹

2.3.34. As such, the group has come to present a considerable threat to localised security forces in Syria and to the sustainability of government control across several regions of the country, especially in the north and east. Jabhat al-Nusra's increasingly prominent profile within the Syrian conflict saw the US government designate the group in December 2012 as an alias of AQI, and therefore as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation. In addition to claiming the group had at that point been responsible for over 600 attacks in Syria, the designation accused the group of having been founded by former AQI operatives and of receiving direct guidance from AQI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Husseini al-Qurashi. This was seemingly confirmed on 9 April 2013 when a Qurashi statement claimed that AQI had sent Golani to Syria in July 2011 to form a militant group with purported AQI militants already present inside Syria, and that henceforth the group would be subsumed within AQI and be known together as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham. The following day, a seven-minute audio message saw Golani swear allegiance to Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, but Golani claimed to have been given no warning of the previous day's AQI statement, and insisted his group would remain known as Jabhat al-Nusra. This separation between the two entities has been borne out in practice, since the two groups have followed different policies towards other Islamist factions, and in some cases have even fought with one another, for example in Raqqa in January 2014. The group's extensive geographical dispersion throughout Syria and its increasingly prominent role in the seizure of territory and military facilities has seen Jabhat al-Nusra become one of the most significant militant threats to the long-term survival of President Assad.⁴²

⁴⁰ Congressional Research Service, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 17 September 2014, Armed Islamist Groups p. 7 <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/232511.pdf> [accessed 30 October 2014]

⁴¹ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Non-State Armed Groups. Updated 16 October 2014. Subscription source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁴² Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Non-State Armed Groups. Updated 16 October 2014. Subscription source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

2.3.35. According to a May 2014 policy briefing from the Brookings Institution “As an al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra’s hardline ideology is clear, but since mid-to-late 2012, the group has demonstrated a surprising level of pragmatism in terms of moderating its behavior and limiting its immediate ideological objectives. In keeping with its allegiance to al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra aims, in the long term, to establish an Islamic state in Syria as a stepping stone to liberating Jerusalem and establishing an Islamic Caliphate. In the short term, however, the group is operating at a very local level while paying particular attention to maintaining healthy relations with civilians and moderate rebels. It has also banned the imposition of hudud punishments during ‘war,’ thereby distinguishing itself from the more brutal ISIS, whose extreme behaviour and refusal to cooperate with moderate armed groups led to its disavowal by al-Qaeda in February 2014.”⁴³

Khorasan Group

2.3.36. According to a September 2014 BBC report, the Khorasan Group - a name apparently coined by the US - is believed to be made up of about 50 veteran militants from Afghanistan and Pakistan, which jihadists refer to as Khorasan, as well as North Africa and Chechnya. US officials said they had been sent to Syria by al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, not to fight the government of President Bashar al-Assad but to "develop external attacks, construct and test improvised explosive devices and recruit Westerners to conduct operations". The militants are thought to have embedded themselves within al-Qaeda's local affiliate, the al-Nusra Front, and obtained land and buildings in its strongholds.⁴⁴

Jaysh al-Muhajireen wa al-Ansar (JMWA)

2.3.37. JMWA is a Jihadist group made up of foreign fighters from Chechen, Russia, Ukraine, Crimea, and other areas of the Caucasus active in Syria, which considers itself aligned to the Caucasus Emirate (CE). Although the late CE leader, Dokku Umarov, had expressed his opposition to North Caucasian fighters travelling into Syria to wage Jihad in November 2012, the high number and the increasing prestige of Chechen jihadists in Syria pushed the CE to modify its stance by mid-2013. At the beginning, the group was led by Umar Shishani, a veteran of the Georgian army (although his name is al-Shishani, which means the Chechen). However, in May 2013 tensions started to grow within the group after Umar al-Shishani was appointed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ISIL military emir in northern region, which include Aleppo, Raqqa, northern Idlib, and Latakia provinces. In August 2013, Umar al-Shishani expelled a group of 27 Chechen fighters led by his second in command, Sayfullah Shishani, who rejected the possibility to pledge allegiance to ISIL. In November 2013, Umar al-Shishani and a group of his fighters officially swore allegiance to the ISIL and left JMWA. The leadership of the group was then put into the hands of Salahuddin al-Shishani, who is considered the official CE representative in Syria and tasked with maintaining a certain degree of independence of the Chechen fighters in Syria. Umar al-Shishani explained his move by asserting that ISIL leader al-Baghdadi had agreed to help Chechen fighters in the North Caucasus to wage Jihad. The group size is estimated to be around 1,000 fighters, the vast majority of which are foreign fighters. The group had played key roles in the early phases of the Battle of Aleppo in September 2012 against the Syrian regular army in the

⁴³ Brookings Institute (Charles Lister), Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape, 19 May 2014 <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/05/19%20syria%20military%20landscape%20lister/syria%20military%20landscape%20english.pdf> [accessed 30 October 2014]

⁴⁴ BBC News. What is the Khorasan Group? 24 September 2014. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29350271> [Accessed 7 November 2014]

August 2013 capture of the Menagh Air Base in Aleppo and in the 2013 offensive in Latakia province.⁴⁵

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Jamaat Jund ash-Sham

2.3.38. Jamaat Jund ash-Sham is a battalion that was based in rural areas of Homs province and in Qalaat al-Hosn (Krak des Chevaliers), established by Lebanese fighters but consisting of a mixture of Syrian, Lebanese, and Levantines fighters. The group is considered the official Syrian branch of the Lebanese Jund al-Sham. In Syria, it has taken part in fighting in the Homs area alongside Jabhat al-Nusra militants, including at least three reported suicide attacks on regular army checkpoints. Jamaat Jund ash-Sham has also been accused of having perpetrated indiscriminate killings of Syrian Christians in Wasi al-Nasara, Homs province, in August 2013. Ideologically, the group advocates the establishment of the Caliphate in Syria. With regard to the dispute between the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) group and Jabhat al-Nusra, Jamaat Jund ash-Sham officially took a neutral stance and declared its support for the mediation efforts. Following the Syrian Army's seizure of its base in Qalaat al-Hosn and other key localities in the vicinity, in which its leader Abu Suleiman was killed, the group has largely ceased its operations.⁴⁶

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Harakat Sham al-Islam

2.3.39. Harakat Sham al-Islam is a jihadist group composed mainly of Moroccan fighters, with a minor component of Syrians. The group was founded in August 2013 by Afghan Jihad veteran Ibrahim bin Shakran, who, along with Ahmed Mizouz and Mohamed Alami, had been detained in the US detention camp in Guantanamo Bay. Harakat Sham al-Islam is mainly based in Latakia province, it has an estimated 500 militants fighting in its ranks, and is divided into four divisions, including the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigade that played an important role in the April 2014 rebel offensive in Latakia province. The group also has a presence in Aleppo, and it had fought mainly alongside Jabhat al-Nusra, including during the October 2013 offensive on Aleppo central prison. Harakat Sham al-Islam might be considered an independent jihadist group, but according to Syrian sources, the group is closer to Jabhat al-Nusra than ISIL.⁴⁷

Suqur al-Izz

2.3.40. Suqur al-Izz is a foreign fighters' battalion formed and composed by Saudi and Arabian Peninsula fighters. The group is active in Latakia area, where during the 2013 summer offensive in the province had fought alongside ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra. In February 2014, in the midst of the dispute between ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra, the group reportedly joined the latter, although no official pledge of allegiance has been made. The exact number of Suqur al-Izz fighters is unknown. The group, similarly to other jihadist groups operating in the country, has also been engaged in social outreach activities for the local population. Images released by Suqur militants have shown bakeries run by the group as a part of a programme of bread distribution to the poor in

⁴⁵ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Non-State Armed Groups. Updated 16 October 2014. Subscription source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁴⁶ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Non-State Armed Groups. Updated 16 October 2014. Subscription source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁴⁷ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Non-State Armed Groups. Updated 16 October 2014. Subscription source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

rural areas of Latakia or schools providing children with religious classes. The group has also claimed several suicide attacks carried out in Latakia and Aleppo.⁴⁸

Liwa al-Umma, also known as Muhajrin wa-Ansar Alliance (Alliance of Emigrants and Helpers).

2.3.41. Liwa al-Umma was founded in April 2012 by Mahdi al-Harati, an Irish-Libyan who led the Libyan Tripoli Brigade during the Battle of Tripoli in August 2011. The group was mainly active in Idlib province, near the Turkish border, but it also maintained divisions in Homs and Aleppo areas. According to the group, the majority of its 6,000 fighters are Syrian, but the bulk of the Liwa al-Umma is represented by Arab foreign fighters, especially Libyans, Egyptians, and Palestinians. Ideologically, Liwa al-Umma is a pan-Islamic group, and its members have constantly attempted to distance themselves from jihadism, portraying the group as a moderate religious movement interested in defending Syrian civilians. In September 2012, Mahdi al-Harati left the group, which aligned itself with the FSA. In January 2014 Liwa al-Umma merged with three other minor rebel groups in Hama area - Jund al-Aqsa, the Omar Brigade, and former fighters of Liwa al-Haqq in Idlib - into a new coalition called the Muhajrin wa-Ansar Alliance.⁴⁹

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Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union

2.3.42. In November 2013, after the emergence of the Islamic Front, a large number of rebel groups in the wider Damascus area announced a new coalition called the "Greater Damascus Operations Room", an umbrella organisation intended to counter and exclude jihadists groups like ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra. In December 2013, five of the leading groups of the Greater Damascus Operation Room (al-Habib Mustafa Brigades; Amjad al-Islam Gathering; Sahaba Brigades and Battalions; Shabab al-Houda Battalions; Der al-Asima Brigade) announced the creation of the Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union, an alliance of 53 sub-factions and around 10,000 fighters. The group claims that its presence stretch beyond Damascus, including the Ghouta region, southern Syria, the Qalamun Mountains, Idlib, and Hama areas. Ajnad al-Sham is currently considered the second-biggest rebel coalition in the Damascus area after Jaysh al-Islam. However, in mid-2014 local sources claimed that Ajnad al-Sham was preparing to join the Islamic Front.⁵⁰

Army of Mujahedeen

2.3.43. The group was created in January 2014 in the rural areas of Aleppo by eight Islamist groups: Nouredin al-Zengi Battalion; Ansar Brigade; Fastaqim Kama Umirta Gathering; Islamic Freedom Brigade; Amjad al-Islam Brigade; Ansar al-Khilafa Brigade; Jund al-Haramain Brigade; and Islamic Light Movement. The Nouredin al-Zengi Battalion is the biggest member group within the coalition, headed by Sheikh Tawfiq Shahabuddin. It was created in 2011 and was part of Liwa Tawhid group in Aleppo. The coalition's goal is to fight a "defence war" against the jihadist factions aligned with ISIL. Indeed, the group managed in March 2014 to drive ISIL out of areas in northwestern Syria. The Army of Mujahedeen consists of 5,000-8,000 fighters, which control strategic areas west of Aleppo and exert influence over some of the main supply lines from Turkey to Aleppo. Ideologically, all the factions portray themselves as Islamists. However, the

⁴⁸ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Non-State Armed Groups. Updated 16 October 2014. Subscription source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁴⁹ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Non-State Armed Groups. Updated 16 October 2014. Subscription source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁵⁰ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Non-State Armed Groups. Updated 16 October 2014. Subscription source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

group has no ideological or political platforms, and it is considered an opportunistic coalition that has emerged in order to channel foreign funds.⁵¹

Popular Protections Units (YPG)

2.3.44. The YPG is the armed wing of the Kurdish Supreme Committee (KSC), the body that runs de facto the Kurdish zone in northeastern Syria. The KSC was founded by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC) in July 2012. The YPG was founded in 2004, but it became active only in 2011 when the Syrian conflict broke out. The group rose to prominence in mid-2012 when the Syrian army withdrew from Kurdish areas. Its stated goal is to defend the Kurdish region from any group that intends to bring the conflict into the Kurdish Syrian areas, but the YPG has occasionally been engaged in fighting with government troops, as well as with Islamist brigades since November 2012 over the control of several border towns, especially Ras al-Ain. The YPG is divided into eight brigades and consists of approximately 45,000 fighters. Since January 2014, the YPG has also collaborated with the FSA in order to fight ISIL.⁵² The August 2014 Report of the Commission of Inquiry notes that “Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) continued to consolidate their control over the de facto self-regulated Kurdish regions in the north, namely Afrin, Ayn al-Arab and Al-Jazeera. They successfully repelled ISIS attacks on territory under their control along the borders with Iraq and Turkey. Renewed violence has been reported in Ayn al-Arab (Aleppo) as ISIS launched an offensive using advanced weapons seized in Iraq. Sporadic clashes between YPG and local National Defence Forces were reported in the cities of Qamishli and Al Hasakah.”⁵³

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2.4 Nature and level of violence

2.4.1 The Foreign and Commonwealth Office reported in September 2014 that “The human rights situation in Syria remains of grave concern. The death toll from the conflict is now over 191,000, with 10.8 million people in humanitarian need inside Syria, of which 6.5 million are internally displaced within the region.”⁵⁴

2.4.2 The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s Human Rights and Democracy Report covering 2013 stated:

‘Syria’s civil war worsened throughout 2013, with many tens of thousands losing their lives, and the country now experiencing some of the most appalling humanitarian

⁵¹ Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Non-State Armed Groups. Updated 16 October 2014. Subscription source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁵² Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment. Syria. Non-State Armed Groups. Updated 16 October 2014. Subscription source. [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁵³ United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. 13 August 2014. Paragraphs 18 and 19 http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf [Accessed 31 October 2014]

⁵⁴ UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 2013 Human Rights and Democracy Report - Syria, , Country of Concern, update 30 September 2014 Update. 16 October 2014. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/syria-country-of-concern/syria-country-of-concern-latest-update-30-september-2014> [Accessed 24 October 2014]

conditions in the world. The already catastrophic human rights situation in Syria continued to deteriorate still further.⁵⁵

‘The Syrian regime bears the primary responsibility for protecting its own population. Yet throughout 2013 it has been responsible for war crimes and systematic state-sponsored violations of human rights within Syria. Regime actions have included: the large-scale use of chemical weapons against civilians, the indiscriminate bombardment (by air and artillery) of densely-populated civilian areas, the use of siege tactics against civilians, the use of starvation as a weapon of war, the targeting of communities based on their religious beliefs, and the detention of thousands of civilians in appalling conditions, with reports of torture and extrajudicial killings in detention. This is in addition to the many serious human rights concerns which pre-date the conflict, including severe restrictions on political freedom, rights of assembly, judicial independence, and freedom of speech, none of which exist in Syria today in a meaningful way.’⁵⁶

‘The year also saw the growth of Islamist extremist groups affiliated to al-Qaeda, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and the Al Nusra Front, which present a terrorist threat to Syria and the region, and have carried out their own human rights abuses in a systematic way.’⁵⁷

2.4.3 The same report continued:

‘There have been widespread reports of informal “executions” by regime forces, including what amount to mass executions on the battlefield. 2013 has also seen increasing reports of extremist groups carrying out summary battlefield executions and executing civilians for breaches of their interpretation of Sharia law. Amnesty International has singled out ISIL in particular’.⁵⁸

‘As the war continues, the regime’s tactics have become increasingly abhorrent. Human Rights Watch referred in April to the regime’s “deliberate and indiscriminate” bombing of civilians. December saw increasing use by the regime of “barrel bombs” dropped from helicopters. These crude weapons consist of barrels filled with shrapnel and explosives and have been widely used in built-up areas. Throughout December, these brutal and indiscriminate attacks killed hundreds of civilians in the Aleppo area. As reported by Human Rights Watch and the Cluster Munition Coalition, the Assad regime has also used cluster bombs throughout 2013.’⁵⁹

2.4.4 In October 2013, UNHCR stated that “Armed hostilities have steadily expanded and leave no area within Syria unaffected by the conflict and its massive humanitarian consequences. Frontlines are reported to be relatively static overall, and any change in

⁵⁵ UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 2013 Human Rights and Democracy Report - Syria, 10 April 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/syria-country-of-concern/syria-country-of-concern> [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁵⁶ UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 2013 Human Rights and Democracy Report - Syria, 10 April 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/syria-country-of-concern/syria-country-of-concern> [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁵⁷ UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 2013 Human Rights and Democracy Report - Syria, 10 April 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/syria-country-of-concern/syria-country-of-concern> [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁵⁸ UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 2013 Human Rights and Democracy Report - Syria, 10 April 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/syria-country-of-concern/syria-country-of-concern> [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁵⁹ UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 2013 Human Rights and Democracy Report - Syria, 10 April 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/syria-country-of-concern/syria-country-of-concern> [Accessed 24 October 2014]

control between pro-government forces and armed opposition groups requires major military efforts, inflicting heavy losses of lives and massive destruction of both public infrastructure and private property. Areas under *de facto* control, or with a presence of armed opposition groups are reported to be subjected to shelling by government forces and the authorities are reported to prevent food and medical supplies reaching the population in these areas. Similarly, armed opposition groups have targeted or laid siege on government-held areas”⁶⁰.

2.4.5 The UN Human Rights Council’s Commission of Inquiry on Syria stated in its February 2014 report:

‘The conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic has grown in intensity and scope, as warring parties renewed efforts to strengthen their negotiation positions before the Geneva II conference. Despite intermittent tactical gains by the Government, fighting reached a stalemate, costing the country and the parties’ significant human and material losses. Particularly fierce around major cities and along main lines of communication, hostilities involved more brutal tactics and means. The Government relied extensively on the superior firepower of its air force and artillery, while non-State armed groups increasingly resorted to methods of asymmetric warfare, such as suicide bombings and the use of improvised explosive devices.’

‘The war has become deeply fragmented and localized, with the emergence of multiple frontlines involving different parties with shifting priorities. Primarily aimed at limited short-term agendas, these confrontations have been fuelled mostly by local operational and socioeconomic particularities rather than by the broader context of the conflict. The hostilities in north-eastern governorates saw Kurdish forces fighting radical Islamic armed groups in a distinct subconflict, with its own front lines and internal military dynamics. In many cases, communities in central governorates brokered localized ceasefires.’⁶¹

2.4.6 Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s Human Rights and Democracy Report June 2014 update stated:

‘The second quarter of 2014 saw repeated reports of the use of chemical weapons, particularly chlorine. On 29 May the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) announced a fact-finding mission to Syria to establish the facts around these alleged attacks. The interim report of the OPCW fact-finding mission concluded that it is likely that toxic chemicals have been used in recent months. We cannot say for certain who is responsible, but we know that Syria lied about the existence of their chemical programme for many years and used chemical weapons on a significant scale in 2013.’⁶²

‘On 23 June, the final consignment of Assad’s declared chemical stockpile was removed from Syria. Nonetheless, we remain deeply concerned about the gaps and discrepancies in Syria’s declarations to the OPCW. The regime’s history of lies and

⁶⁰ UNHCR: International Protection Considerations with regard to people fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic, Update II, 22 October 2013 Para 4. <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5265184f4.html> [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁶¹ United Nations Human Rights Council. Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. 12 February 2014. Paragraphs 7 and 8 Page 4. http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session25/Documents/A-HRC-25-65_en.doc [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁶² UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 2013 Human Rights and Democracy Report - Syria, Country of Concern, 30 June 2014 Update. 24 June 2014. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/syria-country-of-concern/syrai-country-of-concern-update-30-june-2014> [Accessed 24 October 2014]

obstruction make it impossible to take its claims at face value, and the UK supports the OPCW in its efforts to press Syria for full disclosure.’⁶³

June [2014] saw the ISIL, in conjunction with tribal and former Ba’athist forces, take over large parts of north-western Iraq. ISIL’s capturing of sophisticated weaponry, a swelling of its ranks and improved morale places them in a position to pose an increased threat within Syria. The moderate opposition in Syria have continued to fight against ISIL. The longer the conflict in Syria continues the greater is the danger from extremist groups such as ISIL.⁶⁴

2.4.7 The August 2014 report of the Commission of Inquiry notes that Government forces and non-State armed groups continue to engage in fierce fighting. While all belligerents succeeded in securing gains in different areas, none appear capable of achieving a complete military victory. The emergence of countless frontlines, involving different local and regional actors, has amplified the conflict’s complexity. The continuous involvement of extremist fighters mobilized on all sides along sectarian and/or ethnic lines has polarized the conflict. The impact of the war is no longer confined to Syrian territory. The continuous influx of foreign fighters, the success of extremist groups, the rise of sectarian tensions, competition for resources such as water, oil or gas, and the increasingly vulnerable socioeconomic situation of refugees have contributed to a spillover of violence, affecting regional peace and stability. Risks of the conflict spreading further are palpable.⁶⁵

2.4.8 The August 2014 report of the UN Human Rights Council’s Commission of Inquiry on Syria notes that:

“Government forces have systematically targeted civilians and civilian infrastructure, demonstrating the intent to kill, wound and maim. Targets have included markets, shops, hospitals, schools, places of worship and public spaces where civilians gather in large numbers. The apparent objective of the Government’s military operations is to render life unbearable in areas out of its control.”⁶⁶

“In addition to incrementally employing local and foreign irregular forces, the Government has relied on highly destructive firepower. The military has escalated its tactics, techniques and procedures in combating armed groups, progressively introducing heavy artillery, air force combat assets, including vacuum and barrel bombs, and ballistic missiles. Lacking sufficient manpower and mobility to conduct ground offensives on all fronts, Government forces have adopted a strategy that uses minimal manpower in favour of heavy bombardment during offensive and defensive operations.”⁶⁷

⁶³ UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 2013 Human Rights and Democracy Report - Syria, Country of Concern, 30 June 2014 Update. 24 June 2014. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/syria-country-of-concern/syria-country-of-concern-update-30-june-2014> [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁶⁴ UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 2013 Human Rights and Democracy Report - Syria, Country of Concern, 30 June 2014 Update. 24 June 2014. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/syria-country-of-concern/syria-country-of-concern-update-30-june-2014> [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁶⁵ United Nations Human Rights Council. Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. 13 August 2014. Paragraphs 7-9 Page 3. http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁶⁶ United Nations Human Rights Council. Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. 13 August 2014. Paragraph 98 Page 16. http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁶⁷ United Nations Human Rights Council. Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. 13 August 2014. Paragraph 99 Page 16.

“Anti-Government armed groups fire mortars, artillery guns and tanks towards government positions within residential areas, utilizing their limited firepower in an indiscriminate manner, causing civilian casualties. In April and May, anti-Government armed groups fired mortar shells and improvised gas-canister explosives at Al-Midan, Saif al-Dawla, Al-Sulimaniya neighbourhoods in western Aleppo, causing deaths and injuries. Between 17 and 20 April [2014], over 50 civilians were killed in indiscriminate shelling.”⁶⁸

“Groups have intentionally targeted civilian localities either in retaliation for government operations or owing to those localities’ perceived support of the Government. Nubl and Zahra (Aleppo) continue to be shelled, with improvised explosives increasing casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure. Residents described being forced “to live in basements”. Jermana and Sayda Zeinab (Damascus) were indiscriminately shelled. Al-Maliki, Sharq Tijara, Bab Tuma and Al-Shaghour neighbourhoods in Damascus city were shelled, with attacks often targeting children in schoolyards.”⁶⁹

2.4.9 The August 2014 report of the Report of the Commission of Inquiry notes that “In Al-Mataiyyeh (Dara’a), the Islamic Front killed several men suspected of collaborating with the Government. [...] Executions in public spaces have become a common spectacle on Fridays in Ar Raqqa and ISIS-controlled areas of Aleppo governorate. [...] Victims are usually accused of being affiliated with other armed groups, or of violating the ISIS criminal code. There have also been examples of the execution of men accused of being affiliated with the Syrian National Coalition, or of spying for the Government”.⁷⁰

2.4.10 The UN Human Rights Council’s Commission of Inquiry on Syria stated in its August 2014 report:

‘Government forces continued to perpetrate massacres and conduct widespread attacks on civilians, systematically committing murder, torture, rape and enforced disappearance amounting to crimes against humanity. Government forces have committed gross violations of human rights and the war crimes of murder, hostage-taking, torture, rape and sexual violence, recruiting and using children in hostilities and targeting civilians.’

‘Government forces disregarded the special protection accorded to hospitals and medical and humanitarian personnel. Indiscriminate and disproportionate aerial bombardment and shelling led to mass civilian casualties and spread terror. Government forces used chlorine gas, an illegal weapon.’

‘Non-State armed groups, named in the report, committed massacres and war crimes, including murder, execution without due process, torture, hostage-taking, violations of international humanitarian law tantamount to enforced disappearance, rape and sexual violence, recruiting and using children in hostilities and attacking protected objects.’

http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁶⁸United Nations Human Rights Council. Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. 13 August 2014. Paragraph 105 Page 17.

http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁶⁹United Nations Human Rights Council. Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. 13 August 2014. Paragraph 106 Page 17.

http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁷⁰United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. 13 August 2014. Paragraphs 29, 30, 31, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf [Accessed 31 October 2014]

‘Medical and religious personnel and journalists were targeted. Armed groups besieged and indiscriminately shelled civilian neighbourhoods, in some instances spreading terror among civilians through the use of car bombings in civilian areas.’

‘Members of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) committed torture, murder, acts tantamount to enforced disappearance, and forcible displacement as part of an attack on the civilian population in Aleppo and Ar Raqqa governorates, amounting to crimes against humanity.’⁷¹

2.4.11 Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s September 2014 update of their Human Rights and Democracy Report stated:

‘On 22 September 2014, the US announced that it had carried out airstrikes against ISIL targets in Syria, with the support of five Arab partners – Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. There are widespread reports that ISIL is increasingly abandoning military bases and key administrative centres, and establishing presence in civilian areas. This presents a concern for the safety of civilians as well as mass displacement. Recent events in Iraq show the threat ISIL poses for religious and ethnic minorities inside Syria.’⁷²

‘Women living in ISIL-controlled areas have been banned from public life. They are not allowed to walk the streets unaccompanied or work without the supervision of males. Education for girls after primary school has been curtailed, and there are reports that early and forced marriages are increasing. Some women have been stoned to death, ostensibly for adultery. During the last three months, two US journalists, James Foley and Steven Sotloff, and a British NGO aid worker, David Haines, were beheaded by ISIL, showing the dangers for those Westerners who remain in Syria.’⁷³

‘Other extremist groups have also conducted attacks on civilian areas, including an attack against a school in Homs on 1 October 2014, which is reported to have killed over 50 people. The Al-Qaeda affiliated group, Jabhat Al-Nusra, also kidnapped UN peacekeepers stationed in the Golan Heights. They have now been released safely’.⁷⁴

2.4.12 UNHCR’s October 2014 update of their protection guidelines stated:

‘Nearly all parts of the country are now embroiled in violence, which is playing out between different actors in partially overlapping conflicts and is exacerbated by the participation of foreign fighters on all sides. Fighting between the Syrian government forces and an array of anti-government armed groups continues unabated. In parallel, the group “Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham” (hereafter ISIS) has consolidated control over significant areas in northern and north-eastern Syria and engages in frequent armed confrontations with anti-government armed groups, Kurdish forces (People’s

⁷¹United Nations Human Rights Council. Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. 13 August 2014. Summary. http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁷² UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 2013 Human Rights and Democracy Report - Syria, Country of Concern, update 30 September 2014 Update. 16 October 2014. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/syria-country-of-concern/syria-country-of-concern-latest-update-30-september-2014> [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁷³ UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 2013 Human Rights and Democracy Report - Syria, Country of Concern, update 30 September 2014 Update. 16 October 2014. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/syria-country-of-concern/syria-country-of-concern-latest-update-30-september-2014> [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁷⁴ UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 2013 Human Rights and Democracy Report - Syria, Country of Concern, update 30 September 2014 Update. 16 October 2014. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/syria-country-of-concern/syria-country-of-concern-latest-update-30-september-2014> [Accessed 24 October 2014]

Protection Units, YPG) as well as government forces. The launch of airstrikes against ISIS targets as of 23 September 2014 has added an additional layer of complexity to the conflict. As international efforts to find a political solution to the Syria situation have so far not been successful, the conflict continues to cause further civilian casualties, displacement and destruction of the country's infrastructure.'

'At the time of writing, government forces control large parts of the country's western and central areas (Latakia, Tartous, Hama and Homs governorates), the capital Damascus and most of its environs and the southern governorate of Suweida, in addition to the road links between these areas. ISIS has, as of mid-2014, consolidated its hold over a largely contiguous stretch of territory in mainly northern and north-eastern Syria (as well as large areas in neighbouring Iraq), including the eastern Aleppo countryside, Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zour and southern Hassakeh governorates. Territorial gains by ISIS have reportedly come on the heels of the group's enhanced military capabilities following its expansion in Iraq, and were largely at the expense of anti-government armed groups. In late August 2014, ISIS reportedly captured the Tabaqa airbase (Raqqa governorate), overtaking the government's last stronghold in that governorate. An array of anti-government armed groups - with diverse ideological and political backgrounds and shifting alliances - operate mainly in the southern governorates of Dera'a and Quneitra, Rural Damascus, northern Homs, Latakia countryside as well as Idlib countryside and Aleppo (both city and countryside). Jabhat Al-Nusra (JAN) has a record of cooperating with other antigovernment armed groups, but more recently has reportedly sidelined some of its former allies, e.g. in parts of Idlib, where it took control of areas along the Turkish border. The YPG has consolidated control over the de facto self-administered Kurdish areas in the north, namely Hassakeh, Kobane (Ayn Al-Arab) and Afrin. It has been engaged in fending off ISIS, which has been seeking to expand control into Kurdish-dominated areas, most recently with a major military offensive against Kobane (Aleppo governorate), resulting in the large-scale displacement of the predominantly Kurdish population from the city and its environs.'

- 2.4.13 See also maps and resources at [Annex A](#) which show territorial control in the Syrian civil war.
- 2.4.14 UNHCR's October 2014 update of their protection guidelines also identified amongst the following risk profiles⁷⁶:
- Persons opposing or perceived to be opposing the government, including, but not limited to, members of political opposition parties; protestors, activists and others perceived to be sympathizing with the opposition; members of anti-government armed groups, or persons perceived to be members of anti-government armed groups; draft evaders and deserters from the Armed Forces; Government and Ba'ath Party officials who abandoned their positions; family members and affiliates of persons opposing or perceived to be opposing the government; and civilian inhabitants of urban neighbourhoods, towns and villages perceived to be opposing the government.
 - Persons supporting or perceived to be supporting the government, including, but not limited to, government officials and members of government-affiliated parties;

⁷⁵ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Protection Considerations with regard to people fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic, Update III, 27 October 2014, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/544e446d4.html> [accessed 5 November 2014]

⁷⁶ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Protection Considerations with regard to people fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic, Update III, 27 October 2014, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/544e446d4.html> [accessed 5 November 2014]

members and perceived members of government and pro-government forces and civilians perceived to be collaborating with government or pro-government forces; family members of persons supporting or perceived to be supporting the government; and civilian inhabitants of urban neighbourhoods, towns and villages perceived to be supporting the government.

- Persons opposing, or believed to oppose, ISIS in areas under its de facto control.
- Persons opposing, or believed to oppose, anti-government armed groups in areas under their de facto control.
- Persons opposing, or believed to be opposing, the PYD/YPG in areas under their de facto control.
- Certain professionals, in particular journalists and other media professionals, citizen journalists; doctors and other health professionals; human rights defenders; humanitarian workers; artists; and businessmen and industrialists.
- Members of religious groups, including Sunnis, Alawites, Ismailis, Twelver Shi'ites, Druze, Christians, and Yezidis.
- Persons Perceived as Contravening Shari'a Law in areas under control of extremist Islamist groups.
- Members of minority ethnic groups, including Kurds, Turkmen, Assyrians, Circassians, and Armenians.
- Women, in particular women who are victim of or at risk of sexual violence, early and forced marriage, domestic violence, "honour crimes" or trafficking.
- Children, in particular children who are at risk of detention or have previously been detained; children victims of or at risk of underage and forced recruitment, sexual and domestic violence, child labour, trafficking, and systematic denial of access to education.
- Individuals of diverse sexual orientation and/or gender identity and intersex individuals.
- Palestine Refugees from Syria.

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2.5 Humanitarian situation

- 2.5.1. The UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office reported in June 2014 that "UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2139, which demanded that all parties to the conflict allow unimpeded humanitarian access, continues to be flouted. UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Valerie Amos reported to the Security Council on 26 June that the humanitarian situation has significantly worsened. 10.8 million people within Syria are in dire need of humanitarian aid, an increase of 1.5 million over the last six months. The regime continues to arbitrarily deny humanitarian access to opposition-held areas, using starvation as a weapon of war, while some non-state armed groups, including the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), have obstructed the delivery of vital

aid. UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon called for further UNSC action to ensure that those in need receive humanitarian assistance.”⁷⁷

2.5.2. The UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office provided the following update: “On 30 September (2014), UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, Baroness Valerie Amos, briefed the UNSC on the humanitarian situation, and the implementation of resolutions 2139 and 2165 on humanitarian access. Despite these resolutions, violence against civilians and violations of international humanitarian law continued unabated, subjecting people to daily displacement and deprivation. The spread of ISIL beheadings, mass murders, sexual enslavement of women and girls, and child recruitment demonstrates the worsening situation. Despite the dangers, the UN and its partners continue to reach people in need, delivering food aid to 4.1 million people in August. There has also been a limited increase in aid delivered across borders in line with resolution 2165.”⁷⁸

2.5.3. The Syria Needs Analysis Project (SNAP), of the Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS) - an initiative of a consortium of three NGOs (Action Contre la Faim - ACF, Norwegian Refugee Council and Save the Children International) produce quarterly reports on the humanitarian situation in Syria. In their October 2014 report they state:

“All parties to the conflict continue to target vital services and civilian infrastructure, disrupting basic services and raising serious protection concerns. In Aleppo city, damage caused to the main water pumping station by armed opposition groups in early June continues to result in water shortages for over 2.5 million people. Parties to the conflict widely disregard the special protection accorded to health and education facilities. Since the start of the conflict, almost 200 attacks on 140 medical facilities were recorded, and the UN documented 80 attacks on schools between January and August 2014.”

“While a record volume of food assistance in August [2014] was distributed by WFP through cross borders and cross lines deliveries, around 4.7 million people reside in areas categorised as hard-to-reach, including at least 241,000 people who remain besieged by either government or opposition forces. In these areas, access remains challenging, primarily due to insecurity and administrative hurdles. Overall, assistance reached approximately 27% of the 287 locations identified as besieged or hard-to-reach.”⁷⁹

“Syria is now the site of the world’s biggest internal displacement. According to SNAP calculations [...] the number of IDPs inside Syria is around 6.5 million. More than three years into the conflict, roughly 9,500 Syrians are being displaced each day approximately one family per minute becoming displaced. (OCHA 06/14, UNHCR 25/09/14, Syria Deeply (26/05/14)).⁸⁰

2.5.4. The Internal Displacement and Monitoring Centre (IDMC) reported on 21 October 2014 that a third of the entire population of the country were IDPs, with an additional three

⁷⁷ UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 2013 Human Rights and Democracy Report, Syria – country of concern, update 30 June 2014., Updated 16 October 2014. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/syria-country-of-concern/syria-country-of-concern-update-30-june-2014> [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁷⁸ UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 2013 Human Rights and Democracy Report, Syria – Country of Concern, latest update, 30 September 2014. Updated 16 October 2014. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/syria-country-of-concern/syria-country-of-concern-latest-update-30-september-2014> [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁷⁹ Assessment Capacities Project, Regional Analysis Syria Q3 2014. 13 October 2014, 1. Overview, 1.1. Executive Summary, Attacks on civilian infrastructure and Access, <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/q-snap-ras-quarterly-oct-2014.pdf> [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁸⁰ Assessment Capacities Project, Regional Analysis Syria Q3 2014. 13 October 2014, 1. Overview, 1.5 Displacement Profile, <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/q-snap-ras-quarterly-oct-2014.pdf> [Accessed 30 October 2014]

million Syrians having sought refuge in neighbouring countries. It noted that “The Syrian authorities have severely restricted the work of international humanitarian agencies and, except for a few cases, have prevented them from delivering aid to rebel-held areas across front lines and international borders. Access restrictions and cumbersome procedures imposed by the Syrian authorities on humanitarian agencies have hampered their monitoring of IDPs figures and movements. This has led to inconsistent, unreliable and patchy data and contributed to an underestimation of IDPs’ needs. Tensions between international agencies over their relations with the Syrian authorities, perceived by NGOs active in rebel-held areas as compromising, have created mistrust among the different actors. This has, in turn exacerbated coordination constraints. All these factors, compounded by severe funding shortcomings, have gravely hampered the humanitarian response.”⁸¹

2.5.5. An article published in the Forced Migration Review (FMR) in September 2014 noted that Syria has the most IDPs in the world and at least half of the displaced are children. The article stated that “Fleeing itself thus can be risky, with abuses and attacks continuing en route. Safe access to food, water, shelter, medical care and other essentials is a daily struggle. For example, fewer than 3% of IDPs find shelter in official collective centres set up by the government. The rest live with host families, or in private accommodation for as long as their resources will permit, or in makeshift camps and scattered informal settlements where security risks are rampant”. Meanwhile, siege warfare – a tactic used by warring parties on all sides of the conflict – means that many civilians (241,000 currently) are literally trapped in their communities, largely cut off from assistance and unable to flee. Indeed, IDPs are a large part of a larger group of 10.8 million people in urgent need of humanitarian assistance inside the country. An estimated 4.6 million people in need of assistance inside Syria are in what the UN terms “hard-to-reach” areas for humanitarian actors”.⁸²

2.5.6. UNHCR’s October 2014 update of their protection guidelines stated

“With the conflict in Syria in its fourth year, the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate. The total number of people in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria has reached 11 million, including approximately 6.45 million IDPs. Whereas the whole of Syria is affected, the majority of those in need of assistance are, according to reports, concentrated in the governorates of Aleppo, Rural Damascus and Idlib. Over 4.7 million people are living in hard-to-reach areas, in addition to 241,000 who are trapped in besieged areas, cut off from basic supplies and largely inaccessible to humanitarian actors. At the end of 2013, 75 percent of Syrians were estimated to live in poverty, with more than half the population living in extreme poverty, able only to secure the most basic food and non-food items required for the survival of their households. One fifth of the population were found to live in abject poverty, with households unable to meet even the most basic need for food, and, in the case of those living in conflict/besieged areas, facing hunger, malnutrition and starvation.”

“Access to food, water and sanitation, housing, health care, and education is severely affected by the cumulative effects of armed conflict and the related destruction of infrastructure, disruption of essential services and loss of livelihoods. All parties to the conflict have been implicated in targeting vital services resulting in interruptions to the supply of safe drinking water and electricity. Internally displaced families who have lost

⁸¹ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), Syria, Forsaken IDPs adrift inside a fragmenting state, 21 October 2014, page 1 and 3, http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/1226_1414055043_201410-me-syria-overview-en.pdf [Accessed 30 October 2014]

⁸² Mooney, Erin: The inside story: internal displacement in Syria, September 2014 (published by FMR), <http://www.fmreview.org/en/syria/mooney.pdf> [Accessed 30 October 2014]

their sources of income, the urban poor, subsistence farmers, small-scale herders, casual labourers and petty traders are reportedly among the most affected groups. The number of people in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria is expected to further increase due to limited or non-existent basic services, decreasing access to food and water, and lack of alternative livelihood opportunities.”⁸³

- 2.5.7. For more detailed information on the recent countrywide situation with regards to livelihoods and food security, shelter, health, and education, as well as detailed information on the humanitarian situation in each governorate of Syria, view the most recent quarterly SNAP report and monthly supplements, available on ACAPS’s website (<http://www.acaps.org/>)

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2.6 Freedom of Movement

- 2.6.1. The US State Department report covering 2013 noted that relative freedom of movement varied by region and by individual, as throughout the year there was continuous fighting in many areas. Freedom of movement for government supporters or assumed supporters (especially the Alawi and Shia populations), however, was highly restricted in rebel-held areas. Overall, both the regime and the opposition highly discouraged internal movement and travel. The violence, coupled with significant cultural pressure, led to severely restricted freedom of movement for women in many areas. Additionally, the law allows certain male relatives to place travel bans on women.⁸⁴
- 2.6.2. The latest travel advice from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (22 October 2014), advises “against all travel to Syria” due to “widespread fighting throughout Syria, including in Damascus and its suburbs. Full-scale military operations involving the use of small arms, tanks, artillery and aircraft are ongoing. In Aleppo and elsewhere, the regime has been undertaking an indiscriminate campaign of aerial bombardment since mid-December 2013, using so called ‘barrel’ bombs – huge containers packed with explosives and shards of metal dropped by helicopter – against largely civilian targets. The situation remains extremely volatile”.⁸⁵ It further notes that “Fighting has caused the temporary suspension of commercial flights, closed roads, impeded access to land border crossing points and led to the closure of some border crossings”.⁸⁶ Specifically it mentions that “Road networks have been blocked without warning. Several major highways including Tartous-Latakia, Tartous-Homs, Latakia-Aleppo, Homs-Hama, Homs-Damascus and Damascus-Jordan have been temporarily closed. There are security force checkpoints on major road routes”.⁸⁷

⁸³ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Protection Considerations with regard to people fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic, Update III, 27 October 2014, Para 17 – 18. Available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/544e446d4.html> [accessed 5 November 2014]

⁸⁴ US Department of State, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2013, Iran, 27 February 2014. Section 2. d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2013&dliid=220376> [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁸⁵ UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Foreign travel advice: Syria, Still current at: 30 October 2014, Updated: 22 October 2014, 30 October 2014 , Summary, Current travel advice, <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/syria> [Accessed 30 October 2014]

⁸⁶ UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Foreign travel advice: Syria, Still current at: 30 October 2014, Updated: 22 October 2014, 30 October 2014 , Summary, Current travel advice, <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/syria> [Accessed 30 October 2014]

⁸⁷ UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Foreign travel advice: Syria, Still current at: 30 October 2014, Updated: 22 October 2014, 30 October 2014 , Safety and security, <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/syria/safety-and-security> [Accessed 30 October 2014]

- 2.6.3. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) reported on 21 October 2014 that “Civilians have also been prevented from seeking safety through displacement in violation of their right to freedom of movement as guaranteed by the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (Principle 14 and 15). Among other restrictions, civilians have been prevented from crossing checkpoints and turned back to unsafe areas where their lives continue to be at risk.”⁸⁸
- 2.6.4. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria found in its August 2014 report that
- ‘Soldiers at checkpoints regularly conduct arbitrary arrests, confiscate food and other basic supplies, and prevent sick and wounded persons from seeking medical attention.’⁸⁹
- ‘Arrests of men and boys at checkpoints ringing restive areas are commonplace, with the consequence that male civilians inside those areas are unable to leave, even to seek food or medical treatment, and are unable to flee the areas when they come under attack.’⁹⁰
- ‘Government officials continue to commit torture and other forms of ill-treatment at intelligence agencies and in prisons and military hospitals, subjecting tens of thousands of victims to unimaginable suffering. Most are civilians initially held at checkpoints or during or military incursions. While the majority of accounts concerned male detainees, there were increased reports of female detainees suffering abuse in government custody. The frequency, duration and severity of the torture suggest that victims are likely to suffer long term damage to their psychological as well as physical well-being.’⁹¹
- “Violence has severely impaired civilians’ freedom of movement, causing many to restrict their activities outside the home. Many women relayed the despair of being trapped indoors because of insecurity and fear of injury from indiscriminate bombardment. Men are fearful of travelling through checkpoints to access their workplaces and medical assistance owing to the risk of detention and disappearance”.⁹²
- 2.6.5. Reporting on the educational situation in Syria in September 2014, the Syrian Human Rights Committee notes that the current use of sieges impedes travel: “In some areas, and particularly in the Eastern Ghouta and Homs, ongoing siege has been a primary

⁸⁸ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), Syria, Forsaken IDPs adrift inside a fragmenting state, 21 October 2014, Protection concerns, page 10, http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/1226_1414055043_201410-me-syria-overview-en.pdf [Accessed 30 October 2014]

⁸⁹ Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. 13 August 2014. D. Denial of economic, social and cultural rights and basic freedoms, 1. Government forces, page 20, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf [Accessed 5 November]

⁹⁰ Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. 13 August 2014. D. Denial of economic, social and cultural rights and basic freedoms, 1. Government forces, page 12 -13., http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf [Accessed 5 November]

⁹¹ Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. 13 August 2014. D. Denial of economic, social and cultural rights and basic freedoms, 1. Government forces, page 10, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf [Accessed 5 November]

⁹² Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. 13 August 2014. D. Denial of economic, social and cultural rights and basic freedoms, 1. Government forces, paragraph 125, p. 20, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf [Accessed 30 October 2014]

reason for the complete stoppage of all [educational] services.”⁹³ Similarly, Amnesty International noted in its’ Updated Briefing on Sieges Across Syria’, published in June 2014, that “imposing and maintaining the sieges, both government forces and non-state armed groups have sought to deprive the overwhelmingly civilian population within the besieged areas of the basic necessities of life, by cutting water and power supplies, denying access to food supplies, medicine and medical care, and preventing the movement of people into and from the areas under siege”.⁹⁴

- 2.6.6. The UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic further report that “since Syrian men are unable to move around the country for fear of arrest at checkpoints, women are responsible for travelling between areas to seek food, medicine and, increasingly, work. Unaccompanied by men, they are vulnerable to physical assaults and are at risk of arrest or abduction by Government forces and by anti-Government armed groups.”⁹⁵ The UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office’s latest update on Syria of 30 September 2014 notes that “Women living in ISIL-controlled areas have been banned from public life. They are not allowed to walk the streets unaccompanied or work without the supervision of males. Education for girls after primary school has been curtailed, and there are reports that early and forced marriages are increasing”.⁹⁶
- 2.6.7. The UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women raised its concern in July 2014 against difficulties faced by “married women whose husbands have gone missing to escape from conflict-affected areas together with their children due to child custody restrictions not allowing them to travel with their children without the consent of their father or guardian”.⁹⁷ Human Rights Watch reported further on movement restrictions imposed on women: “In interviews at refugee sites, women and their family members reported having limited women’s and girls’ movement outside the home in Syria due to fear of sexual violence, harassment, and indiscriminate attacks. In some cases, as Human Rights Watch has documented in Aleppo, al-Hassakah, Idlib, and Raqqah governorates, extremist armed groups have placed discriminatory restrictions on women and girls. Such restrictions include strict dress codes, limitations on women’s engagement in public life and ability to move freely, and constraints on their access to education and employment. Additionally, some Syrian laws, including personal status laws that regulate marriage and family life, remain discriminatory against women. Women may also be subject to social customs and traditions that constrain their personal freedom and increase their vulnerability”.⁹⁸

⁹³ Syrian Human Rights Committee, The Right to Education: Present and Future Violations, 27 September 2014, <http://www.shrc.org/en/?p=23989> [Accessed 30 October 2014]

⁹⁴ Amnesty International, Updated Briefing on Sieges Across Syria, 12 June 2014, 1. Introduction, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE24/023/2014/en/00aee8fa-6f0e-4d5f-aeb7-bc6b0cd25467/mde240232014en.pdf> [Accessed 30 October 2014]

⁹⁵ United Nations Human Rights Council. Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. 13 August 2014. E. Sexual and gender-based violence, 3. Impact of the conflict, paragraph 81, Page 13. http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf [Accessed 24 October 2014]

⁹⁶ UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 2013 Human Rights and Democracy Report, Syria – Country of Concern, latest update, 30 September 2014. Updated 16 October 2014. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/syria-country-of-concern/syria-country-of-concern-latest-update-30-september-2014> [Accessed 30 October 2014]

⁹⁷ UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Concluding observations on the second periodic report of Syria, 18 July 2014, Marriage and family relations, paragraph 45 (b), page 14, http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2fC%2fSYR%2fCO%2f2&Lang=en [Accessed 30 October 2014]

⁹⁸ Human Rights Watch, “We Are Still here”: Women on the Front Lines of Syria’s Conflict, 3 July 2014, Background: Women in Syria’s conflict, page 4, http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syriawrd0714_web_1.pdf [Accessed 30 October 2014]

Annex A: Maps and current resources

The following sources contain current and regularly updated maps and resources on the conflict and humanitarian situation:

- ▶ US State Department's Humanitarian Information Unit (USSD HIU) produce regular maps which include detail of territorial control and areas of influence within Syria which can be accessed at:

<https://hiu.state.gov/Pages/MiddleEast.aspx>

- ▶ A copy of the USSD HIU's most recent map dated 8 October 2014 can be accessed at:

https://hiu.state.gov/Products/Syria_ConflictsWithoutBorders_FourTheaters_2014_Oct09_HIU_U1098.pdf

- ▶ The [Reliefweb, Syria country page](#) contains regularly updated maps and resources on the humanitarian and security situation in Syria and can be accessed at:

<http://reliefweb.int/country/syr>

- ▶ For more detailed information on the recent countrywide situation with regards to livelihoods and food security, shelter, health, and education, as well as detailed information on the humanitarian situation in each governorate of Syria, view the most recent *quarterly* Strategic Needs Analysis Project (SNAP) report *and monthly supplements*, available on the Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS)'s website at:

<http://www.acaps.org/en/pages/syria-snap-project>

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Annex B: Caselaw

KB (Failed asylum seekers and forced returnees) Syria CG [2012] UKUT 426 (IAC) (20 December 2012)

1. This country guidance replaces previous guidance in [SA & IA \(Undocumented Kurds\) Syria CG \[2009\] UKAIT 00006](#).
2. In the context of the extremely high level of human rights abuses currently occurring in Syria, a regime which appears increasingly concerned to crush any sign of resistance, it is likely that a failed asylum seeker or forced returnee would, in general, on arrival face a real risk of arrest and detention and of serious mistreatment during that detention as a result of imputed political opinion. That is sufficient to qualify for refugee protection. The position might be otherwise in the case of someone who, notwithstanding a failed claim for asylum, would still be perceived on return to Syria as a supporter of the Assad regime.

Elgafaji v. Staatssecretaris van Justitie, C-465/07, European Union: European Court of Justice, 17 February 2009

The ECJ in this case found that “Article 15(c) of Council Directive 2004/83/EC of 29 April 2004 on minimum standards for the qualification and status of third country nationals or stateless persons as refugees or as persons who otherwise need international protection and the content of the protection granted, in conjunction with Article 2(e) thereof must be interpreted as meaning that:

- the existence of serious and individual threat to the life or person of an applicant for subsidiary protection is not subject to the condition that that applicant adduce evidence that he is specifically targeted by reason of factors particular to his personal circumstances;
- the existence of such a threat can exceptionally be considered to be established where the degree of indiscriminate violence characterising the armed conflict taking place – assessed by the competent national authorities before which an application for subsidiary protection is made, or by the courts of a Member State to which a decision refusing such an application is referred – reaches such a high level that substantial grounds are shown for believing that a civilian returned to the relevant country or as the case may be, to the relevant region, would, solely on account of his presence on the territory of that country or region, face a real risk of being subject to that threat.” (Paragraph 45)

QD (Iraq) v Secretary of State for the Home Department [2009] EWCA Civ620 (24 June 2009)

The Court of Appeal provided further domestic guidance on [Elgafaji](#) and the test that needs to be applied “Is there in a country or a material part of it such a high level of indiscriminate violence that substantial grounds exist for believing that an applicant, solely by being present there, faces a real risk which threatens his life or person?” (paragraph 40)

The Court of Appeal also clarified that the word “exceptional” is used by the ECJ to stress that not every armed conflict or violent situation will attract the protection of Article 15(c) (paragraph 25). The reference to ‘threat’ does not dilute the need for there to be a real risk (paragraph 29).

The phrase “situations of international or internal armed conflict” is broad enough to include any situation of indiscriminate violence which reaches the level described in [Elgafaji](#) (paragraph 35).

There is no requirement that the armed conflict itself must be “exceptional” but there must be an intensity of indiscriminate violence sufficient to meet the test in [Elgafaji](#) (paragraph 36).

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Change Record

Version	Date	Change References
1.0	16/12/2014	First version of country information and guidance.

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