



Australian Government
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade



DFAT THEMATIC REPORT ON CONDITIONS IN SYRIA

23 October 2017

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ACRONYMS

CIA	United States Central Intelligence Agency
Col	UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic
GoJ	Government of Jordan
GoL	Government of Lebanon
JIM	Joint Investigative Mechanism (Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons – United Nations)
ISIL	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (also known as ISIS or Daesh)
NCB/NCC	National Coordination Bureau (or Committee) for the Forces of Democratic Change (frequently shortened to the National Coordination Bureau (or Committee))
OPCW	Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party
PLA	Palestine Liberation Army
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organisation
PRS	Palestinian refugees from Syria
PYD	Kurdish Democratic Union Party
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNRWA	UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
YPG	Kurdish People’s Protection Units

1. PURPOSE AND SCOPE

1.1 This Thematic Report has been prepared by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) for protection status determination purposes only. It provides DFAT's best judgment and assessment at time of writing and is distinct from Australian government policy with respect to Syria.

1.2 The Thematic Report provides a general, rather than an exhaustive, country overview. Due to the current volatility within Syria, DFAT has not attempted to provide a comprehensive overview of the situation in all areas of the country. This Thematic Report has been prepared with regard to the current caseload for decision-makers in Australia without reference to individual applications for protection visas. The report does not contain policy guidance for decision-makers.

1.3 Ministerial Direction Number 56 of 21 June 2013 under s 499 of the *Migration Act 1958* states that:
Where the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has prepared a country information assessment expressly for protection status determination processes, and that assessment is available to the decision maker, the decision maker must take into account that assessment, where relevant, in making their decision. The decision maker is not precluded from considering other relevant information about the country.

1.4 This Thematic Report is informed by DFAT's on-the-ground knowledge and discussions with a range of sources in Syria, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. It takes into account relevant and credible open source reports, including but not limited to those produced by Amnesty International, Human Rights Council, Human Rights Watch, Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, United Nations, United States Department of State, the World Bank and the World Food Programme. Where DFAT does not refer to a specific source of a report or allegation, this may be to protect the source.

1.5 This Thematic Report replaces the DFAT Country Information Report for Syria published on 2 February 2015.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

RECENT HISTORY

2.1 Syria gained independence from a League of Nations mandate administered by France in 1946. A number of coups disrupted the civilian government in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In 1958, Syria and Egypt formed the United Arab Republic, headed by the Egyptian President. The Egyptian President ordered the dissolution of political parties in Syria, including the Ba'ath Party, which fuelled discontent and subsequently led to the dissolution of the United Arab Republic following a coup in 1961. In 1967, Israeli forces seized the Golan Heights from Syria during the Six Day War with Egypt, Jordan and Syria. This led to years of tension between Israel and Syria.

2.2 In 1970, the current President's father, Hafiz al-Assad, came to power following a coup. Hafiz al-Assad was initially popular as he attempted to build unity in Syria. However, his concentration of power in the Presidency proved divisive and the roles of other institutions that provided checks and balances diminished. The dominance of fellow Alawites (and other individuals with strong links to Assad) in the government increased. Uprisings began in the mid-1970s, including an uprising led by the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982 that led to thousands of civilian deaths and the detention of many opponents.

2.3 Hafiz al-Assad's son, Bashar al-Assad (Assad), became president upon his father's death in 2000. While Assad initially signalled openness to political diversity in Syria, he did little to implement it. In March 2011, peaceful protests began after authorities detained and reportedly tortured 15 young men for having written graffiti in support of the region-wide movement referred to as the 'Arab Spring'. As in other countries involved in the Arab Spring, a lack of political freedoms combined with economic woes in Syria to fuel resentment towards the government. The government responded with increasing aggression, including through arbitrary detention and extra-judicial killings of perceived opponents.

2.4 By July 2011, military defectors formed the Free Syrian Army with the aim of overthrowing the government. Syria slid into escalating conflict. Other opposition groups quickly emerged. The emergence of ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, also known as Daesh) added complexity to instability in Syria. Despite a range of initiatives aimed at brokering a resolution, some of which led to temporary reductions in violence, all initiatives have failed to end the violence, which has been characterised by indiscriminate attacks on civilians.

2.5 More than six years after the beginning of the conflict, the humanitarian situation in Syria continues to deteriorate. Conflict remains the principal cause of Syria's humanitarian crisis. The United Nations has not reported on the official death toll since 2014 after acknowledging it could no longer verify information. However, in 2016, the UN special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, estimated that the death toll had exceeded 400,000 people. According to the UN, as at July 2017, 13.5 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria, including 4.6 million people in hard-to-reach and besieged areas.

DEMOGRAPHY

2.6 The CIA World Factbook estimated Syria's population in July 2016 at 17.19 million people. In 2016, an estimated 57.7 per cent of the population lived in urban areas, with major urban centres including Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama.

2.7 Approximately 85 per cent of the Syrian population is Arab, with the remainder Kurdish, Armenian and other ethnicities. Kurds are the largest minority estimated at between 9 and 15 per cent of the population. Arabic is the official language. Other spoken languages include Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic, Abzakh, Circassian, French and English.

2.8 Figures for Syrian population composition derive from estimates prior to the conflict. According to such data, Muslims comprise 87 per cent of the population, including 74 per cent of the total population who adhere to Sunni Islam. Thirteen per cent of the population are adherents of other branches of Islam, including Alawis, Ismailis and other Shi'a. Ten per cent of the population is Christian (including Chalcedonian, Antiochian and Syrian Orthodox, Catholic, Armenian Apostolic and other denominations). Approximately three per cent of the population is Druze. These figures are likely to have changed during six years of conflict, given significant population displacement, including the departure of many minorities.

2.9 Over half of all Syrians have fled their homes, with many displaced multiple times. Countries surrounding Syria are hosting significant populations of Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR, including Turkey (3.1 million), Lebanon (1 million), Jordan (660,000), Iraq (245,000) and Egypt (122,000). As the conflict has continued, surrounding countries have continued to increase restrictions on (or halt altogether) the entry of Syrians. In this context, the number of Syrians in neighbouring countries is likely to be higher than the official figures.

ECONOMIC OVERVIEW

2.10 The economic impact of the conflict is large and continues to take a heavy toll on Syrians remaining in the country. The World Bank has estimated that Syria's GDP contracted by 63 per cent between 2010 and 2016. The Syrian conflict has caused an estimated USD 226 billion in economic losses. It could take more than two decades to re-build the economy to pre-war levels. A diverse pre-war economic base, foreign currency reserves and Iranian assistance in the form of oil supplies and credit have provided a slight buffer to the economy. The actions of various participants in the conflict have significantly damaged civilian infrastructure, including hospitals and schools. Reconstruction will pose a significant challenge.

2.11 According to the UN-led 2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview, an estimated 85 per cent of the Syrian population lives in poverty, with 69 per cent living in extreme poverty. The World Bank reports that the main causes of poverty are loss of employment and property, lack of access to services, and rising costs.

2.12 The World Food Programme estimated in 2017 that 53 per cent of the labour force was unemployed, including 78 per cent of youth, and an even higher proportion of women. Unemployment has led to an increasing number of people migrating to secure a livelihood.

2.13 Poverty is concentrated in areas most affected by conflict, and areas that were historically poorer (e.g. rural areas). DFAT assesses that some areas, particularly those that have been under the continuous control of the government (e.g. Damascus), have been less affected by the conflict, but basic services have been strained in all areas.

POLITICAL SYSTEM

2.14 The 1973 Constitution (last amended in 2012) governs Syria's political system. According to the previous constitution (prior to 2012), a single candidate for President (who must be Muslim and Secretary General of the Ba'ath Party and leader of the National Progressive Front), whose term is seven years, was submitted to a Yes / No referendum. In February 2012, the constitutional amendments provided greater plurality, including multi-candidate presidential elections and restrictions on the term of the President (to seven years, plus an additional seven years if re-elected). Presidential elections held in 2014 were widely criticised as not being legitimate, as violence and internal displacement limited access to polling stations. Many Syrian refugees were unable to vote. Assad claimed victory, with 88.7 per cent of the vote.

2.15 The President appoints Vice Presidents, the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Ministers, who are members of the Executive along with the Council of Ministers (i.e. Cabinet). The unicameral parliament is a 250-seat People's Assembly, with members elected for four-year terms. The People's Assembly approves decrees issued by the President, except during a State of Emergency. A State of Emergency had been in place for nearly 50 years until April 2011. Parliamentary elections in April 2016 were limited geographically to areas under the control of Assad government, and widely regarded as illegitimate. The National Progressive Front, which supports Assad's ruling Ba'ath party, won 80 per cent of the vote.

2.16 Syria comprises 14 governorates, divided into 60 districts. Each governorate has an administrative capital, with the exception of Damascus. The Interior Minister appoints governors, subject to the approval of the Council of Ministers.

2.17 In practice, pro-government militias increasingly run local administration in government-controlled areas. This has led to increasing levels of corruption and inefficiency. In opposition-controlled areas, a number of controlling groups have established local administrative councils. The structure of local administrative councils varies. Local administrative councils compete for power and resources and have limited capacity to provide basic services and security to their constituencies.

SECURITY SITUATION

2.18 The security situation in Syria remains extremely dangerous. Large-scale military operations involving small arms, artillery and airstrikes continue in many parts of the country. The UN continues to receive credible reports of the use of barrel bombs and chemical weapons by the government and ISIL has committed many atrocities, including using chemical weapons. Airstrikes continue to kill and injure civilians and to damage infrastructure across Syria, including schools and hospitals.

2.19 The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) – UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) has found that Syrian government forces used chemical weapons on at least three occasions and ISIL used chemical weapons (mustard gas) on at least one occasion. There are credible reports of the broader use of chemical weapons, including chlorine-filled munitions, and the release of sarin gas (or a sarin-like substance) at Khan Sheikhun in April 2017. There are credible reports that, aside from its proven use in 2015, ISIL has used sulphur mustard gas on other occasions.

2.20 In Astana in May 2017, Russia, Turkey and Iran agreed to establish four de-escalation zones in Idlib, northern Homs, Eastern Ghouta (in the outskirts of Damascus) and the south-western governorates. As at August 2017, this has led to some reduction in violence, but no significant improvement in humanitarian

access. Russia, the United States and Jordan have brokered a ceasefire zone in south-western Syria. These moves follow a series of temporary ceasefires throughout 2016.

2.21 While in-country contacts suggest some areas of Syria (mainly government-controlled areas that have remained under government control throughout the conflict, such as Damascus) are relatively safer, the potential remains for the situation to deteriorate rapidly and without notice. The presence of pro-government forces and their increasing ability to establish and maintain checkpoints throughout Damascus has increased indiscriminate targeting of civilians perceived to have links to opposition or competing pro-government forces. Even in relatively safe areas, the risk of bombing and attacks persists as non-state armed groups execute asymmetric attacks behind government lines, or against each other.

2.22 The government has retaken significant territory and, as of August 2017, controls most major urban areas in western Syria, including Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Damascus, as well as the Mediterranean governorates of Latakia and Tartus. Contested areas include some Damascus suburbs, northern Homs, the south-west and the eastern desert. Opposition-controlled areas are mainly in the north-western (Idlib governorate) and south-western areas of the country. Kurdish groups control large swathes of northern Syria, and Turkey and Turkish-backed local forces control a pocket of northern Aleppo governorate. Remaining ISIL territory is predominantly around Raqqqa and along the Euphrates River Valley in Deir ez-Zour governorate, and in part of the eastern desert. As at July 2017, forces backed by the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIL and government forces are undertaking military campaigns to reclaim these areas. By October 2017, ISIL was close to being defeated in Raqqqa. Areas of control will continue to change as these campaigns progress.

2.23 International actors, including Russia and Iran (which support the Syrian government) and the United States, some European countries and Gulf states (which have supported some opposition groups), are involved to differing degrees in the current conflict. Turkey has a strong focus on the north of the country, including areas dominated by Kurds.

2.24 DFAT assesses that, while security conditions may differ across the country depending on who controls any given area and whether it is contested, overall the situation remains highly volatile. All civilians are vulnerable to physical harm caused by deliberate targeting, politically motivated or sectarian-related detention and indiscriminate violence. DFAT assesses that the authorities may view individuals who have left Syria with suspicion.

3. REFUGEE CONVENTION CLAIMS

3.1 The current conflict has affected every political, religious and ethnic group. Individuals have suffered and continue to suffer violence based on their location, their perceived political and religious affiliation, and their ethnicity. There is some overlap between these issues: some ethnic or religious groups are more closely associated with pro- or anti-government elements. Overall DFAT assesses that no group in Syria is fully protected from the conflict.

RACE/NATIONALITY

Armenians

3.2 Before the conflict, the Armenian community in Syria numbered approximately 100,000. Armenians are concentrated in Aleppo governorate, much of which was opposition-controlled, but which is now heavily contested and different actors, including the government, Kurdish groups and Turkish-backed forces, now control different zones. Some Armenians live in Damascus. Armenians are generally perceived to be aligned with the government (as are most Christians in Syria, see [Christians](#), below).

3.3 In-country contacts report that most Armenians who were able to leave Syria have done so. Fewer than 30,000 Syrian Armenians are believed to remain in Syria. Those who remain report not feeling safe anywhere, including in government-controlled areas. For example, Armenian-dominated areas of Aleppo have experienced intense shelling. Armenian churches have been bombed and four Damascene Armenians, including two priests, were kidnapped in 2013. Open source information suggests that opposition forces specifically targeted Armenians for their faith and perceived loyalty to the government. Extremists have also attacked Armenian-majority villages.

Kurds

3.4 Most Syrian Kurds live in a corridor along the Syria-Turkey border, including the northern part of al-Hassakah governorate (bordering Turkey and Iraq), northern al-Raqqah governorate and northern Aleppo governorate. There are also Kurdish populations in Syria's large cities, including Damascus.

3.5 Some Syrian Kurds are stateless. In 1962, Syria stripped approximately 120,000 Kurds of their citizenship. Upon coming to power in the 1970s, President Hafiz al-Assad moved to create a belt of Syrian Arabs living on the Syria-Iraq border, to separate Kurds living in both countries. This strategy involved the expulsion of thousands of Syrian Kurds from their villages. In 2011, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad ordered that some—not all—of the stateless Kurds could re-acquire citizenship.

3.6 The dominant Kurdish political actor is the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), whose military wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), has been fighting ISIL in north and central Syria and retains control of most of the land it has captured. The PYD has declared a federal democratic system in Syria's north, called 'Rojava' or western Kurdistan. While this area has some level of practical autonomy, the neither the Syrian government nor other states recognise it.

3.7 The YPG is the dominant component of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is an effective actor in the fight against ISIL. In October 2017, the SDF scaled up its campaign against ISIL in the city of Raqqa. Turkey views the PYD and YPG as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a Turkish-Kurdish group that has fought for autonomy from Turkey since the 1980s. (The Australian government has designated the PKK as a terrorist organisation). As a result, Turkey has attempted to prevent YPG territorial gains along the Turkish – Syrian border. Turkish attacks against the YPG / SDF, including shelling, have affected Syrian Kurds.

Palestinians

3.8 The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) registered 526,744 Palestinians in Syria as at January 2011. In-country contacts suggest that the number is now likely to be higher, with many Palestinians coming forward to register with UNRWA following the outbreak of the conflict in Syria.

3.9 Descendants of Palestinians who arrived in Syria before 1956 traditionally enjoyed many of the same rights as Syrian citizens, including access to services provided by the government. Palestinians who arrived before 1956 were traditionally also granted *Laisser Passers* valid for 10 years' travel. Palestinians who arrived after 1956 (e.g. as a result of 1967 Six Day War, the 1970 confrontation between Jordan and the Palestinian Liberation Organization – PLO – or the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon) were generally treated as Arab foreigners, with fewer rights than Palestinians who arrived before 1956. Palestinians who arrived after 1956 are required to apply for renewable residency permits valid for 10 years. Palestinians have traditionally been concentrated in and around Damascus, in Palestinian refugee camps.

3.10 Of the 438,000 Palestinians estimated by UNRWA to remain in Syria, over 95 per cent are in critical need of humanitarian assistance in order to survive. Almost 280,000 Palestinians have been displaced by the conflict, and an estimated 45,000 are trapped in hard-to-reach or inaccessible areas. An estimated 120,000 Palestinians have fled Syria, including over 31,000 currently in Lebanon and 16,000 who have fled to Jordan. (See also Groups of Interest).

3.11 Even before the outbreak of the conflict, Palestinians were a vulnerable population. Although they had many of the same rights as Syrians, they lagged behind in key indicators, such as infant mortality and education. UNRWA reports that Palestinian refugees remain particularly vulnerable. The crisis has severely affected Palestinian refugees in camps close to volatile areas. The US State Department's Syria 2016 Human Rights Report states that government and opposition groups have besieged and shelled Palestinian refugee camps. Five of the 12 Palestinian refugee camps in Syria are either destroyed or otherwise inaccessible to the UN. Civilian deaths and severe malnutrition have resulted; remaining camp inhabitants lack access to services and humanitarian assistance.

3.12 Most Palestinian factions, such as the PLO, have remained neutral during the current conflict. Palestinians from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command have fought on the

side of government forces in Palestinian areas in Damascus, in particular the Yarmouk refugee camp. Likewise, some individual Palestinian Islamists are fighting with Sunni opposition groups.

3.13 Though most Syrian Palestinians are exempt from conscription into the Syrian Army, the descendants of those who arrived in 1948 are conscripted to a special unit, the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA). The PLA was formed officially as part of the PLO, though it has been under effective Syrian control for decades. The PLA has largely kept out of the fighting in the current conflict. The state pursues draft dodgers or defectors from the PLA to the same extent as Syrian draft dodgers (see Draft Evaders, Military Defectors and Deserters).

Turkmen

3.14 Turkmen, who numbered approximately 200,000 prior to the outbreak of conflict, are mainly Sunni and located in opposition-controlled areas in the Turkmen Mountain area in Latakia, close to the Turkish border, as well as in Aleppo, Idlib, Homs, Tartus and the Damascus area.

3.15 Successive governments have reportedly attempted to assimilate the Turkmen community into the broader (Arab) Syrian community, including through renaming their villages, confiscating and redistributing their land and banning publications in Turkish, the traditional Turkmen language. More recently, the government has been suspicious of some of the Turkmen communities' links to Turkey. Turkey has continued to defend Turkmen communities in Syria, including by protesting against the bombing of Turkmen villages.

3.16 While broadly united in their opposition to the current Syrian government, allegiances of the Turkmen community differ. In late 2012, a range of Turkmen opposition groups formed the Syrian Turkmen Assembly and the associated armed wing, the Syrian Turkmen Brigades. The Syrian Turkmen Assembly and the Syrian Turkmen Brigades have aligned themselves with Turkey. Some Turkmen who do not support Turkey's involvement in Syria have sided with the Syrian Democratic Forces, forming the Seljuk Brigade.

3.17 During the current conflict, attacks carried out by the government or pro-government forces have destroyed some Turkmen areas. Other Turkmen-dominated areas have come under the control of ISIL. Many Turkmen have been displaced, injured or killed. The YPG, which opposes the Syrian Turkmen Brigade's links with Turkey, has also forcibly displaced those aligned with the Syrian Turkmen Brigades.

RELIGION

Alawites

3.18 Alawites are mainly located in government-controlled areas, thereby receiving some level of protection. Assad and key figures in the government are Alawites, so the Alawite community is perceived to be closely associated with the government. Despite this, in-country contacts stress that Alawites do not uniformly support the government. The US State Department's Syria 2016 Human Rights Report stated that the authorities targeted Alawites who opposed the government, including through arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and killing.

3.19 Non-state armed groups have targeted Alawites for their perceived links to, and traditional support for, the government. Some Islamists have targeted Alawites based on their perceived support for the government and for their religious beliefs, which the (largely Sunni) Islamists consider heretical. A February 2012 attack by ISIL against mainly Alawite areas of Homs caused great concern among the Alawite community, thus achieving ISIL's likely intent of fracturing the Alawite community's support for the government, and increasing broader Alawite – Sunni tensions. In May 2016, ISIL carried out two suicide bombings in the predominantly Alawite areas of Tartus and Jableh, killing 154 people and wounding more than 300 people.

Christians

3.20 Despite their minority status (approximately 10 per cent of the population), Christians are considered part of the elite within Syria and have enjoyed government protection. The founder of the ruling Ba'ath Party was a Christian and Christians are represented throughout the bureaucracy. The government has reportedly armed some Christians, including 'Popular Committees' dominated by young Christians. Christians living in government-controlled areas are unlikely to be targeted by the government on the basis of their religious identity, although, like others, individuals are likely to be targeted if perceived to oppose the government (see [Political Opinion \(actual or imputed\)](#), below).

3.21 According to the US State Department's 2015 Religious Freedom Report, societal tolerance towards Christians in non-government controlled areas has continued to decrease. The US State Department's Syria 2016 Human Rights Report records claims that the PYD or PYD-linked forces have targeted Assyrian Christians for compulsory military service. The PYD and PYD-linked forces have also allegedly seized the assets of Assyrian Christians and forcibly removed them from their land.

3.22 In areas under its control, ISIL has kidnapped, raped, and murdered Christians. It has forced some to convert to Islam, or to pay *jizya* (a protection tax for non-Muslims living under Muslim rule). In 2011, the government expelled an Italian Jesuit priest, who had lived in Syria for decades, after he voiced sympathy for the opposition. He disappeared shortly after attempting to re-enter Syria in 2013, reportedly kidnapped by ISIL. Other examples of Christians speaking out against the government include Father Jacques Mourad, who survived five months' captivity at the hands of ISIL, and subsequently criticised the involvement of external partners in Syria's conflict, including Russia, thereby implicitly criticising the government. The US State Department's Syria 2016 Human Rights Report describes a February 2015 incursion into Christian Assyrian villages in al-Hasakah, where ISIL captured 230 Assyrian Christians and forced several women into sexual slavery. Jabhat Fatah al-Sham has also killed Christians, whom they consider 'infidels', on numerous occasions.

Druze

3.23 The Druze are an ethno-religious group whose faith is a monotheistic Abrahamic religion that originally derived from Ismaili Islam. Many Druze live in the Jabal al-Arab area in the Suweida governorate where they constitute the majority of the local population. There has been limited fighting in the areas where Druze constitute a local majority; these areas remain nominally under government control, although the government presence in these areas is limited.

3.24 Most Druze look to the government for protection. The government is unlikely to target Druze living in government-controlled areas on basis of their religious identity. Outside government-controlled areas,

anti-government forces have targeted Druze because of their religious identity. In mid-2015, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, who consider Druze heretics, shot 20 Druze in Idlib governorate.

Shi'a

3.25 Most Shi'a live in areas controlled by the government or pro-government forces and are perceived to look to the government for protection. The government is unlikely to target Shi'a living in government-controlled areas because of their religious identity.

3.26 In ISIL-controlled areas Shi'a are at risk of violence because of their religious identity. Suspected allegiance to the government is likely to be an overlapping factor with religious identity, affecting the treatment of Shi'a in opposition-controlled areas. Shi'a perceived to be associated with Hizballah are at high risk of violence in all opposition-controlled areas. Shi'a may also be at risk of violence or persecution from other Islamist or secular non-state armed groups.

Sunnis

3.27 The government or pro-government forces are more likely to target Sunnis for their perceived support of the opposition, rather than on religious grounds. This is largely because the armed opposition groups are predominantly Sunni, and find shelter and support in Sunni areas. In-country contacts have provided some examples of Sunnis who support the government being able to live safely in government-controlled areas, including Damascus.

3.28 As the conflict has unfolded and intensified, government bombardment of Sunni-dominated areas has increased. In many areas, Sunnis' religious affiliation is viewed as a proxy for political allegiance. The government and pro-government forces have killed, arrested and physically abused Sunnis in an effort to defeat the armed insurrection. According to the US State Department, pro-government forces have forcibly displaced Sunnis, with the reported intention of attempting to alter the sectarian demography in Sunni-dominated areas.

3.29 In areas controlled by ISIL or other Islamist groups (such as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham), Sunnis have had an extremist interpretation of Islam imposed on them, and have been coerced into supporting ISIL or other Islamist extremists. In areas under its control, ISIL has imposed its version of *sharia* law, and continues to carry out executions and severe corporal punishments (amputations, stoning) on those perceived to violate its strict religious rules.

POLITICAL OPINION (ACTUAL OR IMPUTED)

3.30 On a communal scale, individuals have been targeted on numerous occasions because of living in an area which is considered to support (or is controlled by) one group or another. Individuals in these areas are subject to direct—if generalised—violence through aerial bombing, shelling, or other indiscriminate forms of attack.

3.31 The Syrian identity card displays its owner's place of origin, and individuals are generally perceived (by both the government and non-state armed groups) to support one side over the other based on their

place of origin. Car registration can also give some indication of a person's place of origin. DFAT is unable to assess how this has affected the safety of particular individuals.

3.32 The government has detained critics and charged them with a range of political crimes, including terrorism. In 2012, the government adopted new counter-terrorism legislation that criminalised almost all peaceful opposition activity, allowing the use of military courts to punish activists. People charged under this legislation have not received a fair trial. The Violations Documentation Centre database includes the names and profiles of over 65,000 individuals detained since the beginning of the conflict. The US State Department's Syria 2016 Human Rights Report states the government often detains people without charge or trial, and without informing their families. The government denies the extent of detentions and disappearances.

3.33 Detention of prisoners, both by the government and non-state armed groups, including ISIL, has been associated with human rights abuses, torture, rape and extra-judicial killings. ISIL has used torture and execution of its detainees as propaganda for its cause. In December 2015, Human Rights Watch published a report based on thousands of photographs by 'Caesar', a Syrian military photographer, documenting conditions inside government prisons. Amnesty International and the United States government have accused the Syrian government of building a crematorium to cover up the mass killings of detainees in a military prison outside Damascus, in which it reportedly executed up to 50 detainees a day. The victims were reportedly overwhelmingly civilians who opposed the government.

3.34 A number of government-approved opposition political groups operate in government-controlled areas, mostly under the umbrella of the National Coordination Bureau (sometimes Committee) for the Forces of Democratic Change (frequently shortened to the National Coordination Bureau (or Committee), or NCB or NCC), that have not militarised and argue for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Individuals in these groups self-censor to avoid crossing known, if unspoken, red lines when criticising the government.

3.35 In opposition-controlled areas, where application of the rule of law varies widely, the controlling non-state armed group is likely to perceive any opposition as a threat to be met with violence. Armed groups have reportedly targeted people with family members working for the government in other parts of the country, because they are perceived to support the government. The extent of this practice is unknown.

GROUPS OF INTEREST

Women and Children

3.36 Women and girls are routinely subject to sexual violence at the hands of both government and non-state armed forces. It can be difficult for victims of sexual violence to obtain medical care. Despite a constitutional provision entitling men and women to equal treatment, women are poorly represented in senior positions in the government, and particularly the judiciary. With the exception of areas under Kurdish control, the status of women is even worse in areas controlled by non-state armed groups, particularly under ISIL and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham.

3.37 DFAT assesses that women in Syria face official and societal discrimination. DFAT assesses that women and children in Syria are at extremely high risk of violence, including sexual violence.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

3.38 Homosexuality is illegal under Syrian law and societal discrimination against sexual minorities is high. Local media reports state that government security forces have used accusations of homosexuality as a pretext to detain and torture civilians. Victims are reluctant to report such abuse for fear of societal discrimination. ISIL and other Islamist groups controlling parts of Syrian territory consider homosexuality to be a capital offence. ISIL has posted photographs and videos of boys and men being pushed from the tops of buildings or stoned to death for 'being gay'.

3.39 DFAT assesses that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) individuals in Syria face a high risk of official and societal discrimination. DFAT assesses that LGBTI individuals in Syria face a high risk of violence.

Draft Evaders, Military Defectors and Deserters

3.40 The government continues to send conscription notices to individuals in areas under its control and has the will and capacity to arrest those who do not comply. Conscription has traditionally applied to males between the age of 18 and 42. In-country contacts report that the upper age limit has been raised to 50 and that individuals who have previously completed their military conscription are being re-conscripted as the conflict has continued and the government has needed to bolster its forces.

3.41 In-country contacts report that a wish to avoid conscription was a reason that many families have fled Syria, although this is becoming increasingly difficult with tighter restrictions placed on Syrians' ability to flee to surrounding countries. While the individuals involved are compelled to commence military service or gaoled by the state, the government does not usually pursue the families of draft dodgers.

3.42 Prior to the conflict, exemptions were possible for men who were the only sons in the family. Others obtained exemption by paying a fee. Individuals undertaking tertiary studies were able to obtain a postponement. Obtaining exemption from military service has become harder since the conflict began.

3.43 Syrians who have served in the military, or who are exempt from military service, receive papers that show this status. Males of military age stopped at state checkpoints are usually required to show these papers; failure to do so often results in arrest or violence.

3.44 Many people who wanted to defect from the military have done so by now. These individuals and their families would face a high risk of violence if caught by the government or pro-government forces. There are reports that non-state armed groups have viewed with suspicion individuals recently seeking to defect.

Syrians in Lebanon

3.45 As of January 2017, the Government of Lebanon (GoL) estimated that Lebanon hosted 1.5 million displaced Syrians, including 1.01 million registered with the UNHCR, and a further 31,500 Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS). The GoL has reported that displaced Syrians constitute more than 25 per cent of Lebanon's population.

3.46 Sympathetic (predominantly Sunni) communities in Lebanon initially warmly welcomed displaced Syrians. Within its capacity, the GoL provided generous support, including access to health and education

services. However, the issue of displaced Syrians seeking protection within Lebanon remains politically, economically and socially sensitive. As the number of displaced Syrians and associated pressures continue to grow, resentment towards displaced Syrians has increased. Some communities see displaced Syrians as creating insecurity by hosting Syrian fighters and attracting retribution from the Government of Syria, while others (particularly those from poorer Lebanese communities) believe they themselves receive little support while donors are providing significant support to displaced Syrians (although support to displaced Syrians more broadly continues to decrease due to limited funding). There is a widespread perception that Syrian refugees have displaced Lebanese workers, particularly in terms of unskilled and low-skilled jobs.

3.47 Lebanon's legal stance towards displaced Syrians remains ambiguous and complicated. Lebanon is not party to the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees and lacks any significant domestic legislation on the issue. In 2003, Lebanon signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with UNHCR, allowing the organisation to register individuals seeking protection and to conduct protection status determinations in country. The MoU emphasises that Lebanon does not consider itself an asylum country, and that the term 'asylum seeker' means an individual seeking asylum in a country other than Lebanon. While technically still valid, this MoU has remained largely unapplied in the context of displaced Syrians.

3.48 From mid-2014, the GoL started implementing measures to reduce the number of displaced Syrians entering Lebanon. Previously, Syrians were able to enter Lebanon on a six-month residency permit that was renewable for an additional six months, free of charge. As the number of displaced Syrians increased, restrictions incrementally tightened, including the introduction of a \$200 residency fee that saw an estimated 60 per cent of displaced Syrians lose their legal status within Lebanon. This fee no longer applies to UNHCR-registered displaced Syrians, but those who have neither registered with UNHCR nor secured a Lebanese sponsor are still required to pay. The GoL has also introduced measures requiring Syrians seeking entry into Lebanon to prove that the purpose of their visit falls within one of six categories – tourism, business, study, transit, short-stay or medical. While the GoL initially indicated that it would continue to allow displaced Syrians to enter Lebanon on humanitarian grounds, in May 2015 it requested UNHCR to cease registration of displaced Syrians pending the establishment of a mechanism that would allow the GoL to approve registration based on certain humanitarian criteria. The border between Lebanon and Syria is now effectively closed to refugees and, as of July 2017, there were no signs that a mechanism to allow displaced Syrians to enter Lebanon would materialise.

3.49 The GoL implemented a 'Pledge Not to Work' for displaced Syrians in 2015. This was subsequently replaced by a 'Pledge to Abide by Lebanese Law' which allowed displaced Syrians to work in three sectors which in-country contacts suggest have been traditionally difficult to fill with Lebanese, including construction, agriculture and environmental services.

3.50 An estimated 60 per cent of displaced Syrians are unregistered, and many lack adequate identity documentation. As a result, many Syrians have been unable to access basic services and freedom of movement is limited (identity documents are required to pass checkpoints).

3.51 A range of actors opposes the establishment of new camps. Christian (and, to varying degrees, other) groups are opposed to establishing camps for displaced Syrians on the grounds that Palestinian camps in Lebanon have become permanent communities, while Hizballah has opposed establishing camps predominantly due to concerns that an overwhelmingly Sunni influx of refugees would shift the demographic balance within Lebanon against its interests. As such, the majority of displaced Syrians live in Lebanese communities or informal settlements, mainly in the Beka'a governorate, followed by the North governorate, Beirut governorate and South governorate.

3.52 Municipal police forces and local vigilante groups have begun enforcing curfews targeted at Syrian refugees, although such curfews are illegal under Lebanese law. In addition, Human Rights Watch has reported an increasing number of violent attacks by private Lebanese citizens against individuals perceived to be Syrian, and that Lebanese authorities are failing to provide adequate protection in response.

Palestinians from Syria

3.53 There was a significant drop in the number of Palestinian refugees from Syria between 2014 and 2016 as many attempted to flee to Europe. In-country contacts suggest that this was a result of the deteriorating living conditions within Lebanon.

3.54 An estimated 20 per cent of displaced Palestinians from Syria are not registered. While there are some exceptions that allow Syrians to enter Lebanon, displaced Palestinians from Syria now require either proof of an appointment with an embassy in Lebanon or proof of onward travel in order to enter Lebanon. Some have been able to enter outside of these regulations, possibly through bribery.

3.55 UNRWA has now withdrawn cash assistance for housing for Palestinian refugees from Syria, which was the main source of income for many individuals from this cohort.

Syrians in Jordan

3.56 As of August 2017, there were more than 660,000 Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR in Jordan, comprising 10 per cent of the local population. However, the Government of Jordan (GoJ) estimates that 1.3 million Syrians reside in the country, including those in need of protection who are not registered with the UN as well as Syrians who were working in Jordan prior to the conflict. Twenty per cent of registered Syrian refugees reside in purpose-built camps, while the remainder live in the Jordanian community. The GoJ's Syrian Refugee Affairs Directorate in partnership with UNHCR manages the two largest camps, Zaatari and Azraq, which host 80,000 and 53,000 Syrians respectively. Many refugees located outside the camps are in areas already considered poor, which has placed an immense strain on local infrastructure, services and social cohesion.

3.57 Jordanian legislation does not provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the GoJ does not have a formal system of protecting refugees. Although it is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol, the GoJ generally respects UNHCR's eligibility determinations regarding asylum seekers. A 1998 MoU between the GoJ and UNHCR provides the legal framework under which refugees are processed. It contains the definition of a refugee, confirms adherence to the principle of non-refoulement, and allows recognised refugees a maximum stay of one year, during which period UNHCR must find a durable solution.

3.58 In practice, the GoJ has provided ongoing support to Syrian refugees since the crisis began, including bringing the humanitarian needs and longer-term resilience needs of all affected people in Jordan together under one nationally led response strategy. At an international donor conference held in February 2016, the GoJ committed to provide access to quality formal education for all children in Jordan, a pledge that has included opening 198 schools in double-shifts. Despite the progress though, numerous barriers exist for Syrian children to access education, and approximately 41 per cent are still out of formal schooling.

3.59 The GoJ also set a target of creating 200,000 formal employment opportunities for Syrian refugees at the conference, with the help of the international community. This measure has included removing the

fee for work permits and opening up access to new professions previously reserved for Jordanians. As a result, the number of Syrian refugees with work permits grew from 4,000 to 40,000 between December 2015 and December 2016. In August 2017, Jordan also began issuing non-employer and non-position specific work permits in the construction sector to simplify further access to the formal workforce – the first permits of their kind issued to Syrian refugees in the region. Syrians still face many employment barriers in Jordan, however, largely to protect Jordanian workers. Restrictive measures include closing sectors, pushing displaced Syrians into unskilled roles that non-Jordanians traditionally filled. Given the GoJ only began issuing substantial numbers of work permits to Syrian refugees after February 2016, many had sought informal employment, placing them at higher risk of exploitation. Consequently, much of the focus on work permits now is to formalise the employment of those in the informal sector. As with Lebanon, Jordanian communities are sensitive to the rights of displaced Syrians to secure employment.

3.60 The influx of refugees and the security risks associated with the ongoing conflict in Syria have significantly affected Jordan. Following a June 2016 suicide bombing at an informal crossing on Jordan's north-east border, the GoJ effectively closed its borders with Syria. As a result, as at August 2017, an estimated 45,000 Syrians are living in makeshift accommodation on the Syrian side of the border in an area referred to as 'The Berm'. Due to the harsh environment and persistent insecurity, the population is largely without access to supplies such as food and water. Severe medical cases may still enter Jordan on a case-by-case basis for treatment, but they are returned to the Berm following treatment.

3.61 According to the US State Department's Syria 2016 Human Rights Report, the GoJ has forcibly returned some displaced Syrians to Syria, including for security reasons as well as those found working illegally, living in informal tented settlements, or not presenting documentation when moving internally, while forcing others to return to formal camps.

3.62 Between 2011 and 2013, the GoJ confiscated the documentation of Syrians entering Jordan. During this time, some displaced Syrians attempted to secure alternate documentation, which was frequently unavailable. While there have been increasing efforts to return confiscated documentation, in-country contacts suggest there have been numerous instances of documentation being permanently lost.

Palestinians from Syria

3.63 An estimated 16,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS) have registered with UNRWA in Jordan. The majority suffer abject poverty and live with precarious legal status. The GoJ's 2013 announcement that it would not allow entry into Jordan of Palestinian refugees from Syria remains in effect and in-country contacts suggest that thousands of PRS remain in Jordan illegally, while many others are attempting to access fraudulent Syrian passports in order to enter Jordan.

3.64 Authorities subjected PRS in Cyber City (a camp in a closed facility in Ramtha) to strict controls if they wished to leave the facility. Unlike other Syrian refugees at Cyber City, PRS were not entitled to the bailout system of a Jordanian guarantor. The authorities did not officially inform PRS for the reasons for their restricted movement. In October 2016, the GoJ closed Cyber City and moved remaining residents to King Abdullah Park camp. Restrictions on movement of PRS remain in place at King Abdullah Park.

3.65 In-country contacts reported that PRS in Jordan are often reluctant to access basic services because their irregular status makes them vulnerable to detention. In-country contacts say PRS with links to the 1971 Black September Conflict between the PLO and Jordan fear detention and deportation.

Syrians in Turkey

3.66 In 2017, more than three million Syrian refugees were registered with UNHCR in Turkey. Up to one million Syrians not registered with UNHCR may also be in Turkey (exact figures are unknown). Only 10 per cent of displaced Syrians reside in purpose-built camps, while the remainder live in the Turkish community, primarily in the provinces bordering Syria in southern and south-eastern Turkey, and in the lower-income outskirts of Istanbul, Izmir and Ankara.

3.67 Although it is a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Turkey limits its obligation to people originating from Europe. Turkish legislation therefore does not provide for granting asylum or refugee status to Syrians in Turkey.

3.68 Instead of asylum or refugee status, Syrians in Turkey are accorded 'temporary protection status'. On 22 October 2014, the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Turkey issued a Regulation on Temporary Protection establishing the rules on registration and documentation for temporarily protected persons, and clarifying rights and entitlements in the fields of education, health and employment, and social assistance for the temporary protection beneficiaries. Registered persons obtain a 'Temporary Protection Identification Card' and a 'Foreigner's Identification Number' (listed on the card), which gives access to health care and other services, though only in the city in which a person first registered. Due to high demand and a lack of capacity in the migration directorates, provincial police officers routinely conduct registration interviews. In practice, applicants often face lengthy waits for registration.

3.69 Syrians in Turkey face significant challenges including lack of legal employment opportunities, child labour, limited educational opportunities, limited access to housing, and mobility restrictions. Many displaced Syrians are not registered in cities across Turkey and hence unable to access basic services and protection. Syrians also face language barriers and administrative impediments to entering formal employment in Turkey. Lack of understanding of legislation and a lack of uniformity in applying rules on the part of local authorities further impedes formal employment. In September 2016, the European Union committed EUR 3 billion to assist Turkey to manage Syrian refugees, but Turkey claims much of this funding has yet to arrive.

3.70 The Ministry of Labour issued a Regulation on Work Permits of Foreigners under Temporary Protection in January 2016 to provide formal employment opportunities to Syrians in Turkey. Since 15 January 2016, registered Syrian refugees who have been in Turkey for more than six months are eligible to apply for work permits in the province where they had first registered for temporary protection. However, until June 2017, only 7,000 Syrians under temporary protection had actually received work permits. An estimated 300,000-500,000 work informally, due to a lack of information about work permit procedures, the language barrier, and complicated, labour-intensive and costly application procedures.

3.71 According to UNICEF, some 380,000 Syrian school-age children living in Turkey are not enrolled in any type of educational institution. The language barrier, the lack of catch-up provisions, and economic factors are key challenges faced by displaced Syrians in putting their children into school. Many school-age Syrian children pursue illegal low-skilled labour to help support their families. In 2016, Turkey decided to integrate Syrian children into the Turkish public school system over three years by phasing out 400 temporary education centres, which had employed Syrian teachers for a few hours each day to teach a modified version of the Syrian national curriculum in Arabic.

3.72 Housing has become scarcer and rental prices have almost doubled in provinces along the Syrian border. Although displaced Syrians have access to formal rent contracts under the temporary protection

regime, there are anecdotal reports of landlords demanding six months' of rent payment in advance, evictions at short notice, and discrimination based on large family size.

3.73 Displaced Syrians are subject to mobility restrictions following recent terrorist attacks by Syrian suicide bombers. Turkish authorities also restrict mobility to prevent the flow of refugees on the western border, although this has led to increased use of people smugglers.

3.74 While violence against refugees is not so far widespread, there are signs that host communities increasingly perceive displaced Syrians negatively and as a potential security threat, particularly after President Erdogan announced in July 2016 that Turkey would grant citizenship to around 300,000 Syrians and their families. In-country contacts reported that a nationalist backlash to this announcement caused many Syrians to feel more exposed and under increased societal pressure. The government did not implement the citizenship plans. UNHCR has documented 133 violent incidents against (mainly Syrian) refugees in Turkey since July 2016, with 90 between January and July 2017. According to UN figures, while violence in 2016 was limited to some provinces, in 2017 it had spread across the country. The UN reports that individual disputes often lead to mass anti-refugee protests, incited on social media. Community and media attitudes towards refugees were very negative. Root causes were economic pressure, competition for livelihoods and services, and prejudice. The Turkish government has condemned the violence and is trying to prosecute perpetrators, with mixed results.

3.75 The increasing number of cross-border and terrorist attacks emanating from the border region has become a major source of government and community concern in Turkey. ISIL and other Syrian opposition groups use Turkey's southern provinces, where many Syrians are located, as smuggling routes. In early 2016, the Turkish government began construction of a 900 km wall on the Syrian border, and despatched additional police and military units. Turkish forces have conducted artillery and air strikes in Syria near the border, as well as a military operation in northern Syria, called Operation 'Euphrates Shield', which lasted from August 2016 to March 2017.

4. COMPLEMENTARY PROTECTION CLAIMS

4.1 After more than six years of fighting, civilians continue to bear the brunt of violence waged by warring parties in the Syrian conflict. Government and pro-government forces continue to attack civilian targets, including hospitals, schools and water facilities. Armed opposition groups have launched numerous indiscriminate attacks with indirect fire artillery systems, including with unguided, locally manufactured weapons, killing and maiming civilians. ISIL and other terrorist groups, including Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, continue to perpetrate severe human rights violations against civilians. As a result, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the death toll reached 470,000, including 96,000 civilians, between 2011 and March 2017. A further 145,000 people have been reported missing.

4.2 There is a diverse range of armed groups fighting in Syria. Some are small local militias, while others are large forces or alliances of multiple smaller groups. Their ideologies and practices vary widely. The UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (CoI) reported that both sides (encompassing many separate actors) committed war crimes in the battle for Aleppo in late 2016. The different state and non-state actors are pursuing different objectives in different areas of Syria, making it difficult to provide an accurate description of who is targeting whom, and to assess the likelihood of any particular individual being at risk. Given the large number of government and non-government actors, this is not an exhaustive outline. DFAT is unable to provide categorical assessments on complementary protection claims, but provides the information below as an overview of some of the many complementary protection issues faced by civilians.

GOVERNMENT ACTORS

4.3 The government and pro-government forces kill, torture and detain civilians on a large scale, and deny civilians the right to fair public trial. Impunity for government actors is pervasive and deeply embedded.

4.4 According to the CoI, the government has violated international law and has perpetrated attacks against civilians, including by using chemical weapons, cluster munitions, and incendiary weapons in civilian areas. The OPCW – UN JIM found that government forces used chemical weapons on at least three occasions (see [Security situation](#), above).

4.5 Amnesty International's February 2017 report 'Human Slaughterhouse: Mass Hangings and Extermination at Saydnaya Prison, Syria' found that an estimated 13,000 people had been hanged since 2011 at Saydnaya Military Prison near Damascus. Amnesty International claims most of those hanged were civilians perceived to be opposed to the government, and many were tortured to extract false confessions and sentenced in a summary and arbitrary manner by a so-called 'Military Field Court'. Amnesty International estimates a further 17,000 people have died in prisons across Syria since 2011 because of acute inhumane conditions and the common use of torture.

4.6 Despite the lifting of the State of Emergency in 2011, the government has retained the right to arrest suspects without charge and hold them incommunicado. Government forces have detained an estimated 215,000 individuals since 2011. Human Rights Watch estimates that approximately 35,000–50,000 people have been charged with terrorism offences. The Syrian government has released several hundred prisoners in ad hoc amnesties.

4.7 The Col has reported enforced disappearances by government forces. Government forces commonly detain individuals based on their perceived affiliations. DFAT considers credible reports of people being detained to coerce their relatives to surrender. Conditions of release vary, and can involve payment, a confession or provision of a list of names of regime opponents. Credible allegations of authorities in Syria conducting arbitrary arrests and disappearances pre-date the current conflict.

4.8 Other armed groups including Syrian militias and foreign forces – including Lebanese Hizballah and Iranian and Russian military personnel – have also been active in Syria in support of the government. Pro-government forces have been implicated in human rights abuses, including alongside Syrian government forces.

NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS

4.9 Many armed groups oppose the government of Syria. These include listed terrorist organisations as well as more moderate groups, such as the YPG and those fighting under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces. Some estimates suggest up to 1,000 groups have fought in Syria. Some armed opposition groups have established informal judicial systems and detention facilities in areas under their control (see [State Protection](#), below). The Col has reported repeated indiscriminate attacks on civilians by all parties to the conflict. The US State Department has reported targeting of journalists by opposition forces.

ISIL

4.10 ISIL (otherwise known as Daesh, or the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria – ISIS) is a Sunni terrorist group and former al-Qaeda affiliate that adheres to a global jihadist ideology. It follows an extreme interpretation of Islam that promotes sectarian violence and targets those that do not agree with its interpretations as infidels and apostates. ISIL's announcement of a caliphate claimed the land from Aleppo in Syria to Diyala in Iraq, the Sunni-dominated areas of both countries. It aimed to establish a Salafist-orientated Islamist state spanning Iraq, Syria and other parts of the Levant and now operates in parts of Syria and Iraq as a consolidated organisation separate from al-Qaeda and its affiliates. ISIL has also accepted pledges of allegiance from a number of like-minded groups elsewhere in the world to further its influence globally.

4.11 Since its formation, ISIL has focussed on capturing and consolidating (and more recently, defending) its control over areas of Iraq and Syria by stoking sectarian tensions between, and within, Sunni and Shi'a, and capitalising on Sunni disenchantment. Although DFAT is unable to confirm the exact number of ISIL fighters in Syria and Iraq, observers estimate that the total is at its lowest level since ISIL's rise, and is probably less than 20,000, down from previous estimates of 65,000.

4.12 In Syria, ISIL has fought against government and pro-government forces, as well as non-state armed groups. It directly targets civilians. ISIL conducts daily attacks in Syria, ranging from low-capability attacks with small arms through to complex, coordinated mixed-mode attacks with firearms, indirect fire and explosives. ISIL has industrialised the production of improvised explosive devices and litters areas it controls,

including civilian residences, with booby traps. Its attacks often aim to maximise casualties and publicity by targeting crowds and gatherings, often using vehicle or individual-borne explosive devices, including suicide attacks. The group incites and conducts violence against Muslims and non-Muslim religious minorities within the region, and conducts public executions and violent punishments in areas it controls. It also targets Sunnis who refuse to comply with the group's edicts.

4.13 As of September 2017, ISIL had lost 65 per cent of territory it previously held in Syria due to operations by local forces supported by the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIL, other non-state armed groups and government and pro-government forces. ISIL continued to lose ground in the early part of October 2017, due to intensified campaigns by these forces. However, it retains the capability to conduct counter-attacks in areas it has lost. Areas liberated from ISIL often require considerable de-mining and reconstruction in order to become habitable again.

Jabhat Fatah al-Sham

4.14 In July 2016, al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, rebranded as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in an attempt to distance itself from the al-Qaeda brand and attract more local support. Jabhat Fatah al-Sham is now the largest militant group in an umbrella group of jihadist forces known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Jabhat Fatah al-Sham adheres to a jihadist ideology that encourages violence to pursue its goals, including removing the current Syrian government and creating a Salafist-oriented Sunni Islamist state in Syria, which it plans to expand into an Islamist caliphate under its own rule throughout the Levant. Although Jabhat Fatah al-Sham enjoys cooperative relationships with some like-minded non-state actors, in the long term it seeks to unify the global Salafi-jihadi movement under the al-Qaeda umbrella.

4.15 Although DFAT cannot confirm the exact number of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham members, the group once had a fighting force of around 5,000 fighters, along with further members in support roles. It is known to have operated several training camps in north-western Syria. Most of its members are Syrian, but around 30 per cent of its forces are foreign fighters from a wide range of countries.

4.16 In addition to fighting against rival opposition and jihadist groups, including ISIL, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham aims to influence and control other groups by offering assistance and alliances. Jabhat Fatah al-Sham has tried to bolster its support by providing humanitarian supplies and, in areas under its control, establishing informal governance structures and setting up services such as electricity and water. Jabhat Fatah al-Sham has used violence against moderate non-state actors to expand its control of opposition-held territory and intimidate smaller groups into pledging allegiance. Jabhat Fatah al-Sham has publicly stated its intention to expel or convert non-Sunnis, particularly Christians and Alawites.

4.17 Jabhat Fatah al-Sham undertakes a range of militant activities and terrorist attacks, using improvised explosive devices, suicide attacks, snipers and small-arms attacks, as well as kidnapping and executions throughout Syria. It conducts attacks primarily in urban areas and often targets civilians. The group has also executed civilians in areas under its control and soldiers captured during military operations.

Other Armed Groups

4.18 Ahrar al-Sham, Jaish al-Islam and Faylaq al-Rahman are some of the largest groups that control territory in the more populated areas of western Syria. The armed opposition groups in Syria have increasingly become radicalised throughout the conflict, with some groups aligning themselves with terrorist



organisations in particular areas at some stages in the conflict. Many armed groups have allegedly committed human rights abuses and there are credible reports their operations have affected civilians, including, in some cases, through forced displacement, confiscation or destruction of homes, civilian casualties, and extra-judicial detention and killings.

5. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

STATE PROTECTION

5.1 The CoI has reported on several occasions that the government and pro-government forces have committed crimes against humanity, including extermination, murder, rape or other forms of sexual violence, torture, imprisonment, enforced disappearance, use of indiscriminate weapons (including chemical weapons) and other inhuman acts during the course of the current conflict.

5.2 The government's ability to maintain effective control and provide adequate state protection is weak due to its pre-occupation with the conflict. In government-controlled areas that have been relatively unaffected by the conflict, such as parts of Damascus, normal state protection procedures are largely in place. The government has committed and continues to commit significant human rights abuses against Syrians (see [Government Actors](#) above). In-country contacts also suggest that impunity is pervasive. The US State Department's Syria 2016 Human Rights Report notes no known convictions of personnel for abuse or corruption, and there are no known incidents of government action to reform the security apparatus.

5.3 Opposition groups have established alternate structures in the areas they control. For example, the US State Department's Syria 2016 Human Rights Report states that armed opposition groups have established informal judicial systems and detention facilities, which vary greatly in organisation and adherence to judicial norms. In some opposition-controlled areas, the Penal Code applies; other areas apply the draft 1966 Arab League Unified Penal Code (which is based on Islamic law). In-country contacts reported that while justice mechanisms existed, they were barely functioning, particularly in areas that were experiencing a higher level of conflict.

INTERNAL RELOCATION

5.4 While there are some areas of Syria that have been less affected by the conflict than others, conflict has the propensity to escalate in these areas at short notice and all areas of the country have, to some extent, been affected. As the conflict has worsened, over half the population has been forced to relocate (both internally and to surrounding countries) often as a necessity to seek safety. Significant and indiscriminate targeting of civilians has led to an understandable fear amongst displaced populations.

5.5 In-country contacts report that some individuals were more likely to flee to government-controlled areas (given the government's increasing dominance and territorial gains). As the government takes control of various areas, individuals can decide to stay or move to government-controlled areas. However, should the individual be perceived to be aligned with the opposition, this would not be possible, and there are reports of reprisals against individuals following government capture of areas controlled by armed opposition groups.

5.6 Loose command along with a lack of respect for international law affect the treatment of individuals attempting to relocate internally. In Damascus where in-country contacts report that the security situation is relatively stable, the government and other pro-government forces control checkpoints, making it difficult to assess accurately whether the area is indeed 'safe'.

5.7 In recent years, government and opposition forces have struck a number of so-called 'reconciliation agreements' in besieged areas. These deals often involve armed fighters and their families moving to opposition-held territory in northern Syria, while civilians come back under government control. Other deals have involved forced displacement of civilians to other areas. These agreements have often followed months or years of siege, including bombardment and restrictions on humanitarian aid and essential services. Services in Idlib governorate, the destination for most evacuees, have been under strain due to the influx of fighters and civilians from besieged areas.

TREATMENT OF RETURNEES

5.8 UNHCR estimates that as at 30 June 2017, more than 440,000 internally displaced people had returned to their homes in Syria during the first six months of 2017. In parallel, UNHCR has monitored over 31,000 Syrian refugees returning from neighbouring countries. Since 2015, some 260,000 refugees have returned to Syria, primarily from Turkey into northern Syria. The pull-factors for refugees to return to Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Damascus and other areas include family reunion, to secure or sell property, and a real or perceived improvement in security in parts of the country. However, returnees still face security and protection risks in many parts of the country. They face limited livelihoods, reduced infrastructure and poor provision of services such as health and education.

5.9 The UN continues to emphasise that conditions are not safe for return. UNHCR has been unable to verify whether all returns have been voluntary, with some reports suggesting that, in some cases, the authorities in neighbouring countries have applied pressure to refugees to return.

5.10 DFAT assesses that authorities may view individuals who have left Syria with suspicion.

DOCUMENTATION

5.11 The Syrian government has traditionally provided good documentation to its citizens. However, given the conflict has now entered its seventh year and has resulted in significant displacement, many Syrians either no longer have their documentation or possess expired documentation. As Syrian nationality facilitates access to some rights and services in Turkey and Jordan, and to refugee status in Europe, documentation is frequently forged. Many displaced Syrians have cited lack of documentation as a significant protection concern, particularly in relation to their property rights. Both state and non-state actors issue documentation, with detectable difference between the two. Documentation issued by non-state actors is more susceptible to fraud, and to being fraudulently obtained. Documentation, particularly non-original documentation, is becoming increasingly difficult to verify.

5.12 Outside Syria, documentation is accessible from Syrian Embassies. For example, Syrian citizens can obtain a passport from the Syrian Embassy in Jordan. However, in-country contacts stated that passports issued by the Syrian Embassy in Jordan are only valid for two years (as opposed to the usual validity of six years). In-country contacts suggested that the limited validity allows the government to maintain information on Syrian citizens in neighbouring countries as well as raise significant revenue.

Civil Documentation

5.13 Prior to the outbreak of conflict, Syria was undertaking a comprehensive process of digitising civil documentation. The conflict has significantly disrupted this process. In-country contacts stated there was no process for accessing this database or verifying civil documentation. They further reported that there were some local-level initiatives to issue civil documentation, although there was little information available on this. Civil documentation is therefore often not recognised.

5.14 In-country contacts said that civil documentation (particularly birth certificates and death certificates) was becoming increasingly difficult to obtain due to the exodus of medical professionals (who are required to certify birth and death certificates) from Syria. Further, the ongoing conflict and significant displacement have made it logistically difficult to obtain civil documentation. It is therefore likely that an individual from Syria would not have been able to obtain accurate civil documentation, or have the ability to verify and obtain copies of lost civil documentation.

National Identity Cards

5.15 The Civil Registrar within the Civil Affairs Department of the Ministry of the Interior issues National Identity Cards. In-country contacts report that National Identity Cards have good security features. Individuals over the age of 14 can obtain National Identity Cards in person, free-of-charge. Applicants are fingerprinted during the application process. They must provide their birth certificate and Family Book, which is issued upon the marriage of the parents. National Identity Cards do not expire, and therefore there is no requirement for renewal unless the form of the National Identity Card is changed (for example, between 2003 and 2005, all National Identity Cards had to be renewed and replaced with plastic National Identity Cards).

5.16 A person entering military service exchanges their National Identity Card for a Military Identity Card for the period of military service (at the conclusion of which it is exchanged for a National Identity Card). Military Identity Cards have similar security features to National ID Cards.

Passports

5.17 Introduced in 2008, the version of the Syrian passport as at July 2017 includes 'Syrian Product' on the rear end page. The previous two versions were produced in France and therefore included 'Imprimerie Nationale France' on the rear end page. All three versions are visually similar, although there are small differences that may incorrectly lead an individual to suspect fraud.

5.18 The Department of Immigration and Passports issues passports. Applicants must submit an application, four photographs and their Identity Card (or Individual Civil Record if the applicant is a minor). Males over the age 18 must also provide a letter of approval from the Military Drafting Office.

5.19 According to contacts who undertook a mission inside Syria, it takes approximately 24 hours to issue a passport, which are valid for six years when issued in Syria. Males who are about to reach conscription age are issued with passports that have only two years validity.

5.20 Legislative changes in April 2017 increased the fee for passport renewals to USD 300 for regular process and USD 800 for an expedited process. This legislation also cancelled passport renewals, so Syrians



with expired passports are only able to renew their passports at the new price, rather than extend them, as was previous practice. This reportedly makes Syrian passports the most expensive in the world. Proof of Syrian identity is a marketable commodity as it facilitates refugee claims in Europe and there are reports of counterfeit Syrian passports selling for up to USD 2,000.