



European Asylum Support Office

Syria

Targeting of individuals

Country of Origin Information Report



SUPPORT IS OUR MISSION



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Country of Origin Information Report

March 2020

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Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Legal Service and Country Information Unit

ACCORD, the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation

It must be noted that the review carried out by the mentioned departments, experts or organisations contributes to the overall quality of the report but does not necessarily imply their formal endorsement of the final report, which is the full responsibility of EASO.

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Disclaimer

This report was written according to the EASO COI Report Methodology (2012).¹ The report is based on carefully selected sources of information. All sources used are referenced.

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

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

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

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

The drafting of this report was finalised on 5 December 2019. Some additional information was added during the finalisation of this report in response to feedback received during the quality control process, until 30 January 2019. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this report. More information on the reference period for this report can be found in the methodology section of the [Introduction](#)

¹ The EASO methodology is largely based on the Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information (COI), 2008, and can be downloaded from the EASO website: <http://www.easo.europa.eu>.

Glossary and abbreviations

CoI	Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic
CPJ	Committee to Protect Journalists
DIS	Danish Immigration Service
FIS	Finnish Immigration Service
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GoS	Government of Syria
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant; also known as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Islamic State (IS), or Daesh
ISW	Institute for the Study of War
KNC	Kurdish National Council
NDF	National Defence Forces
NLF	National Liberation Front
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights
PHR	Physicians for Human Rights
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Kurdish)
RSF	Reporters Sans Frontières/Reporters Without Borders
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SDPP	Syrian Democratic People's Party
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SHRC	Syrian Human Rights Committee
SJAC	Syria Justice and Accountability Centre
SNA	Syrian National Army
SNHR	Syrian Network for Human Rights
SOHR	Syrian Observatory of Human Rights
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
YPG	Kurdish People's Protection Units
YPJ	Kurdish Women's Protection Units

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide relevant information regarding the targeting of individuals in Syria, for international protection status determination, including refugee status and subsidiary protection, and in particular for use in EASO's country guidance development on Syria.

This report is produced in line with the EASO COI Report Methodology (2019)² and the EASO COI Writing and Referencing Style Guide (2019).³

This report should be read in conjunction with other 2019-2020 EASO COI reports on Syria, such as the reports titled [Actors \(December 2019\)](#), [Situation of women \(February 2020\)](#), [Socio-economic situation: Damascus City \(February 2020\)](#), [Exercise of authority in recaptured areas \(January 2019\)](#) and [Security situation \(November 2019\)](#). These reports provide relevant information regarding topics such as the main armed actors, targeted violence, and armed conflict developments in Syria for the purpose of developing country guidance on Syria.

Methodology

The report contains information on the conflict in Syria since 2011 but focuses primarily on recent trends, with updated information on 2019 where available. The information gathered is a result of research using public, specialised paper-based and electronic sources until 5 December 2019. Some additional information was added during the finalisation of this report in response to feedback received during the quality control process, until 30 January 2020.

The terms of reference (ToR) of this report were defined by EASO based on discussions held and input received from COI experts in the EASO COI specialist network on Syria and from policy experts in EU+ countries⁴ within the framework of a Country Guidance development on Syria. This report was drafted for the purpose of developing analysis of particular profiles with regard to qualification for refugee status.

ToR for this report can be found in the [annex](#) of this report.

Quality control

In line with the EASO COI Report Methodology, a peer review was performed by COI researchers from the departments listed as reviewers in the [Acknowledgements](#) section.

Sources

The report is based on information from UN reports, reports from human rights organisations, academic publications and news articles, that in different ways describe the situation of the profiles covered in the report.

In addition to the paper-based and electronic sources that were consulted, the report also draws on an interview conducted by EASO with Christopher Kozak, Editor and Senior Analyst at the Institute for the Study of War. The sources are described in the [Bibliography](#).

² EASO, EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology, June 2019, [url](#)

³ EASO, Writing and Referencing Guide for EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Reports, June 2019, [url](#)

⁴ All EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland

Structure and use of the report

The report is divided into chapters that each discuss the different profiles of targeted persons as defined in the ToR according to the actor(s) targeting them. For the profiles that may be targeted by multiple actors, information was further split by actors of targeting. This is particularly the case for Chapters 5 to 9.

EASO has published additional COI reports on Actors, Situation of women, Socio-economic situation: Damascus City, Exercise of authority in recaptured areas and Security Situation. All reports are publicly available at the EASO COI portal.⁵ Where relevant, in this report reference to these reports have been made for further reading and more detailed information.

⁵ EASO, COI Report: Syria – Actors, December 2019, [url](#); EASO, COI Report: Syria – Exercise of authority in recaptured areas, January 2020, [url](#); EASO, COI Report: Syria – Security situation, November 2019, [url](#); EASO, COI Report: Syria – Situation of women, February 2020, [url](#); EASO, COI Report: Syria – Socio-economic situation in Damascus City, February 2020, [url](#)

Map



Map 1: Syria, © United Nations⁶

⁶ Syria, Map No. 4204 Rev. 3, April 2012, United Nations, [url](#)

1. Persons perceived to be opposing the government

As of December 2019, the Government of Syria (GoS) controlled most of the country⁷, including the major cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama, and nearly all the governorates capitals.⁸

The Syrian Armed Forces consist of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), the navy, the air force, the intelligence services and the National Defense Forces (NDF).⁹ Various pro-government militias, both local and foreign, were operating in Syria alongside the regular armed forces.¹⁰ These included local militias such as the NDF and non-Syrian militias made up of foreign fighters mainly backed by Iran.¹¹

Syria's security apparatus is composed of four main intelligence branches that are formally coordinated by the National Security Bureau, which is overseen by the President's office: Air Force Intelligence, Military Intelligence Department, General Intelligence Directorate and Political Security Directorate.¹²

Detailed information on the mandate/structure, protection capabilities and integrity issues of government actors and affiliated armed groups is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Actors \(December 2019\)](#).

Government forces harshly repressed the anti-government protests that erupted in 2011 and ensuing military uprising. According to the US Congress-appointed Syria Study Group, throughout the conflict, the GoS has used 'systematic torture, unlawful detentions and disappearances, and starvation and medical deprivation sieges, as well as mass casualty weapons, including chemical weapons, against civilians'.¹³ Civilians perceived to be either supporting the opposition or insufficiently loyal to GoS were arbitrarily arrested and detained.¹⁴

GoS is reported to view as political dissent the activities of wide categories of individuals, including peaceful protesters, activists and critics of the government¹⁵, professionals such as humanitarian workers, doctors, lawyers, journalists¹⁶, bloggers and online activists¹⁷, as well as draft evaders¹⁸ and

⁷ Based on reading of the following maps: ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 17-28, 2019, 9 January 2020, [url](#); Liveuamap, Syria, 31 December 2019, [url](#)

⁸ Lund, A., From Cold War to Civil War: 75 Years of Russian-Syrian Relations, Swedish Institute of International Affairs, July 2019, [url](#), p. 33

⁹ CIA World Factbook, Syria, 16 September 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰ ACLED, Pro-government Militia Autonomy on the Battlefield in Syria, 22 March 2018, [url](#)

¹¹ Finland, FIS, Syria: Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, April 2018, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 5; Al-Masri, A., Analysis: The Fifth Corps and the State of the Syrian Army, Atlantic Council, 13 January 2017, [url](#)

¹² EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 8

¹³ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 17

¹⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Deaths in Detention in the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 February 2016, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁵ USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 18; SJAC, Walls Have Ears: An Analysis of Classified Syrian Security Sector Documents, April 2019, [url](#), p. 28

¹⁶ Al, Human rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Review of 2018 - Syria [MDE 24/9903/2019], 26 February 2019, [url](#), p. 63

¹⁷ Freedom House, Freedom on the Net, 1 November 2018, [url](#)

¹⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 15

defected soldiers.¹⁹ Individuals living in opposition-controlled areas²⁰, those in recaptured areas²¹, returnees from abroad²², relatives of suspected armed groups members²³ and those who have been in contact with family members or friends residing in opposition-controlled areas, have also been targeted.²⁴

The sections below provide detailed information on specific profiles perceived to be opposing the GoS and their treatment.

1.1 Treatment of persons perceived to be opposing the government

1.1.1 Arbitrary arrest, detention and enforced disappearances

More than 100 000 people have been detained, abducted or gone missing during Syria's eight-year civil war, largely at the hands of the GoS, according to Rosemary DiCarlo, UN Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs.²⁵ Amnesty International (AI) noted that tens of thousands of people are still missing, most of them since 2011, including 'peaceful activists, humanitarian workers, lawyers, journalists, peaceful critics and government opponents as well as individuals detained in place of relatives wanted by the authorities'.²⁶

The UN Human Rights Council described the practice of arbitrary arrests as follows: 'Since March 2011, a countrywide pattern emerged in which civilians, mainly males above the age of 15, were arbitrarily arrested and detained by the Syrian security and armed forces or by militia acting on behalf of the Government during mass arrests, house searches, at checkpoints and in hospitals'. GoS forces arrested civilians perceived to be supporting the opposition or deemed insufficiently loyal to the government, including residents in opposition-held areas and relatives of suspected armed opposition fighters, among others.²⁷

AI reported thousands of detainees in 2018 being held without trial, some since the outbreak of the conflict in 2011 including 'peaceful critics and opponents of the government as well as family members detained in place of relatives wanted by the authorities'.²⁸ Documenting the period March 2011 to August 2019, the Syrian NGO Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)²⁹ noted around 144 899 people are still detained or forcibly disappeared. GoS forces including the SAA, intelligence services and militias were responsible for 128 417 of these cases. 98 279 persons were reported to still be forcibly disappeared, the majority of whom (83 574) by the GoS and affiliated forces.³⁰

¹⁹ AI, *Between Prison and the Grave: Enforced Disappearances in Syria*, November 2015, [url](#), p. 7; UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/19/69]*, 22 February 2012, [url](#), p. 13

²⁰ UN Human Rights Council, *Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Deaths in Detention in the Syrian Arab Republic*, 3 February 2016, [url](#), p. 4

²¹ OHCHR, *Human Rights Digest Syria*, The "unreconciled" concerns of civilians in Dar'a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), p. 8

²² EIP, *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 22-24

²³ UN Human Rights Council, *Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Deaths in Detention in the Syrian Arab Republic*, 3 February 2016, [url](#), p. 4

²⁴ UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70]*, 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 15

²⁵ UN News, *Security Council Failing Thousands of People Detained, Abducted in Syria, Civil Society Speakers Say, Demanding Information about Missing Persons' Whereabouts*, 7 August 2019, [url](#)

²⁶ AI, *Human rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Review of 2018 - Syria [MDE 24/9903/2019]*, 26 February 2019, [url](#), p. 63

²⁷ UN Human Rights Council, *Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Deaths in Detention in the Syrian Arab Republic*, 3 February 2016, [url](#), p. 4

²⁸ AI, *Report 2017/18, the State of the World's Human Rights*, 2018, [url](#), p. 353

²⁹ The SNHR is, according to its website, 'an independent, non-profit and non-governmental organization'. It documents human rights violations in Syria. For more information, see SNHR, *About us*, n.d., [url](#)

³⁰ SNHR, *At Least 98,000 Forcibly Disappeared Persons in Syria since March 2011*, 30 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 5-6

According to the US Department of State (USDOS) annual report on human rights practices in Syria (covering 2018), since the start of the conflict in 2011 the four main intelligence agencies were responsible for most arrests and detentions of persons perceived to oppose the government, including peaceful demonstrators, human rights activists, and political dissidents and their families.³¹ In a June 2019 report, Human Rights Watch noted that the intelligence services were ‘responsible for systematic rights abuses, have restricted access to aid, and mistreated those they perceived as political opponents’. Arbitrary arrests, torture and extrajudicial killing of civilians, human rights defenders and humanitarian workers have also been documented.³²

An April 2019 report by the Syrian Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC)³³, based on a sample of 5 003 documents drawn from about 483 000 papers retrieved from Syria during the civil war, revealed how the intelligence agencies created a wide network of informants and used phone surveillance to ensure that the government kept a close watch of the most mundane of Syrians’ everyday life and restrict criticism of Assad and his government. Peaceful protesters, media reporters, opposition politicians, Kurdish leaders, defected soldiers, armed rebels, or extremist fighters were all viewed through the same lens and faced detention and punishment for their actions. Only a few of the documents also made reference to torture and death in detention.³⁴

In an analysis of 164 government documents about detention, SJAC noted that:

‘The majority of pages related to detention in the sample set were about individuals detained for protesting or for other forms of expression, including, in one case, for simply cursing the President during a dinner gathering. Despite this emphasis, however, it should be noted that the pages often lumped protesters, critical reporters (i.e., ‘enemy media’), members of armed groups, and terrorists into a single category of ‘inciting elements.’ In some cases, the terms appeared to be used interchangeably. There was an admission in the sample set that women and children are among the detainees [...]’³⁵

Furthermore, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (CoI) reported that civilians were arrested for communicating with their relatives in rebel-held territory or abroad.³⁶ According to interviews by the Finnish Immigration Service (FIS) with an anonymous expert on Syria in September 2018, GoS appeared to remain capable of monitoring telephones and social media of its citizens and to compile several lists of alleged government opponents.³⁷

The abuses committed by the Syrian intelligence branches have led countries such as France and Germany to issue arrest warrants for the heads of these agencies on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity.³⁸

While arbitrary arrests and detention would have to be illegal or at least challengeable in court under the Syrian constitution, a 2011 decree allows the government to detain individuals for up to 60 days

³¹ USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 18

³² HRW, Rigging the System. Government Policies Co-Opt Aid and Reconstruction Funding in Syria, 28 June 2019, [url](#), pp. 5; 33-34

³³ The Syrian Justice and Accountability Centre is an US based non-profit organization who collects and preserves documentation of violations of human rights, humanitarian, and international criminal law in Syria. See [url](#)

³⁴ SJAC, Walls Have Ears: An Analysis of Classified Syrian Security Sector Documents, April 2019, [url](#), p. 28

³⁵ SJAC, Walls Have Ears. An Analysis of Classified Syrian Security Sector Documents, April 2019, p. 16, [url](#)

³⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 13

³⁷ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 38

³⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 6

without charge if suspected of ‘terrorism’ and related offenses.³⁹ Regardless of the decree’s stipulations, detention often outlasted 60 days and in many cases lasted indefinitely.⁴⁰

The GoS had used the practice of enforced disappearance before 2011 as an instrument of social and political control⁴¹, but the conflict has brought other armed actors and a refugee crisis into play which makes the location and identification of missing persons highly complicated.⁴²

1.1.2 Torture and other forms of ill-treatment

The CoI has reported on the use of torture by government forces, especially the intelligence branches, noting in 2016 that ‘it is extremely rare to find an individual who has been detained by the Government who has not suffered severe torture’. Most of the victims were men between the ages of 18 and 60, but torture of women and children was also reported.⁴³ USDOS noted that GoS forces tortured perceived opponents; including during interrogations and the Counter Terrorism Court (CTC) and courts-martial ‘relied on forced confessions and information acquired through torture to obtain convictions’.⁴⁴

The SNHR recorded that 14 298 individuals died due to torture between March 2011 and September 2019 and attributed approximately 99 % of these cases to GoS forces.⁴⁵ During the first half of 2019, SNHR reported that 159 individuals died due to torture with GoS forces being responsible in approximately 89 % of cases.⁴⁶

In March 2018, the CoI published a report on sexual and gender-based violence from March 2011 to December 2017 finding that the rape of and sexual violence of women, girls and occasionally men committed by GoS forces and associated militias during ground operations, raids and in detention amounted to war crimes and crimes against humanity. Sexual violence was used during operations to arrest protesters and perceived opposition supporters, but also ‘to force confessions, to extract information, as punishment, as well as to terrorise opposition communities’.⁴⁷

1.1.3 Wanted lists

Several experts on Syria interviewed by the FIS during a fact-finding mission to Beirut and Damascus in April 2018 reported that Syrians ended up wanted by the government for a wide variety of reasons and sometimes for no reason at all. A checkpoint officer’s mood as well as having a similar name with a person that in fact opposes the government could lead to an arrest.⁴⁸

Pro-opposition media outlet Zaman al-Wasl leaked one of those lists in 2018, which is said to originate from the year 2015 and has since been widely shared online. It contains around 1.5 million names of

³⁹ USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 11

⁴⁰ USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 13

⁴¹ HRW, A Wasted Decade: Human Rights in Syria during Bashar al-Asad’s First Ten Years in Power, July 2010, [url](#), pp. 5-10, 18-22

⁴² ILAC, Rule of Law Assessment Report Syria 2017, 19 April 2017, [url](#), p. 145

⁴³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 11 August 2016, A/HRC/33/55, [url](#), p. 15

⁴⁴ USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁴⁵ SNHR, Death Toll due to Torture, n.d., [url](#)

⁴⁶ SNHR, Death Toll due to Torture. Statistics of 2019, n.d., [url](#)

⁴⁷ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic; Conference room paper of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/37/CRP.3], 8 March 2018, [url](#), pp. 1, 4

⁴⁸ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 39

people wanted for arrest by the government.⁴⁹ Similar leaks (although containing not as many names) were released by Zaman al-Wasl in 2016⁵⁰ and by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) in 2018⁵¹, respectively.

While some sources seem to indicate a certain arbitrariness in the behaviour of Syria's army personnel and its allied militias, other (anonymous) sources from the FIS FFM report seem to confirm the general assessment according to which there is a systematic pattern of targeting persons perceived to be opposing the government.⁵² The CoI also noted that persons perceived to be opposition supporters 'were the most likely to be detained arbitrarily'.⁵³

The practice of arresting Syrian citizens on unspecified grounds continued in 2019.⁵⁴ In the first half of 2019, SNHR documented 1 733 cases of arbitrary arrest at the hand of GoS forces throughout all governorates.⁵⁵

In September 2019, President Bashar al-Assad issued Legislative Decree No 20 of 2019, granting general amnesty for crimes committed before 14 September 2019 for all or part of the penalty concerned.⁵⁶ A GoS-affiliated publication summarised the decree's stipulations as follows: 'the decree minimizes major penalties like execution to life-time hard labour imprisonment while life sentences are lessened to 20 years in prison. The decree also covers military service penalties. Deserters from the army must surrender themselves to benefit from the amnesty'.⁵⁷ The decree foresees the release or decrease of punishment for some categories of prisoners, including some that were detained under the 'terrorism law'.⁵⁸

Information on the implementation of the decree could not be found.

1.1.4 Extrajudicial executions

In a report published in June 2019, Human Rights Watch stated that it 'extensively documented abusive practices by the Syrian intelligence branches, including mistreatment, torture, arbitrary detentions, and extrajudicial execution'.⁵⁹

⁴⁹ Zaman al-Wasl, 1.5 milyoun matloub li-nzam al-Asad [1.5 Million Wanted by the Assad Regime], n.d., [url](#); Daily Star (The), Syrians in exile search for answers in leaked "wanted list", 6 April 2018, [url](#); Swiss Refugee Council, Syrien: Fahndungslisten und Zaman al Wasl [Syria: Wanted Lists and Zaman al-Wasl], 11 June 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁰ Zaman al-Wasl, Khas bi-shabab Haleb wa-rijaliha: Muhrik maftuh min "Zaman al-Wasl" li-imatlubeen li-jaysh an-nizam [Especially for Aleppo's youth and its men: "Zaman al-Wasl" search engine for those wanted by the regime's army], 12 December 2016, [url](#)

⁵¹ SOHR, Qawayeem bi'akthar min 5 alaf ism matlub li-laihtiat fi-sufuf jayesh an-nizam tasil ila sharq al-asimat dimashq wa-rifiha [lists of more than 5 thousand names required for reserve in the ranks of the regime's army up to the east of Damascus and its countryside], 18 December 2018, [url](#)

⁵² Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), pp. 40-41; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 15

⁵³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 15

⁵⁴ SNHR, At least 183 Cases of Arbitrary Arrests Documented in Syria in October 2019, 2 November 2019, [url](#); HRW, Syria: Detention, Harassment in Retaken Areas, 21 May 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁵ SNHR, At least 2,460 Cases of Arbitrary Arrests Documented in Syria in the First Half of 2019, 2 July 2019, [url](#), pp. 7-8

⁵⁶ SANA, President al-Assad issues legislative decree stipulating for granting amnesty for crimes committed before 14 September 2019, 15 September 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁷ Syria Times (The), President al-Assad issues general amnesty, 15 September 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁸ RFI, Syria president decrees amnesty, reduces sentences, 15 September 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁹ HRW, Rigging the System: Government Policies Co-Opt Aid and Reconstruction Funding in Syria, 28 June 2019, [url](#)

Citing the Human Rights Data Analysis Group, an NGO that uses a data analysis to estimate human rights violations in armed conflict, AI stated that an estimated 17 723 people were killed in custody across Syria between 2011 and 2015, although the real number is thought to be higher.⁶⁰

Since the summer of 2018, death registers have been issued by government authorities, officially confirming for the first time the deaths of thousands of people in government custody, without notifying their families or providing death certificates.⁶¹ In most cases, natural causes of death such as ‘heart attack’ or ‘stroke’ were indicated.⁶² Former inmates interviewed by human rights organisations stated that they were subjected to multiple forms of torture, and suffered illness as a result of inadequate nutrition and hygiene while in detention.⁶³ The massive and systematised torture and killing of detainees in Syria’s state prisons over the course of the conflict is widely documented.⁶⁴

According to an AI report published in 2017, between 5 000 and 13 000 people, mainly civilians opposing the GoS, were executed at Saydnaya Prison [a military prison located 30 km north of Damascus] over the course of five years.⁶⁵ In December 2018, the Washington Post published an article suggesting that the rate of death sentences and executions in Syria’s prisons was increasing. Testimonies of former detainees spoke of transfers of prisoners from other locations to Saydnaya to be executed by hanging. The number of detainees in Saydnaya prison, which once held between 10 000 to 20 000 inmates, have begun to decrease ‘largely because of the unyielding executions’ with one section being almost empty.⁶⁶

1.2 Different profiles interpreted by the government as opposition

1.2.1 Members of anti-government armed groups

GoS has entered into so-called reconciliation agreements with different actors in most of the areas the GoS forces have recaptured from various anti-government groups in the last few years.⁶⁷ The reconciliation agreements ‘ranged from compromises in which after a cease fire opposition fighters remained involved in security and governance roles in their areas, to cases of virtual opposition surrender involving evacuations of fighters or even whole populations’.⁶⁸

According to Lama Fakhri, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, active combat has ended in much of Syria, but nothing has changed in the way security services abuse the rights of ‘perceived opponents of Assad’s rule’.⁶⁹

Research by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) revealed that both civilians and former opposition fighters have been arrested in so-called ‘reconciled’ areas retaken by GoS and ‘[...]

⁶⁰ AI, ‘It Breaks the Human’. Torture, Disease and Death in Syria’s Prisons, 18 August 2016, [url](#), p. 7

⁶¹ USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁶² Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Death Notifications in the Syrian Arab Republic, 27 November 2018, OHCHR, [url](#), p. 3; AI, Syria: Families left alone to find answers about disappeared relatives, 30 August 2019, [url](#)

⁶³ SHRC, The 17th Annual Report on Human Rights in Syria. January – December 2018, 24 January 2019, [url](#), pp. 71-73

⁶⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Deaths in Detention in the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 February 2016, [url](#); AI, Human Slaughterhouse. Mass Hangings and Extermination at Saydnaya Prison, Syria, February 2017, [url](#); SJAC, Walls Have Ears: An Analysis of Classified Syrian Security Sector Documents, April 2019, [url](#); New York Times (The), Inside Syria’s Secret Torture Prisons: How Bashar al-Assad Crushed Dissent, 11 May 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁵ AI, Syria, Secret campaign of mass hangings and extermination at Saydnaya Prison, 7 February 2017, [url](#)

⁶⁶ Washington Post (The), Syria’s once-teeming prison cells being emptied by mass murder, 23 December 2018, [url](#)

⁶⁷ Adleh, F. and Favier, A., “Local reconciliation agreements” in Syria: A non-starter for peacebuilding, European University Institute, June 2017, [url](#), pp. 1-2

⁶⁸ Hinnebusch, R., and Imady, O., Syria’s reconciliation agreements, Centre for Syrian Studies. University of St. Andrews, 12 February 2017, [url](#), p. 1

⁶⁹ HRW, Syria: Detention, Harassment in Retaken Areas, 21 May 2019, [url](#)

the regime's clear priority is to eliminate remaining structures of resistance, whether civilian or former fighter, and to discourage future rebellion'.⁷⁰

As of late May 2019, as part of a 'reconciliation deal' sponsored by Russia, some former non-state groups even retained their security control over some areas within government-controlled areas of Dar'a governorate.⁷¹ However, in similar deals struck in 2018, former opposition fighters were provided only short-term protection: at first, former fighters were allowed to enlist in the government forces' Fifth Corps - an association of militias incorporated into the official military structure in 2016 as a distinct army corps backed by Russia⁷² - under Russia's supervision. It took only a few months for government troops and allied militias to enter the 'reconciled' areas and carry out arbitrary arrests and detentions. Reportedly, both civilians and former opposition fighters were targeted.⁷³

Christopher Kozak, senior analyst at the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), assessed that in practice, the reconciliation agreements have been broken repeatedly and often. In particular, former activists and opposition commanders have been arrested despite the reconciliation agreements and despite having settlement cards. While Russia has invested heavily in taking reconciled opposition fighters and integrating them into its Fifth Corps, GoS has detained a number of former opposition commanders and fighters regardless of their affiliation with the Fifth Corps. Russia has tried issuing its own identifications to individuals, saying that they are under Russian protection and should not be arrested, which has worked to a limited degree, although there are still reports of opposition leadership figures being detained regardless of any so-called guarantees from the Russians.⁷⁴

The Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that in Dar'a governorate it had received information that a few hundred reconciled fighters and civilians joined the pro-GoS forces 'in order to avoid being perceived as opposition affiliates or "terrorists" and putting themselves and their families at risk of arrest and detention or retaliation by the authorities'.⁷⁵ The CoI also noted in August 2019 that the secret police has conducted a campaign of arrests against former opposition figures in southern Syria.⁷⁶

In July 2019, SOHR reported that in June the security service had arrested two former commanders of the rebel faction Shuhada al-Asimah Brigade, who had both signed reconciliation agreements and joined GoS forces. They accused the men of killing informants and members of the GoS during the time when the armed faction had been in control of parts of the area.⁷⁷ In summer 2019, reports were received that the Palestine Branch of the military intelligence service had arrested three former rebel commanders who had signed reconciliation agreements with GoS.⁷⁸

Detailed information on the implementation of reconciliation agreements and consequences for the population is available in [EASO COI Report: Syria - Exercise of authority in recaptured areas \(January 2020\)](#)

⁷⁰ ACLED, The Risks of Reconciliation: Civilians and former fighters face continued threats in Syria, 25 January 2019, [url](#)

⁷¹ OHCHR, Human Rights Digest Syria, The "unreconciled" concerns of civilians in Dar'a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁷² Al-Jabassini, A., From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria, Middle East Directions. European University Institute, 14 May 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁷³ Atlantic Council, The aftershocks of reconciliation in Syria: Reflections on the past year, 17 April 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁴ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁷⁵ OHCHR, Human Rights Digest Syria, The "unreconciled" concerns of civilians in Dar'a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁷⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 13

⁷⁷ SOHR, The regime's security services arrests commanders and fighters of those who stuck "reconciliation and settlement" deals in the south of Damascus, 23 July 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁸ Despite the name, the Palestine Branch does not just target Palestinians in Syria but is one of the biggest branches of the military intelligence service, with Islamist movements as its main focus. SNHR, Syrian security branches and persons in charge, n.d., [url](#)

1.2.2 Political activists, protesters and opposition party members

Political activism in Syria had been kept in check by the government for decades. The overarching security apparatus made organisations register every activity with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. Civil society organisations had to work either underground or under the patronage of individuals close to the government. Only due to the turmoil of the Syrian conflict were political activists able to organise activities more freely in the years after 2011.⁷⁹

Although a 2011 decree allowed for the registration of independent political parties, in practice the government enforced it selectively, permitting only pro-government groups to form official parties.⁸⁰

Since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, the GoS' targeting of political activists and protesters who sided with the opposition has been a key element in its counterinsurgency strategy.⁸¹ According to Freedom House 'opposition protests in government-held areas are usually met with gunfire, mass arrests, and torture of those detained'. The government forces conduct regular raids to detain political and civic activists.⁸² Bertelsmann Stiftung noted that most of the political opposition members to the Assad government have either fled Syria, were killed or are in prison.⁸³

The prominent case of Bassel Khartabil Safadi, an outspoken supporter of the early demonstrators' demands of peaceful government change attained a sizeable following online before he was arrested in March 2012. As late as 2017, his family heard confirmation of his execution that took place in October of 2015 while he was in custody.⁸⁴

In other less prominent cases, confirmations of the individuals' fate did not come until 2018 after the government started issuing death notifications for previously arrested activists.⁸⁵ In a 2015 report, AI traced several more cases in which the state security actors and its allied militias arrested political activists and protesters and/or forcibly disappeared them.⁸⁶ According to AI, the targeted individuals were politically active by organising and leading protests, leading chants and songs or merely participating in demonstrations.⁸⁷

Members of political parties, which are known to support the calls for overthrowing the Assad government, are considered enemies of the state. For example, the Syrian Democratic People's Party (SDPP) openly aligns itself with revolutionary forces.⁸⁸ According to AI, a leading member of the SDPP disappeared in October 2013 shortly before allegedly 20 members of the government's security forces raided his house, seizing his computer among other personal belongings.⁸⁹ His fate remains unknown.⁹⁰

Former political activists living in areas recaptured by GoS claimed to have used smuggling networks to be transported to rebel-held areas out of fear that they would risk arrest by GoS forces.⁹¹ USDOS

⁷⁹ Middle East Institute, Hope amid Despair: Syrian Civil Society, 30 June 2015, [url](#)

⁸⁰ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2019 - Syria, 4 February 2019, [url](#); USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 46

⁸¹ UN Human Rights Council, Without a Trace: Enforced Disappearances in Syria, 19 December 2013, [url](#), pp. 2-5; New York Times (The), Syrian Arrests Are Said to Have Snared Tens of Thousands, 27 June 2012, [url](#)

⁸² Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2019 - Syria, 4 February 2019, [url](#)

⁸³ Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI 2018 Country Report: Syria, 2018, [url](#), p. 9

⁸⁴ Washington Post (The), One of Syria's best known-democracy activists has been executed, 2 August 2017, [url](#)

⁸⁵ Atlantic (The), A Cruel Epilogue to the Syrian Civil War, 15 August 2018, [url](#)

⁸⁶ AI, Between Prison and the Grave, November 2015, [url](#), pp. 28-35

⁸⁷ AI, Between Prison and the Grave, November 2015, [url](#), pp. 28-33

⁸⁸ SDPP, Homepage, n.d., [url](#)

⁸⁹ AI, Between Prison and the Grave, November 2015, [url](#), pp. 31-32

⁹⁰ AI, Tens of Thousands: Fa'eq al-Mir, n.d., [url](#)

⁹¹ Syria Direct, Syrians in former opposition pockets still using smugglers, corrupt security officials to transport themselves north amid 'false promises' of reconciliation, 11 April 2019, [url](#)

reported that Alawite opposition activists were reportedly victims of ‘arbitrary arrests, torture, detentions and killing’ by the GoS forces.⁹²

According to Christopher Kozak, in Qamishli, Hasaka governorate, where the GoS retains partial control on the ground, it has targeted individuals for arrest based on political activities.⁹³

Targeting of political activists opposing GoS can also occur through other parties than the government forces or its allied militias. It is worth mentioning that a very prominent activist named Raed Fares was shot dead by unidentified gunmen in rebel-held territory in November 2018. However, it is not clear whether the incident was linked to his profile as a government opponent.⁹⁴

1.2.3 Civilians originating from, or residing in, areas perceived to be opposing the government

The government’s territorial gains over the course of the Syrian conflict were followed by continued arbitrary arrests and detention. In particular, as reported in the CoI, individuals perceived to be opposition supporters were most likely to be detained arbitrarily by government forces and its allied militias.⁹⁵

Arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances of alleged opposition supporters took place in reconquered areas such as Dar’a and Rural Damascus governorates.⁹⁶ Civilians that had contact with relatives of friends in opposition-held areas were also arrested and prevented from establishing further contact.⁹⁷ Communicating with relatives abroad also led to arrests and monitoring of phones was alleged by civilians residing in Douma, Rural Damascus.⁹⁸ Women with familial ties to opposition fighters were reportedly detained for intelligence-gathering purposes or retribution.⁹⁹

According to figures by the human rights collective Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity (SYACD), (based on interviewees with residents and returnees to GoS-held areas), arbitrary arrests are about twice as prevalent in reconquered areas than in areas that have remained under GoS-control since 2011.¹⁰⁰

Eastern Ghouta, one of the former rebel strongholds suffered the most bombardment during wartime. After the government’s recapture in April 2018, security forces have been carrying out night-time raids, mass arrests and forced disappearances and intelligence forces asserted themselves in every aspect of daily life, as summarised in a policy paper by Middle East Institute and Etana.¹⁰¹ Out of a population of about 180 000, in May 2019, approx. 1 500 were said to be arrested and 7 000 men to be forcefully conscripted for military service since the GoS takeover.¹⁰²

⁹² USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 66

⁹³ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁹⁴ New York Times (The), Activist Who Used Humor to Highlight War Is Gunned Down in Syria, 23 November 2018, [url](#); Washington Post (The), One of Syria’s most famous activists killed by assassins in rebel stronghold, 23 November 2018, [url](#)

⁹⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), pp. 15-16

⁹⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 13; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 15

⁹⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 15

⁹⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 14

⁹⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 13; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 15

¹⁰⁰ SYACD, Vengeance, repression and fear: Reality behind Assad’s promises to displaced Syrians, October 2019, [url](#), p. 13

¹⁰¹ MEI/Etana, Despair and Decay: East Ghouta after 18 months of renewed regime rule, November 2019, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁰² MEI/Etana, Forgotten Lives: Life under regime rule in former opposition-held East Ghouta, May 2019, [url](#), pp. 1, 7-9

According to Christopher Kozak of ISW, GoS treats individuals from former opposition-held areas with a heavy degree of suspicion. The scrutiny of individuals from former opposition-held areas is the highest in Damascus, just given the concentration of security personnel in the city as well as the importance of the capital to the government. Persons originating from the areas of Eastern Ghouta, Darayya, and Hajar al-Aswad are also heavily scrutinised. The local population that remains in the former opposition strongholds in Damascus is heavily monitored and needs to pass through checkpoints with time restrictions to enter Damascus, if they are allowed to enter at all. The security presence is very high and there are routinely arrests of activists, medical personnel, former media activists, basically anyone suspected of affiliation with the opposition in Eastern Ghouta.¹⁰³

Following the takeover of Dar'a governorate by the GoS, OHCHR 'received a number of worrying reports of human rights violations and abuses by State and non-State actors, including executions, arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, looting and seizure of property'. Between July 2018 and March 2019, 380 people were arrested or detained, often for unclear reasons. In some cases, the arrests were reportedly on suspicion of 'terrorism'. Some 150 were soon released, but there were at least 230 cases of enforced disappearance after that. Of those detained, 17 were arrested at checkpoints as they were on the GoS' 'wanted lists'.¹⁰⁴ OHCHR identified the Syrian intelligence services Air Force Intelligence, Military Security and the Criminal Security department as being the main bodies responsible for the arrests.¹⁰⁵

In southern Syria (Dar'a and Quneitra governorates), Kozak noted that there is also suspicion of individuals from former opposition-held areas and travel restrictions on locals, who for the most part are not allowed to leave southern Syria. While GoS controls within a given locality are less rigid in southern Syria because, among other things, it does not have the manpower still to fully secure the areas that it reasserted control over in the past two years, violations are becoming routine. According to Kozak, individuals are still restricted from travelling, subjected to increased scrutiny, and subjected to detention by GoS, depending on their role in or their connections to individuals who had a leadership, activist, or militant role in southern Syria. These violations, Kozak assessed, are part of the grievances that fuelled the resumption of protests in Dar'a city in late 2018 as well as the insurgent violence that has been growing in southern Syria.¹⁰⁶

Covering the period January to July 2019, the CoI noted that 'throughout areas under the control of government forces, including Rif Dimashq and Dar'a Governorates, the Commission continued to receive accounts of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances'.¹⁰⁷ In May 2019, Human Rights Watch reported that in recaptured areas, Syrian intelligence agencies were reported to be arbitrarily detaining, disappearing and harassing people, especially former armed and political opposition leaders, media activists, aid workers, defectors, and family members of activists and former anti-government fighters, even if the government had signed reconciliation agreements with them.¹⁰⁸ According to an August 2019 report by the UN Security Council, the Syrian government's security forces have arbitrarily arrested and detained hundreds of persons since June 2019, the majority of detentions occurring in Dar'a, Rural Damascus, Damascus and Homs governorates.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

¹⁰⁴ OHCHR, Press briefing note on Dar'a, 21 May 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁵ OHCHR, Human Rights Digest Syria, The "unreconciled" concerns of civilians in Dar'a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁰⁶ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

¹⁰⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 13

¹⁰⁸ HRW, Syria: Detention, Harassment in Retaken Areas, 21 May 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁹ UN Security Council: Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/674], 21 August 2019, [url](#), p. 6

Human Rights Watch also reported that in Damascus and Rural Damascus GoS restricted the access of civilians that wished to return and unlawfully demolished houses of residents ‘without providing notice, alternative housing, or compensation’.¹¹⁰

Human Rights Watch claimed the government also punished family members of alleged opposition supporters by applying a number of laws that violate their individual property rights.¹¹¹ In recaptured areas, GoS used the counter-terrorism Law No 19/2012 to seize properties of individuals deemed to have been involved in terrorism activities. Under Law No 19, the state can freeze or confiscate both movable or immovable property of such individuals. Around 70 000 Syrians reportedly faced asset freeze decisions during 2017-2018, which were carried out by the Ministry of Finance. Family members of those convicted of terrorism activities were included in some decisions, making it unclear if they were also being convicted or barred from claiming any right on the properties seized.¹¹²

More information on the treatment of civilians in recaptured areas by GoS is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Exercise of authority in recaptured areas \(January 2020\)](#)

1.3 Returnees from abroad

The upcoming 2020 EASO COI report on “Syria: IDPs, returnees and internal mobility” will provide an extensive overview of the situation of refugees in neighbouring countries Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan, and the underlying dynamics in those countries leading to the return of refugees to Syria.

1.3.1 Profiles of returnees

January 2020 data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) showed the following number of registered Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries¹¹³:

Location name	Source	Data date	% of all refugees	Refugee Population
Turkey	UNHCR, Government of Turkey	9 Jan 2020	64.4%	3,576,659
Lebanon	UNHCR	31 Dec 2019	16.5%	914,648
Jordan	UNHCR	5 Jan 2020	11.8%	654,692
Iraq	UNHCR	31 Dec 2019	4.4%	245,810
Egypt	UNHCR	30 Nov 2019	2.3%	129,426
Other (North Africa)	UNHCR	30 Nov 2018	0.6%	35,713

It should be noted that the above UNHCR figures do not include Palestinian refugees from Syria registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA).¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ HRW, World Report 2019 - Syria, 17 January 2019, [url](#)

¹¹¹ HRW, Syria. Suspect's Families Assets Seized, 16 July 2019, [url](#); Reuters, Syrian state seizes opponents' property, rights activists say, 12 December 2018, [url](#)

¹¹² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 16

¹¹³ UNHCR, Operational Portal, Total persons of concern, last updated 9 January 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁴ AI, Q&A-Why are returns of refugees from Lebanon to Syria premature? Public Statement MDE 18/0481/2019, 12 June 2019, [url](#), p. 1

The UNHCR data shows that between January and September 2019, 75 501 verified Syrian refugees had ‘spontaneously returned’ to Syria. Of these, 7 803 had returned through ‘organised group returns facilitated by the General Security office of Lebanon and spontaneous returns from Jordan’, and 97 self-organised returns from Jordan. UNHCR noted that the number of returnees in reality may be higher than those registered with UNHCR. UNHCR expects an increase in self-organised returns of refugees in 2019.¹¹⁵ As of 31 October 2019, there had been 216 719 ‘self-organized refugee returns’ documented by UNHCR from 2016-2019.¹¹⁶

Regarding demographic profiles of returnees, a World Bank/International Bank for Reconstruction and Development report on mobility of displaced refugees, showed that ‘refugees who are single, or male, or not members of a nuclear family have been more likely to return.’¹¹⁷

1.3.2 Syrian refugees returning from Turkey

Since 2016, Turkey provides support for integration and voluntary return via its Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM). Legally, returnees have to apply via the provincial branches of DGMM which have to give monetary and in-kind support. There are no bi- or multilateral readmission agreements nor does DGMM cooperate with Syrian organisations nor with UNHCR to facilitate the returns. After approval, returnees are brought to the border, where they will be escorted by two Turkish agencies working in Syria, ‘to cities under Turkey’s military control’.¹¹⁸

DGMM employs an encouraging policy, facilitating ‘go-and-see’ visits during which the protection status is maintained, only to be revoked if the returnee does not return within the period of three months. According to Turkish government sources, cited by the researcher Mencutek, ‘in 2017 40,000 Syrians – some 15% of those who made go-and-see visits – remained, and in 2018 57% of the 252,000 Syrians undertaking go-and-see visits remained’.¹¹⁹

The DGMM reportedly cannot trace what happens with returning Syrians; neither is the UNHCR present to verify and guarantee the voluntariness of returns.¹²⁰ Whereas the government stated in September 2019 that around 350 000 Syrians have ‘voluntarily’¹²¹ returned to Syria¹²², several sources reported that forced returns and deportations were taking place.¹²³ According to interviews by AI, deportations were taking place through the border crossing of Bab al-Hawa. Some deportees reported that they were arrested and imprisoned by Islamist groups on the Syrian side of the border.¹²⁴

On 24 September 2019, Turkey announced to return one to two million Syrian refugees¹²⁵ to the (Kurdish dominated) north-eastern part of Syria in so-called ‘safe zones’. These were created after a

¹¹⁵ UNHCR, Operational update Syria, October 2019, [url](#), p. 10

¹¹⁶ UNHCR, Syria Regional Refugee Response: Durable Solutions – Self-organized Refugee Returns to Syria 2016-2019, [Updated 31 October 2019], [url](#)

¹¹⁷ World Bank (The)/IBRD (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians, An economic and social analysis, 2019, [url](#), p. 22

¹¹⁸ Mencutek, Zeynep Sahin, Encouraging Syrian return: Turkey’s fragmented approach, October 2019, [url](#), pp. 28-29

¹¹⁹ Mencutek, Zeynep Sahin, Encouraging Syrian return: Turkey’s fragmented approach, October 2019, [url](#), p. 29

¹²⁰ Mencutek, Zeynep Sahin, Encouraging Syrian return: Turkey’s fragmented approach, October 2019, [url](#), p. 30

¹²¹ Mencutek expressed doubts about the voluntariness of returns. The ‘precarious situation of Syrians in Turkey, marked by the lack of full-scale protection, exploitative employment conditions, and the loss of hope in their future, pushes them to return.’ Their situation has further deteriorated in mid-2019. Mencutek, Zeynep Sahin, Encouraging Syrian return: Turkey’s fragmented approach, October 2019, [url](#), p. 30

¹²² Reuters, Turkey’s plan to settle refugees in northeast Syria alarms allies, 8 October 2019, [url](#)

¹²³ Economist (The), Turkey tightens restrictions on Syrian refugees, 5 September 2019, [url](#); RI, Insecure future, Deportations and lack of legal work for refugees in Turkey, Field report, September 2019, [url](#), pp. 4-5; COAR, Syria Update, 20 - 26 November 2019, [url](#); AI, Sent to a War Zone: Turkey’s illegal deportations of Syrian refugees, 25 October 2019, [url](#), p. 11; Mencutek, Zeynep Sahin, Encouraging Syrian return: Turkey’s fragmented approach, October 2019, [url](#), p. 30

¹²⁴ AI, Sent to a War Zone: Turkey’s illegal deportations of Syrian refugees, 25 October 2019, [url](#), p. 11

¹²⁵ Reuters, Turkey’s plan to settle refugees in northeast Syria alarms allies, 8 October 2019, [url](#)

military operation 'Peace Spring' in October 2019, leading to the displacement of more than 160 000 Syrians.¹²⁶

There are no exact figures of returned and/or deported Syrians from Turkey to Syria. UNHCR estimated the numbers of self-organised returns by Syrian refugees from Turkey as of 30 June 2019 to a total of 12 017.¹²⁷

More information on the situation of refugees in Turkey and on Syrians deported from Turkey to Syria will be covered in the upcoming 2020 EASO COI report on "Syria: IDPs, returnees and internal mobility".

1.3.3 Syrian refugees returning from Lebanon

Syrian refugees in Lebanon are under increasing pressure to return. Lebanese policy has increasingly become stricter and has made it much more difficult for most Syrians to obtain documents and pay fees; as a consequence, the majority live in illegality.¹²⁸

As soon as the GoS seemed to be on the winning hand, the call for returns to Syria became louder, and refugees' access to housing and employment in Lebanon became stricter and their livelihood deteriorating. As a result, small-scale returns, facilitated by a variety of formal and informal Lebanese agents, are taking place.¹²⁹

Under a bilateral agreement with the GoS, the governmental General Security Office (GSO) is tasked to facilitate voluntary returns. Per the agreement, the GSO sends lists of names of registered refugees (except names received from political parties unless is verified that the applicants have voluntarily chosen to return to Syria) for pre-approval to Syrian authorities. The GoS has rejected the return of 'some refugees who are wanted for security reasons'.¹³⁰ Application for return takes place via registration centres, coordinated by the GSO. Criteria for approving the application are not known. Applicants have to pay an 'exit' fee for the period they stayed in Lebanon without a residence permit. At the border, the returnee's passport is stamped with a ban to return to Lebanon 'for a period of time that is often unknown to refugees'.¹³¹

UNHCR estimated the numbers of self-organised returns by Syrian refugees from Lebanon as of 30 June 2019 to a total of 9 676.¹³² According to the GSO, about 170 000 Syrian refugees have returned between December 2017 and March 2019.¹³³ As of 24 April 2019, Syrians who entered Lebanon irregularly can be legally deported to Syria¹³⁴, and between May and August 2019, the GSO arrested and deported 2 731 Syrians and handed them over to the Syrian authorities.¹³⁵

¹²⁶ Guardian (The), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan proposes 'safe zone' for refugees in Syria, 24 September 2019, [url](#); Al Jazeera, Turkey's military operation in Syria: All the latest updates, 18 October 2019, [url](#); Al, Sent to a War Zone: Turkey's illegal deportations of Syrian refugees, 25 October 2019, [url](#), p. 11

¹²⁷ UNHCR, Update: Durable Solutions for Syrian Refugees, July/August 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁸ HRW mentions a percentage of 74% of illegal Syrians residing in Lebanon. HRW, Lebanon: Syrians Summarily Deported from Airport, 24 May 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁹ Tamirace Fakhoury and Derya Ozkul, Syrian refugees' return from Lebanon, Forced Migration Review, October 2019, [url](#), pp. 26-28

¹³⁰ Al, Q&A-Why are returns of refugees from Lebanon to Syria premature? Public Statement MDE 18/0481/2019, 12 June 2019, [url](#), p. 3

¹³¹ Tamirace Fakhoury and Derya Ozkul, Syrian refugees' return from Lebanon, Forced Migration Review, October 2019, [url](#), p. 27

¹³² UNHCR, Update: Durable Solutions for Syrian Refugees, July/August 2019, [url](#)

¹³³ Daily Star (The), Over 170,000 Syrian refugees have returned from Lebanon since Dec. 2017: General Security, 20 March 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁴ Tamirace Fakhoury and Derya Ozkul, Syrian refugees' return from Lebanon, Forced Migration Review, October 2019, [url](#), p. 27

¹³⁵ HRW, Syrians Deported by Lebanon Arrested at Home, 2 September 2019, [url](#)

There is no monitoring whether or not returns are voluntary. Fakhoury and Ozkul noted: ‘UNHCR has been informally monitoring returns at border crossings although it has no authority to intervene. There is no other independent monitoring at borders to ensure that returns are indeed voluntary’.¹³⁶

Human Rights Watch reported in May 2019 that at least 16 Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR were forced to sign voluntary return forms and deported from Lebanon, even while they expressed fear of torture or persecution if returned to Syria.¹³⁷ At least three returnees were reportedly detained upon arrival in Syria.¹³⁸

1.3.4 Syrian refugees returning from Jordan

Jordan hosts about 1.4 million Syrians of which over 658 000 are registered with UNHCR.¹³⁹ The Jordan government announced in October 2018, on the occasion of the reopening of the Jaber–Nasib border crossing (to allow border-crossing trade¹⁴⁰), that it did not support Syrians returning at that time. As of October 2019, the government had not taken measures to facilitate large-scale voluntary returns, according to researcher Morris. However, Morris also noted a ‘widespread sentiment among the Jordanian public that Syrians have overstayed their welcome in Jordan’.¹⁴¹

Many Syrians are reluctant to return to Syria, for fear of military conscription and arrest by government forces.¹⁴²

As of March 2019, only about 2 % of Syrian refugees have returned.¹⁴³ UNHCR’s July/August 2019 update on durable solutions estimated the numbers of self-organised returns by Syrian refugees from Jordan as of 30 June 2019 at a total of 16 034.¹⁴⁴

1.3.5 Clearance

Syrians wishing to return to their place of origin in GoS-retaken areas, are requested to gain security approval by going through a ‘security clearance’ involving interrogation by Syrian security forces.¹⁴⁵ This ‘clearance’ implies providing extensive information on any involvement they had with the political opposition. Government guarantees ‘forgiveness’ to returnees when they tell the truth. However, in many cases this does not work out as promised, as a recent survey amongst Syrians returning to government-held areas, cited in the Washington Post, revealed: ‘About 75 percent had been harassed at checkpoints, in government registry offices or in the street, conscripted into the military despite promises they would be exempted, or arrested’.¹⁴⁶

It is not self-evident that returnees are allowed to return. A source interviewed by DIS noted that those not allowed to return were people whose names were on the ‘wanted’ lists and ‘the government

¹³⁶ Tamirace Fakhoury and Derya Ozkul, Syrian refugees’ return from Lebanon, Forced Migration Review, October 2019, [url](#), p. 27

¹³⁷ HRW, Lebanon: Syrians Summarily Deported from Airport, 24 May 2019, [url](#), p. 27

¹³⁸ HRW, Syrians Deported by Lebanon Arrested at Home, 2 September 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁹ UNHCR, Fact Sheet: Jordan, May 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁰ Reuters, Syria says to reopen important Nassib crossing with Jordan on October 10, 29 September 2018, [url](#)

¹⁴¹ Morris, Julia, The politics of return from Jordan to Syria, Forced Migration Review, October 2019, [url](#), p. 33

¹⁴² Al Monitor, Why Syrians on Jordan refuse to return home, 11 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴³ FP, Turkey’s deportation policy is killing Syrian refugees, 8 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁴ UNHCR, Update: Durable Solutions for Syrian Refugees, July/August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁵ AI, Q&A-Why are returns of refugees from Lebanon to Syria premature? Public Statement MDE 18/0481/2019, 12 June 2019, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁴⁶ Washington Post (The), Assad urged Syrian refugees to come home, 2 June 2019, [url](#)

wanted to send a message that those affiliated with armed opposition groups are not welcome in Syria'.¹⁴⁷

Detailed information on the 'security clearance' will be covered in the 2020 EASO COI report on "Syria: IDPs, refugees and internal mobility".

1.3.6 Treatment upon return

A source interviewed by the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) stated that returnees at the border may be detained for a short period (between one hour and several days). The majority of these were released but he knew of 38 men who were still detained at the time of the interview. Other sources added that persons who had evaded military conscription or who (or family members) had connections with an armed opposition group, or who is part of an NGO inside or outside Syria, or is travelling back and forth to Syria from abroad, may face issues such as extortion, forced conscription, arrest and detention.¹⁴⁸

The OHCHR stated in February 2019 that despite changes in the situation in Syria, those returning face a lack of rule of law, widespread human rights violations and poor economic prospects, noting that 'safe and sustainable returns' were not possible due to continuing hostilities.¹⁴⁹

Some of the challenges that returnees may face, according to the European Institute of Peace (EIP), are:

- State guarantees as part of reconciliation agreements are not fulfilled, for both individuals and communities. There are many reports of returnees having been arrested, detained, harassed or conscripted after they had completed the reconciliation process and received protection papers;
- The control of Syrian security sector over society is strengthening. The Syrian military and security services arrest and detain individuals, 'both to gather intelligence and punish those considered disloyal and to extract payments from families for the release of loved ones';
- Refugees and IDPs wanting to return have to reconcile with the state and fill in 'extensive forms that defy international practice for refugee returns'. These forms are difficult to understand and there is no adequate information on the procedures regarding returns and reconciliation;
- Returnees are forced to give 'extensive amounts of information' about their contacts and activities abroad. 'There are no guarantees in place that this information will not be used against the individual or others, [including their loved ones], in the future';
- The Syrian government does not allow international agencies to carry out data collection and to monitor returnees.¹⁵⁰

Detailed information on the situation of returnees in Damascus, is available in the [EASO COI report on Socio-economic situation in Damascus City](#).

Consequences of illegal exit and applying for asylum abroad

According to a report by the DIS on the consequences of illegal exit, in August 2018, the GoS announced that Syrians who had left the country illegally during the war would not encounter problems because of illegal exit; whilst until then, under Law No 14 of 2014, illegal exit was punishable

¹⁴⁷ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, 21 February 2019, [url](#), p. 24

¹⁴⁸ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, 21 February 2019, [url](#), p. 26

¹⁴⁹ UN Human Rights Council, UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria, Continued hostilities and lawlessness countrywide render safe and sustainable returns impossible, 28 February 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵⁰ EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 4-5

with imprisonment and fines. Sources reported to DIS that they did not know of cases of people punished solely for illegal exit, noting that those who face problems on return are those with other security problems with the government.¹⁵¹ According to two sources interviewed by DIS, ‘by legalizing, their status at a Syrian representation abroad prior to return to Syria, persons who have left Syria illegally can return without facing any problem’.¹⁵²

However, other sources indicated that Syrians who return must agree to sign loyalty pledges to the government, including providing extensive background information and signed statements to cooperate with authorities, or must enter reconciliation agreements.¹⁵³ See also Section [1.3.5](#).

Sources interviewed by DIS reported that there are no consequences known of having applied for asylum abroad and that such applicants are not punished on return.¹⁵⁴

Conscription in the Syrian army

A 2014 decree stipulated that men of the age of military conscription (18-42) ‘who are unwilling to serve but who wish to return to Syria must remain outside the country for at least four years and pay an exemption fee of US\$8,000’. Men over 42 years of age who had not served in the military had to pay the same exemption fee.¹⁵⁵ An amnesty (Decree No 18/2018), announced in October 2018, removed the exemption fee for men who had not been conscripted yet. However, it did not remove the mandatory military conscription as such.¹⁵⁶ Also, according to the DIS, ‘arrest of reservists who have evaded the military service is prohibited and names of reservists wanted for active duty are dropped.’ The government emphasised that the circular was meant ‘to assure refugees that they will not be detained upon return to Syria if they were previously wanted for reservist service in the Syrian Arab Army’.¹⁵⁷

Very few people applied for amnesty during the period (four months for those within the country, six months if living abroad). ‘Instead, thousands of young men have been detained and investigated before being forced into military service across the country in recent months,’ according to EIP.¹⁵⁸ According to Morris, describing the situation of returnees from Jordan, ‘many fear reprisals due to perceived cowardice or disloyalty to the regime’.¹⁵⁹

The 2019 EIP report mentioned the existence of ‘wanted lists’ with about 3 million names of individuals wanted, including for mandatory military service. These lists are reportedly ‘designed to deter disloyal individuals from returning’. The wanted lists also contain names of persons ‘believed to have been involved in opposition-related activities, which range from protesting to working in media or nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), and human rights activists and local administrative officials under opposition control’.¹⁶⁰

Detailed information on the military service in the GoS forces and consequences for draft evaders and deserters is available in [Chapter 2](#).

¹⁵¹ Denmark, DIS, Syria: Consequences of illegal exit, consequences of leaving a civil servant position without notice and the situation of Kurds in Damascus, June 2019, [url](#), pp. 6-7

¹⁵² Denmark, DIS, Syria: Consequences of illegal exit, consequences of leaving a civil servant position without notice and the situation of Kurds in Damascus, June 2019, [url](#), pp. 6-7

¹⁵³ EIP, Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks, and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#); pp. 5-6; Washington Post (The), Assad urged Syrian refugees to come home. Many are being welcomed with arrest and interrogation, 2 June 2019, [url](#);

¹⁵⁴ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, 21 February 2019, [url](#), p. 20

¹⁵⁵ Araman, A. and Loutf, S., Return to Syria after evading conscription, Forced Migration Review, October 2019, [url](#), p. 52

¹⁵⁶ EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 11

¹⁵⁷ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, 21 February 2019, [url](#), p. 29

¹⁵⁸ EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 11

¹⁵⁹ Morris, Julia, The politics of return from Jordan to Syria, Forced Migration Review, October 2019, [url](#), p. 32

¹⁶⁰ EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 12

Arrests, torture, detention

A report by the EIP, examining the concerns of all categories of returnees, found a worrying situation with many arrests and torture cases by government security forces: ‘Even among the self-selecting “voluntary” returnees, hundreds of detentions and arrests have been reported [...] Recent detainees report having experienced brutal torture while in custody; deaths in custody have also been recorded’.¹⁶¹

The EIP identified some particular risk profiles which are more susceptible to arrests while adding that arrests are taking place in all returning categories, ‘and it cannot be assumed that only those within these groups are at risk of being detained or arrested, now or in the future’:

- ‘those who return without seeking security permissions and reconciling before travelling,
- individuals who worked in sectors or activities believed to be associated with the opposition (journalism, aid work, local councils, rescue workers),
- men of military age,
- and those with family members who were forcibly displaced to Idlib or Aleppo’.¹⁶²

Reliable figures on arrests and detention cases of returnees are not available. According to returnees and human rights organisations interviewed by the Washington Post, ‘hundreds of Syrian refugees have been arrested after returning home as the war they fled winds down — then interrogated, forced to inform on close family members and in some cases tortured’.¹⁶³ The EIP report provides numerous cases of returnees and IDPs having been arrested after returning to government-held areas.¹⁶⁴

EIP reports that UNHCR has only limited access to IDPs and returnees, and is therefore unable to monitor and collect data on their situation without government permission. The agency does in some cases subcontract local NGOs, such as the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), to collect data and carry out surveys.¹⁶⁵

Access to properties and housing

According to the Syrian Association for Citizens Dignity¹⁶⁶ (SYACD) report on the situation of returnees to government-held areas, the government’s urban development laws in the recaptured, destroyed areas are reportedly ‘discriminatory’ and returnees are ‘systematically denied the right to their property in an openly retaliatory manner’.¹⁶⁷ Returnees to recaptured parts of Rural Damascus, Dar’a, Homs, and Aleppo were also asked to pay fees for water, electricity, phone, municipal and real estate taxes during the period they fled.¹⁶⁸

Morris also noted that returnees experience many difficulties to gain access to the properties that they held before fleeing the country, due to lack of documentation and identification. The new property law of April 2018 (Law No 10), amended in November 2018, gives Syrians a year to prove their ownership and to reclaim their properties. After that period, authorities are allowed ‘to confiscate property without compensating the owners or giving them an opportunity to appeal’. However, as Morris reported, ‘many refugees are unclear as to which is the real deadline, and the majority lack identification or property registration documents to make the claims in the first place’.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶¹ EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁶² EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 11-12, 25

¹⁶³ Washington Post (The), Assad urged Syrian refugees to come home, 2 June 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁴ EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 4-5

¹⁶⁵ EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 19

¹⁶⁶ SYACD is ‘a movement fighting for the rights of displaced Syrians’. SADC, Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality Behind Assad’s Promises to Displaced Syrians, October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁷ SYACD, Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality Behind Assad’s Promises to Displaced Syrians, October 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁶⁸ SYACD, Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality Behind Assad’s Promises to Displaced Syrians, October 2019, [url](#), p. 18

¹⁶⁹ Morris, Julia, The politics of return from Jordan to Syria, Forced Migration Review, Forced Migration Review, October 2019, [url](#), p. 32

According to a World Bank/International Bank for Reconstruction and Development report on mobility of displaced refugees, looting, expropriations and damage of properties are major housing-related concerns for Syrians. A lack of documents is also an important concern in several cities. In addition, recent legal measures (such as Law No 10 in 2018, Law No 33 in 2017, and Legislative Decrees Nos 40, 63, 66 in 2012) 'seem to facilitate further confiscation and expropriation of property, especially of refugees'.¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ World Bank (The)/ IBRD, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians, An economic and social analysis, 2019, [url](#), p. 19

2. Persons fearing recruitment by the government armed forces and/or repercussions as military draft evaders and deserters from the armed forces

When the Syrian civil war began in 2011, one of the GoS' main issues was to provide manpower in order to face armed rebel groups.¹⁷¹ During the conflict, the SAA lost many soldiers to casualties, desertion, draft dodging, and defection.¹⁷²

Some men have fled the country because they do not want to perform military service for fear of their lives, while others have defected from the army or avoided military service out of political conviction and in opposition to the GoS.¹⁷³

The evasion of conscription has been reported as one of the main reasons for young men over the age of 18 having fled Syria. 'It is also one of the primary reasons why they cannot return', according to researchers Araman and Loutfi.¹⁷⁴ UNHCR found that 75 % of Syrians hope to return one day, but the military conscription that they 'cannot avoid' makes them reluctant to do so.¹⁷⁵

A study conducted by SYACD, documenting the security situation of returnees and others living in areas covered by the 'reconciliation agreements' concluded that three quarters of the interviewed persons or a relative were 'wanted for recruitment'. Conscripted persons are 'almost inevitably sent to the most dangerous frontlines' to fight.¹⁷⁶ At times, family members of those evading military service and deserters have faced retaliation by GoS in the form of intimidation and arrest.¹⁷⁷

2.1 Military service and official conscription

Male citizens between the ages of 18 and 42 are obliged by law to perform their military service.¹⁷⁸ According to Law No 35/2011, which amended the military conscription Law No 30 of 2007, military service lasts between 18 to 21 months.¹⁷⁹ Women may perform military service voluntarily.¹⁸⁰ Registered Palestinians residing in Syria are also subject to conscription and usually serve in the ranks of the SAA-affiliated Palestine Liberation Army (PLA).¹⁸¹

While the law prescribes an age limit of 42 years for conscription, in practice the age limit for military service and reserve duty has been increased, which practically lead to people in their late 40s and

¹⁷¹ Quartz, Syria's young men face an impossible choice, 14 December 2016, [url](#)

¹⁷² Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission Report, Syria: Military service, national defence forces, armed groups supporting Syrian regime and armed opposition, Helsinki, 23 August 2016, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁷³ TIMEP, Brief: Legislative Decree No.18 – Military Service Amnesty, 6 December 2018, [url](#)

¹⁷⁴ Ahmad Araman and Shaza Loutfi, Return to Syria after evading conscription, Forced Migration Review, October 2019, [url](#), p. 52; see also Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, 21 February 2019, [url](#), p. 21

¹⁷⁵ UNHCR, Fifth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees, Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria, March 2019, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁷⁶ SYACD, Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality Behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians, October 2019, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁷⁷ TIMEP, Brief: Legislative Decree No.18 – Military Service Amnesty, 6 December 2018, [url](#)

¹⁷⁸ International Crisis Group, Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 10

¹⁷⁹ Parliament of Syria (The), al-Marsoum at-Tashree'ee 35 li-am 2011 [Legislative Decree 35 for the year 2011], 1 June 2011, [url](#)

¹⁸⁰ TIMEP, TIMEP Brief: Conscription Law, 22 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸¹ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 6; Atlantic (The), Assad is desperate for soldiers, 14 May 2018, [url](#)

early 50s being forced to sign up. Sources interviewed by FIS stated that the age limit is less dependent on the universal draft than on the government's mobilising efforts and local developments. Therefore, the Syrian authorities are usually following younger people between the age of 18 and 27 more closely while people older than that tend to avoid the recruitment more easily.¹⁸²

Since the outbreak of the conflict, most conscripts have not been discharged even after their compulsory military service has been fulfilled and had to continue their service.¹⁸³ Until January 2018, only a few serving in the military since 2011 were demobilised.¹⁸⁴ The state media agency SANA previously reported two demobilisation orders.¹⁸⁵

According to Christopher Kozak of ISW, GoS is actually releasing some of the earliest classes of conscripts, which had been in service since early 2011 and had never been released from their official 18-month terms of duty. GoS begun demobilising the earliest classes of conscripts drafted up to 2012-2013. However, there are still a lot of individuals serving past the term of their ostensible 18-month mandatory service period, but GoS has finally begun some demobilisation, particularly due to public pressure from pro-government populations.¹⁸⁶ Further information on the implementation of the demobilisation orders could not be found.

According to expert interviews carried out by FIS, it appears to be possible for a person to join and serve in the government-affiliated militias instead of doing the military service under the regular army. This holds to be true especially for the retaken and 'reconciled' areas.¹⁸⁷ The Fifth Corps - an association of militias incorporated into the official military structure in 2016 as a distinct army corps backed by Russia¹⁸⁸ - in particular is said to be the main alternative to the regular Syrian army regarding military service. That has been the case especially in the reconciled areas, retaken by the government in 2017 and 2018. According to information received by the FIS, the special status of the Fifth Corps in terms of recruitment seems not to be limited to the reconciled areas. For example the Fifth Corps elite unit, the Tiger Forces, were recruiting new fighters in Damascus area.¹⁸⁹

Recruitment occurred in other pro-government militias such as the National Defense Forces (NDF), which often attracts recruits due to better financial incentives than the SAA.¹⁹⁰ A Syrian activist interviewed by FIS assessed 'that pro-government militias are the primary recruiters of new fighters in areas where these militias are more powerful than the Syrian army'.¹⁹¹

OHCHR noted that in Dar'a governorate civilians of military age were required to perform their military service either in the army, intelligence services, or the NDF. By enlisting in the Fourth Division, men were reportedly promised to remain inside Dar'a governorate and not being sent to fight elsewhere. Hundreds of reconciled fighters and civilians joined the Fourth Division and other government-affiliated forces. Some have joined the Fifth Corps to avoid drafting by the SAA. Those refusing these

¹⁸² Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁸³ Atlantic (The), Assad is desperate for soldiers, 14 May 2018, [url](#)

¹⁸⁴ Norway, Landinfo, Syria: Reactions against deserters and draft evaders, 3 January 2018, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁸⁵ SANA, سنوات خمس أتموا الذين 249 والدورة قبلها وما 248 الدورة عناصر المجندين للضباط الاحتفاظ بموجبه تنهي إداريا أمرا تصدر للجيش العامة القيادة [The General Command of the Army issues an administrative order that ends the retention of officers recruited for the elements of the 248th and earlier cycle and the 249th session who have completed five years of retention], 10 December 2018, [url](#); SANA, Army's General Command issues order on demobilizing conscripted officers of batch no. 103, 31 December 2018, [url](#)

¹⁸⁶ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

¹⁸⁷ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁸⁸ Al-Jabassini, A., From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria, Middle East Directions. European University Institute, 14 May 2019, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁸⁹ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁹⁰ Khatib, L. and Sinjab, L., Syria's Transactional State How the Conflict Changed the Syrian State's Exercise of Power, Chatham House, October 2018, [url](#), pp. 14-15; Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 15

¹⁹¹ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 9

options would either attempt fleeing from government-held areas and risk arrest at checkpoints or remain in territories outside of the government's access.¹⁹²

However, according to other sources cited in the FIS report, the government has also begun to incorporate several militias into the official military structures. If fully implemented, joining a militia may no longer allow an individual to avoid military conscription, nor for him to avoid deployment to distant front lines.¹⁹³

According to Christopher Kozak, conscription intake remains relatively the same even though the situation has stabilised somewhat. Mass conscription drives and arrests in Damascus, in core areas of the Syrian Coast and in Homs and Hama governorates are still going on. Conscription activity in reconciled areas, such as northern Homs governorate or southern Syria also took place, primarily because former opposition populations in these areas have largely been recruited into other pro-GoS units such as the Fifth Corps or the wide array of pro-GoS paramilitary groups rather than conscripted into the SAA.¹⁹⁴

Kozak further noted that the bulk of the casualties in the SAA as indicated by GoS reporting, still come primarily from Latakia, Tartous, western Hama, western Homs, and Damascus governorates. These areas have been the core recruitment ground for the SAA for quite some time, particularly the Syrian Coast and western Homs and Hama governorates. These are the areas where reporting mentioned that most young men have been recruited for military service and these areas still represent a disproportionate amount of the formal SAA.¹⁹⁵

Christopher Kozak assessed that conscription targets any military-aged male that the state can get its hands on. Some populations are seen as more loyal and more effective, such as those from the core heartland area mentioned above, but even Syrian Sunnis will be rounded up and sent to other units that are perhaps less risky in grand scheme of the war. For example, many conscripts seen as less reliable were sent to southern Syria (i.e. the SAA Fifth, Seventh, and Ninth Divisions) because those units remained primarily garrisoned and were not used for offensive operations, whereas more offensive capable units were drawn primarily from the Syrian Coast and western Homs and Hama governorates.

Kozak concluded that the GoS is conscripting as far as its reach extends across Syria. It has conducted conscription effort in Qamishli and conscripted individuals from Raqqah and Deir Ez-Zor governorates who had fled from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) to western Syria. In Kozak's assessment, 'it is fair to say that the Syrian Government has been an equal opportunity employer when it comes to targeting young men for conscription'.¹⁹⁶

In Qamishli, Hasaka governorate, where the GoS retains partial control on the ground it has conducted conscription campaigns. The SDF has been unwilling to cooperate in this regard and as of November 2019, had the ability to prevent the Syrian Government from exercising these activities on the ground in northern Syria.¹⁹⁷ After the agreement between the SDF and GoS in mid-October 2019 that saw GoS troops deployed in previously Kurdish-controlled areas, it was reported that Syrian Kurds from the area fled to Iraq out of fear of being conscripted in the SAA.¹⁹⁸

For child recruitment by government armed forces and affiliated armed groups, see Section [12.1](#).

¹⁹² OHCHR, Human Rights Digest Syria, The "unreconciled" concerns of civilians in Dar'a Governorate (May 2019), [url](#), p. 5

¹⁹³ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁹⁴ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

¹⁹⁵ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

¹⁹⁶ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

¹⁹⁷ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

¹⁹⁸ Defense Post (The), Fearing conscription into Assad's army, Syrian Kurds flee to Iraq, 12 December 2019, [url](#)

2.2 Deferrals and exemptions

The law permits exemptions from military service for certain categories of individuals (described below). However, the process for obtaining an exemption was assessed ‘to include more limitations and more variation on case-by-case basis’. An AI researcher interviewed by FIS assessed that the way the law is implemented for these exempted categories is not clear.¹⁹⁹

According to Christopher Kozak, GoS has not reimposed its exemptions for protected categories of individuals such as government employees, students, and other classes that held a special status in the prior conscription system but saw their status degraded over the course of the conflict. Kozak assessed that the government has not loosened its scrutiny and focus on those ostensibly protected populations and is still attempting to force government employees to enlist in the reserves and paramilitary formations, and still targeting students for conscription.²⁰⁰

2.2.1 Students

Students at universities may under certain conditions be exempted from military service though a 2017 change in law has made it more difficult for university students to continue deferring their conscription.²⁰¹ DIS noted that amendments made to the Military Service Law in July 2019 by Legislative Decree No 12 introduced more restrictions on the age limits allowed to start different levels of education and the number of study years during which students are permitted to request exemption from military service.²⁰²

The FIS FFM report noted that students applying for a deferral from military service were put under more scrutiny than before. Students without proper documentation were conscripted immediately. Older students were more likely to be recruited, however. Persons who have reached the age of 27 were usually not given deferrals by the military police. According to an anonymous source quoted in the report, there were ‘quite a few cases where people have student exemptions but were called anyway to join the army’.²⁰³ Furthermore, the treatment of students was said to depend on the military police unit responsible, for example, for a particular checkpoint, since the police themselves might serve in their posts involuntarily: ‘Sometimes these guys [the military police] have been recruited forcefully and they are not very sympathetic to people who have been able to dodge the draft’.²⁰⁴

According to OHCHR’s information on Dar’a governorate, students who have suspended their education since the beginning of the civil unrest in 2011 were pardoned by the GoS and allowed to return to college. Those who returned were granted a deferment of their military service. Those who were over 25 years old – the age limit for which the Syrian law states that students can remain at university – were drafted in the army and other affiliated security bodies.²⁰⁵

2.2.2 Government employees

According to estimates by a humanitarian conflict analyst interviewed by FIS, government employees, particularly those working in Damascus and in the government ministries, are not recruited for military

¹⁹⁹ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), pp. 6-7

²⁰⁰ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

²⁰¹ Norway, Landinfo, Syria: Reactions against deserters and draft evaders, 3 January 2018, [url](#), pp. 6, 8

²⁰² DIS, Issues Regarding Military Service, October 2019, [url](#), p. 5; SANA, الرئيس الأسد يصدر مرسوما تشريعيا بتعديل مواد من قانون خدمة العلم [President Assad issues a Legislative Decree [no.12] amending articles of the Military Service Law], 14 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁰³ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 7

²⁰⁴ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 7

²⁰⁵ OHCHR, Human Rights Digest Syria, The “unreconciled” concerns of civilians in Dar’a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), p. 6

service. Another expert on the topic stated that government employees who were in fact recruited to the Syrian army usually consisted of reservists who have been called to reserve duty to resume their former tasks.²⁰⁶

In November 2017, a new directive from the Prime Minister which applied to state employees instructed public institutions to ‘terminate the employment of those avoiding mandatory military service or reserve duty’. The directive was followed by an unknown number of dismissals.²⁰⁷ No further information on the application of the exemption for government employees was found.

2.2.3 Medical cases

Reliable information concerning medical reasons for exemption from military service is difficult to come by. Two sources interviewed by FIS stated that exemptions were still granted on the basis of medical reasons. Other experts cited estimated that in the case of military conscription the recruitment criteria in general have loosened. Accordingly, even old and obese men, who in the past would have been exempted relatively easily, were conscripted if required by the authorities. According to one source, it is probable that a person will not be given an exemption unless his medical condition is very clearly visible. The source also points out that in some cases it was possible for an individual to get an exemption based on medical grounds if a bribe was paid.²⁰⁸

2.2.4 Only sons

The Syrian Military Service Law provides that the only male child to his parents can be exempted from military service. The exemption is also applicable if the parents of the only son are divorced, or if one or both parents are deceased.²⁰⁹ DIS noted that ‘in addition, an only son will be exempted if he has half-brothers or has become an only male child as a result of the death of one or more of his brothers’.²¹⁰

President Assad issued on 6 August 2014 Legislative Decree No 33, which amends a number of articles of Legislative Decree No 30 for 2007 on the mandatory military service law. The amendments also altered the number of sons per family who may postpone military service, with the numbers becoming as follows: ‘1 may postpone if 2-4 brothers were performing mandatory, voluntary, or reserve military service, 2 if there were 5-8 brothers in the service, and 3 if there were 9 or more brothers in the service. Before the amendments, only one son could postpone’.²¹¹

According to an expert interviewed by FIS, a family’s only son can still benefit from the exemption regulation, but the GoS has been tightening controls on this. Instead of renewing the exemption every two years, the person concerned is obliged to renew it every single year. From there, the only son is required to renew his exemption until his mother reaches the age when she is not expected to be able to give birth to another child (approximately by the age of 50, according to the source).²¹² No further information on the application of the exemption for only sons could be found.

²⁰⁶ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 7

²⁰⁷ Syria Direct, Syrian public sector employees fired in latest government conscription effort, 7 December 2017, [url](#)

²⁰⁸ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 8

²⁰⁹ Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Defense, Only male child, n.d., [url](#)

²¹⁰ Denmark, DIS, Issues Regarding Military Service, October 2019, [url](#), p. 5

²¹¹ SANA, President al-Assad issues legislative decree amending mandatory military service law, 6 August 2014, [url](#)

²¹² Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 8

2.2.5 Exemption from military service by paying exemption fees, and risk of being called up as reservist despite having paid the fee

DIS noted that ‘according to Law 30/2007, Syrian young men, including registered Palestinians from Syria, can pay a fee (*‘Badal al-Naqdi’*) to get an exemption from compulsory military service and not be called up again. Since 2007, this decree has been amended several times, latest in 2014 and 2017’.²¹³

The opposition website Enab Baladi noted that exemption fees applies to a male living abroad for no less than four years, who could pay a fee of USD 5 000 before the war and USD 8 000 after to be exempted from military service.²¹⁴ According to the chief of Syria’s Immigration and Passports Department interviewed by DIS in November 2018, not only persons who left the country legally, but also those who left illegally can be exempted from their military service obligations.²¹⁵ The deadline for paying the fee is three months after receiving the call for conscription.²¹⁶

However, based on DIS interviews with representatives of an international security organisation and Human Rights Watch, the effectiveness and durability of the law that grants exemptions from military service through the mentioned fee was questionable in light of their experience with previous decrees. The security organisation’s representative considered such arrangements as being implemented differently on a case-by-case basis and that they in no way constitute a guarantee against forced conscription. To the interviewee’s understanding, the only real exemption was given to either someone beyond the military service age or someone who completed military service already. Although, in both cases being called up (again) during the conflict remains an eventuality.²¹⁷

The use of exemption fee has been linked with corruption²¹⁸, bribery²¹⁹, and discretionary application.²²⁰

2.3 Consequences of draft evasion and desertion

2.3.1 Penalties for evading service

The punishment for evading conscription is defined in the Military Penal Code, but its application remains arbitrary.²²¹ According to the Syrian Military Penal Code (Articles 98, 99), draft dodgers are punished with one to six months imprisonment in peacetime, after which they have to complete their military service in full. In wartime draft evasion is a criminal offense, punishable by up to 5 years in prison.²²²

According to interviews conducted by Landinfo with representatives of a Syrian civil society organisation and an international organisation in 2016 and 2017, the Military Criminal Code’s

²¹³ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 27-28

²¹⁴ Enab Baladi, Military Service Exemption Fee: Expensive Return Ticket To Homeland, 2 September 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁵ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 29

²¹⁶ Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, البديل النقدي [Exemption Fee] n.d., [url](#)

²¹⁷ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 29

²¹⁸ Omran Center for Strategic Studies, Transformations of the Syrian Military: The Challenge of Change and Restructuring, 31 December 2018, [url](#), pp. 174-175

²¹⁹ Syria Direct, Damascus student to pay 8 months of salary in bribe to avoid military service, 20 April 2017, [url](#)

²²⁰ TIMEP, TIMEP Brief: Conscription Law, 22 August 2019, [url](#)

²²¹ Swiss Refugee Council, Syrien: Aufschub des Militärdienstes für Studenten [Postponement of military service for students], 11 June 2019, [url](#), p. 6

²²² Syrian Arab Republic, Legislative Decree No. 61/1950, Military Penal Code, [url](#)

provisions were not consistently followed. Draft evaders were usually sent directly to the military.²²³ Sources interviewed by DIS for their report of 2017 also indicated that those who have evaded service and were caught were then sent to compulsory military service.²²⁴

2.3.2 Penalties for desertion

Since the start of the conflict tens of thousands of officers and conscripted soldiers deserted.²²⁵ Many fled the country while others remained in Syria and joined one of the armed insurgent groups.²²⁶

According to the Military Penal Code (Articles 100, 101), desertion is punishable by one to five years imprisonment in peacetime and can result in a prison sentence up to twice as long in wartime. Those who have left the country following desertion can be punished with a penalty of up to 15 years imprisonment in wartime. Desertion to the enemy is punishable by life imprisonment or the death penalty.²²⁷

Several experts on the topic interviewed by DIS in April 2017 noted that deserters were punished more severely than draft evaders. Some sources stated that deserters would be viewed through the same lens as opposition members. Other sources noted that amnesties and local agreements have allowed deserters to re-enter the military service and be sent to the front.²²⁸

Reporting for the period between mid-July 2018 and mid-January 2019, the CoI assessed that conscript deserters were among the groups most likely to be detained arbitrarily by the GoS forces.²²⁹ In previous years, deserters were often punished in the same way as those who actively joined the opposition. In targeted campaigns, the government systematically arrested defectors and military personnel suspected of sympathising with the opposition.²³⁰ According to a 2015 AI report, the Syrian government arrested defectors and had them forcefully disappeared.²³¹

2.4 Enforcement of amnesty for draft evaders and deserters

Amnesty laws have been issued on several occasions since Syria's crisis began in March 2011 to grant draft dodgers or deserters amnesty from prosecution.²³² Some organisations stated that these measures have not necessarily resulted in the return of refugees or draft evaders, because such individuals would still be required to complete their military service after turning themselves in.²³³

Legislative Decree No 18 issued in October 2018, granted a general amnesty to certain individuals in Syria or abroad, accused of deserting or avoiding military service. However, the decree did not exempt

²²³ Norway, Landinfo, Reactions against deserters and draft evaders, 3 January 2018, [url](#), p. 8

²²⁴ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria, Recruitment Practices in Government-controlled Areas and in Areas under Opposition Control, Involvement of Public Servants and Civilians in the Armed Conflict and Issues Related to Exiting Syria, August 2017, [url](#), pp. 13-14

²²⁵ Norway, Landinfo, Reactions against deserters and draft evaders, 3 January 2018, [url](#), p. 10; Atlantic (The), Assad is desperate for soldiers, 14 May 2018, [url](#)

²²⁶ Al Jazeera, Interactive: Tracking Syria's defections, 30 July 2012, [url](#)

²²⁷ Syrian Arab Republic, Legislative Decree No. 61/1950, Military Penal Code, [url](#)

²²⁸ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria, Recruitment Practices in Government-controlled Areas and in Areas under Opposition Control, Involvement of Public Servants and Civilians in the Armed Conflict and Issues Related to Exiting Syria, August 2017, [url](#), p. 13

²²⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 15

²³⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Deaths in Detention in the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 February 2016, [url](#), p. 4

²³¹ AI, Between Prison and the Grave: Enforced Disappearances in Syria, November 2015, [url](#), p. 7

²³² TIMEP, TIMEP Brief: Conscription Law, 22 August 2019, [url](#)

²³³ TIMEP, Legislative Decree No.18 – Military Service Amnesty, 6 December 2018, [url](#)

the person to whom amnesty was granted from military service.²³⁴ The amnesty had to be taken up within four months for those residing within the country, or six months for those living abroad.²³⁵ Those who fought on the side of the armed opposition or dissented against GoS were excluded from the amnesty.²³⁶

On 28 October 2018, the Ministry of Defence issued a circular that provided for the implementation of the amnesty law. The circular forbids the arrest of reservists who had evaded military service and states that the names of reservists who were wanted for active service would be removed from the list. Those reservists can still be called up again in the event of war or a state of emergency, however. According to some estimates, this decree could affect 800 000 people who have left the country or gone into hiding.²³⁷

According to the Atlantic Council, despite the October 2018 amnesty law, the GoS issued new lists of persons called for emergency military service, which contained 400 000 names, including a large number of youths whose names had just been removed from the list by virtue of the amnesty measure.²³⁸ Syria Direct²³⁹ reported in March 2019 on a case of a defector who returned to Syria following the amnesty and was reportedly taken by the authorities upon his return. His whereabouts were unknown.²⁴⁰

Representatives of the Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR)²⁴¹ interviewed by DIS in November 2018 assessed that very few individuals would be interested in using the amnesty law, the main reasons being that it does not pardon them for fulfilling the military service. Other interviewed sources mentioned that GoS has not respected prior amnesties and reconciliation agreements, fuelling distrust among Syrians. A Syrian official stated however, that following the amnesty ‘a crucial number of both deserters and draft evaders had handed themselves in to the authorities’.²⁴²

Christopher Kozak stated that GoS resumed conscription earlier than the grace period prescribed by the terms of the amnesty agreements, in some cases within weeks of reasserting control over reconciled areas. Kozak further assessed that GoS still has an intense need for manpower so it has an incentive to operate in this fashion to maximise the number of individuals conscripted into the military. Kozak expected that as the Syrian Civil War will shift into a new phase and the need for manpower will become less intensive, GoS will likely become less lenient and individuals with a history of having draft-dodged or evaded military service will be on the government radar for potential detention or other punishments later.²⁴³

The grace period of four to six months granted by the amnesty expired on 9 April 2019.²⁴⁴ Information on whether the amnesty was renewed could not be found.

²³⁴ Reuters, Syria’s offers amnesty to deserters and draft dodgers, 9 October 2018, [url](#); Washington Post (The), Syria offers amnesty to deserters and draft dodgers, 9 October 2018, [url](#)

²³⁵ EIP, Refugee return in Syria: Dangers, security risks and information scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 10

²³⁶ TIMEP, Legislative Decree No. 18 of 2018 (Military Service Amnesty), 20 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 1-2

²³⁷ National (The), Syrian military clears men wanted for extra military service, 31 October 2018, [url](#)

²³⁸ Atlantic Council, Forced conscription continues despite amnesty by Syrian Government, 13 February 2019, [url](#)

²³⁹ Syria Direct is ‘an independent journalism organization focused on Syria’, founded in 2013. For more information see [url](#)

²⁴⁰ Syria Direct, ‘Is it safe to go home?’ Amid promises of amnesty in Syria, defectors abroad weigh their options, 18 March 2019, [url](#)

²⁴¹ COAR is a social enterprise that provides research and analysis related to the conflict in Syria as part of an EU-funded project. For more information see [url](#)

²⁴² Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 30-31

²⁴³ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

²⁴⁴ TIMEP, Legislative Decree No. 18 of 2018 (Military Service Amnesty), 20 August 2019, [url](#), p. 2

3. Persons perceived to be opposing the SDF/YPG

As of December 2019, much of north-east Syria was under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).²⁴⁵ The SDF are a Kurdish-led multi-ethnic force comprising of Kurds, Arabs and other ethnic groups created in 2015 to support the US-led coalition in the war against ISIL.²⁴⁶ The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) were established in 2012 as the military wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) – a Syrian branch of the EU²⁴⁷, US²⁴⁸ and Turkey-designated terrorist organisation Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).²⁴⁹ The SDF is dominated by the YPG who helped establish the SDF in October 2015²⁵⁰, provides its core fighting forces and largely ensures its leadership.²⁵¹

The October 2019 Turkish-led incursion into northeast Syria has led to territorial control changes in north-east Syria, namely by occupying previously Kurdish-held territory stretching between Ras al-Ain and Tall Abyad.²⁵²

SDF was neither in alliance with the Syrian opposition nor the government, but it was nevertheless largely dependent on the GoS, which funded certain state institutions in the area and paid salaries to state employees.²⁵³ In October 2019, the GoS and the Kurdish-controlled SDF announced an agreement that allowed the GoS troops to be deployed along the border with Turkey to assist Kurdish forces in repelling the Turkish offensive.²⁵⁴ Christopher Kozak of ISW assessed in November 2019 that the SDF are still in control on the ground in Kurdish-controlled territories and there has not been a governance handover to the Syrian government following the agreement.²⁵⁵

Detailed information on the SDF, YPG and the Kurdish-controlled north-east of Syria is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Actors \(December 2019\)](#)

3.1 Targeting of political opponents

The Democratic Union Party, known as the PYD, is a Kurdish political party established by the Syrian branch of the PKK in 2003.²⁵⁶ PYD is viewed as the dominant political actor in the Kurdish-controlled areas where it exercises ultimate control and making decisions for the entire region.²⁵⁷ Most of the Kurdish opposition is united in the Kurdish National Council (KNC), an umbrella group for various

²⁴⁵ Based on reading of the following maps: ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 17-28, 2019, 9 January 2020, [url](#); Liveuamap, Syria, 31 December 2019, [url](#)

²⁴⁶ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 33

²⁴⁷ European Council, Council Decision of 17 June 2002 implementing Article 2(3) of Regulation (EC) No 2580/2001 on specific restrictive measures directed against certain persons and entities with a view to combating terrorism and repealing Decision 2002/334/EC, 18 June 2002, [url](#)

²⁴⁸ USDOS, Country Report on Terrorism 2018 - Chapter 5 - Kurdistan Workers' Party, 1 November 2019, [url](#)

²⁴⁹ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 33

²⁵⁰ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), pp. 8, 33

²⁵¹ International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, 31 July 2019, [url](#), p. 1; Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), pp. 8, 33

²⁵² COAR, Syria Update 06 - 12 November, 2019, 13 November 2019, [url](#), pp. 3-4

²⁵³ International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, 31 July 2019, [url](#), pp. 1, 13-14; Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 59-60

²⁵⁴ Al Jazeera, Syria's army to deploy along Turkey border as Kurds strike deal, 14 October 2019, [url](#)

²⁵⁵ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

²⁵⁶ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 33; Wimmen, H. and Seluck, M., The Rise of Syria's Kurds, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 5 February 2013, [url](#)

²⁵⁷ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2019 - Syria, 4 February 2019, [url](#), Political Rights and Civil Liberties; Wilkofsky, D., The future of northeast Syria, Atlantic Council, 13 August 2019, [url](#)

Syrian Kurdish parties that was created in 2011.²⁵⁸ As of mid-2019, the KNC comprised of 14 parties.²⁵⁹ Several sources documented the arrest, detention and enforced disappearances²⁶⁰ of members of the political opposition, including KNC, at the hand of local security forces.²⁶¹

Several sources noted that the PYD and the affiliated Asayish engaged in arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances and torture of political opponents such as the KNC, arrests of journalists, members of human rights organisations and individuals who refused to cooperate with Kurdish groups.²⁶² During 2018, at least 20 members of the KNC were reported to have been arrested by the Asayish, some of which were alleged to have been forcibly disappeared.²⁶³

According to the Col, Kurdish forces arbitrarily arrested civilians supporting competing political parties or individuals perceived to be insufficiently loyal. Instances of torture of political opponents by elements associated with the SDF and YPG on the Syrian Arab Republic were also reported.²⁶⁴

In a June 2018 article, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy noted that the PYD has previously arrested KNC leaders, burned their offices, and prevented them from holding meetings and conferences.²⁶⁵ In the months preceding the 2017 local elections in north-east Syria, Kurdish authorities launched a campaign of arrests of 'illegal' and unpermitted political parties, resulting in the closure of nearly all opposition party offices.²⁶⁶

In January 2019, during attempts to unify the Syrian Kurdish political parties, the PYD-run administration allowed 'unlicensed' political parties to open new local offices. Amidst the rapprochement, the Kurdish National Congress - 'a pan-Kurdish coalition of organizations with over 288 representatives'²⁶⁷ - reportedly pledged to investigate the existence of political prisoners.²⁶⁸ Prior mediation attempts and agreements between the KNC and the PYD have failed in between 2012 and 2014²⁶⁹ and in 2016.²⁷⁰ Due to the Turkish military offensive in north-east Syria (starting in October 2019), talks about a deal between the PYD and KNC have emerged.²⁷¹

According to a statement by the KNC, the PYD-Asayish prevented a cultural seminar held by a local council in Qamishli on 15 September 2019. The head of the local council was reportedly arrested for a couple of hours. The KNC condemned the blocking of political activities by the PYD.²⁷² According to

²⁵⁸ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 33; Chatham House, Governing Rojava: Layers of legitimacy in Syria, December 2016, [url](#), p. 3

²⁵⁹ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 33; Koontz, K., Borders Beyond borders. The Many (Many) Kurdish Political Parties of Syria, Middle East Institute, October 2019, [url](#), p. 8

²⁶⁰ HRW, World Report 2019 - Syria, 17 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁶¹ Al, Human rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Review of 2018 - Syria [MDE 24/9903/2019], 26 February 2019, [url](#), p. 62; HRW, World Report 2019 - Syria, 17 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁶² USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 55; HRW, Syria: Kurdish-led Administration Jails Rivals, 10 September 2018, [url](#); Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2019 - Syria, 4 February 2019, [url](#)

²⁶³ HRW, World Report 2019 - Syria, 17 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁶⁴ Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Detention in the Syrian Arab Republic: A Way Forward, OHCHR, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 5

²⁶⁵ Washington Institute for Near East Policy (The), Why Syria's Kurds are Struggling Politically, 12 June 2018, [url](#)

²⁶⁶ Kurdistan24, Syria's Kurdish authorities close dozen political offices, 18 March 2017, [url](#)

²⁶⁷ Koontz, K., Borders Beyond borders. The Many (Many) Kurdish Political Parties of Syria, Middle East Institute, October 2019, [url](#), p. 9

²⁶⁸ Kurdistan24, Syrian Kurdish groups attempt to unify after Trump withdrawal decision, 5 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁶⁹ Kurdistan24, Syrian Kurdish groups attempt to unify after Trump withdrawal decision, 5 January 2019, [url](#); Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Günter Seufert (publisher), Die Kurden im Irak und in Syrien nach dem Ende der Territorialherrschaft des »Islamischen Staates« [The Kurds in Iraq and Syria after the end of the territorial reign of the „Islamic State“], July 2018, [url](#), p. 70

²⁷⁰ Koontz, K., Borders Beyond borders. The Many (Many) Kurdish Political Parties of Syria, Middle East Institute, October 2019, [url](#), p. 7

²⁷¹ Al Monitor, Feuding Syrian Kurdish political blocs dance around rapprochement, 6 August 2019, [url](#)

²⁷² Kurdish National Council (KNC), A statement on the prevention by the PYD-run Asayish to hold a cultural seminar by the local council of al-Kournish [translated from Arabic], 16 September 2019, [url](#)

a meeting protocol of the KNC-member Partîya Yekîtiya Kurdistanî – Sûrîyê (PYKS) on 30 September 2019, the party offices in Qamishli and Amude remained closed and some political prisoners were not released.²⁷³ The events and allegations could not be verified.

SNHR reported that in December 2019 SDF arbitrarily arrested activists and members of civil society who opposed their policies in Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor governorates. Civilians were reportedly also targeted for forced conscription or under the charge of cooperating with opposition factions.²⁷⁴

In 2014, Human Rights Watch published an extensive report on human rights violations (i.e. arbitrary arrests, due process violations, abuses in detention, unsolved disappearances and killings) committed by the YPG, Asayish and other PYD institutions against members of the Kurdish opposition. Human Rights Watch suggested that human rights violations persisted in Kurdish-controlled territories, although less widespread and drastic than in other Syrian territories.²⁷⁵ With the establishment of PYD-run administration, many opposition parties are said to have gone into exile²⁷⁶ or have reportedly been suppressed by the PYD.²⁷⁷

3.2 Targeting of persons with (perceived) links to ISIL

In a January 2019 report, the Col stated that ‘SDF relied heavily on international coalition air power, causing a notable increase in civilian casualties and underscoring the link between explosive weapons in densely populated areas and civilian harm’.²⁷⁸ During the first half of 2019, military raids carried out by SDF against ISIL elements in Deir Ez-Zor governorate have led to civilian casualties. Some raids have been perceived by local communities as direct SDF attacks on tribal members.²⁷⁹

Sources interviewed by the International Crisis Group in 2019 noted that SDF/YPG arbitrarily detained and indiscriminately killed civilians during anti-ISIL raids. At least 111 people were said to have been wrongfully killed by SDF during anti ISIL-operations carried out in eastern Deir Ez-Zor during March 2019. SDF reportedly paid blood money to the tribes for some of the victims.²⁸⁰

Between July 2012 and September 2019, SNHR documented the detention or enforced disappearance of 2 907 individuals by SDF. SNHR noted that in 2019 the SDF was responsible for raids, arrests and enforced disappearances. IDPs settled in Raqqa, Hasaka and Deir Ez-Zor governorates, were particularly targeted by SDF, whom it accused of ISIL affiliation.²⁸¹

In a report published in February 2019, SNHR stated that there has been an increase in arrests and enforced disappearances in the Kurdish region. Between January and February 2019, SNHR documented the arrests of at least 107 persons out of which 52 were forcibly disappeared by Kurdish forces affiliated with the PYD. Amongst others, the arrests targeted IDPs residing in camps and

²⁷³ Kurdish National Council (KNC), A statement on the meeting of the Yekiti Party Syria’s Central Committee [translated from Arabic], 30 September 2019, [url](#)

²⁷⁴ SNHR, At least 6,671 Cases of Arbitrary Arrests Documented in 2019, 2 January 2020, [url](#), p. 5

²⁷⁵ HRW, Under Kurdish Rule, 19 June 2014, [url](#), pp. 3-6

²⁷⁶ SWP (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik), Günter Seufert (publisher), Die Kurden im Irak und in Syrien nach dem Ende der Territorialherrschaft des »Islamischen Staates« [The Kurds in Iraq and Syria after the end of the territorial reign of the „Islamic State“], July 2018, [url](#), p. 69

²⁷⁷ SWP (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik), Aljoscha Albrecht / Guido Steinberg, Kurden unter Druck [The Kurds under pressure], January 2019, [url](#), p. 6; Washington Institute for Near East Policy (The), A Better Future For Syrian Kurdistan, 29 November 2017, [url](#)

²⁷⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 10

²⁷⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 8

²⁸⁰ International Crisis Group interviews with tribal notables, March 2019 and YPG official, May 2019. International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria’s North East, 31 July 2019, [url](#), p. 19

²⁸¹ SNHR, Nearly 3,000 Individuals Are Still Detained or Forcibly Disappeared by Syrian Democratic Forces, 10 September 2019, [url](#), pp. 1-3

suspected of having links with ISIL or armed opposition groups.²⁸² Mistreatment of non-Kurdish residents, particularly those suspected to be associated with ISIL was also reported.²⁸³

The Col noted that 'in areas under the control of SDF, thousands of women, men and children continued to be unlawfully interned or detained, some of them held in deplorable conditions in makeshift camps unfit to meet their basic needs'.²⁸⁴ The informal detention centres for ISIL fighters and affiliates were reported to be severely overcrowded and lacking adequate medical care.²⁸⁵ Thousands of wives and children of ISIL fighters were also held in makeshift camps where the living conditions were reported to be 'deplorable'. With many countries of origin of foreign ISIL family members refusing to repatriate them, these persons were held in 'limbo' by the SDF.²⁸⁶

During anti-ISIL operations in Hasaka and Raqqah governorates carried out in 2015, AI stated that the YPG forces engaged in razing of villages, confiscation of property and forced displacement of people in retaliation for perceived affiliation or sympathies to ISIL or other armed groups. AI assessed that the forced displacement carried out by the Kurdish forces constituted war crimes.²⁸⁷

While the SDF regularly claims to arrest ISIL affiliates, SOHR reported that some of those arrested are civil activists.²⁸⁸ SDF was accused of arresting activists involved in the uprising against the Assad government. In August 2019, four activists were arrested in Raqqah under the accusation of being ISIL members.²⁸⁹ SNHR also reported on several incidents of arrest of local activists and humanitarian workers in Raqqah governorate under the accusation of ISIL affiliation.²⁹⁰ The Syrian for Truth & Justice - an NGO documenting human rights violations in Syria - reported that during August 2019 SDF and local security forces arrested at least 14 civilians in Raqqah for undisclosed reasons. The arrested including six prominent civil society activists who started working in the governorate after the defeat of ISIL. Sources close to Kurdish authorities accused at least one of the activists arrested of being an ISIL affiliate.²⁹¹

Reporting for the period July 2017 to January 2018, the Col noted that SDF arrested relatives of members of the Free Syrian Army (FSA)²⁹² and ISIL for interrogation.²⁹³

3.3 Other profiles perceived as opposition

Arabs have claimed to be marginalised in the governance of the areas where they constitute a majority with decision-making ultimately resting in the hands of the Kurds.²⁹⁴

²⁸² SNHR, An Increase in Arrests and Enforced Disappearances by Kurdish Self-Management Forces, 18 February 2019, [url](#), p. 2

²⁸³ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2019 - Syria, 4 February 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 4

²⁸⁵ HRW, Northeast Syria: Article on men and boys being held by Kurdish-led armed group in informal detention centers, 8 October 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 15-16

²⁸⁷ AI, 'We Had Nowhere Else to Go'. Forced Displacement and Demolitions in Northern Syria, 13 October 2015, [url](#), pp. 5-6

²⁸⁸ SOHR, Without warning...the SDF arrest 4 activists working in civil society organizations in Al-Raqqah city, 17 August 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁹ Syrian Observer (The), In the Footsteps of ISIS, the SDF Pursues Activists in Raqqah, 21 August 2019, [url](#)

²⁹⁰ SNHR, Nearly 3,000 Individuals Are Still Detained or Forcibly Disappeared by Syrian Democratic Forces, 10 September 2019, [url](#), p. 3

²⁹¹ STJ, Syria: Prominent Activists Arbitrarily Arrested in Raqqah, 3 September 2019, [url](#)

²⁹² The Free Syrian Army is the umbrella-armed group formed by the anti-government opposition in 2011. ISW, The Free Syrian Army, March 2013, [url](#), p. 9

²⁹³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/37/72], 1 February 2018, [url](#), p. 10

²⁹⁴ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Kurdish-Arab Power Struggle in Northeastern Syria, 24 July 2019, [url](#)

The US Congress-appointed Syria Study Group noted in a September 2019 report that ‘YPG’s heavy-handed approach to governing and resource allocation, has led to unrest in Arab tribal areas’.²⁹⁵ In spring 2019, Arab residents launched protests in Deir Ez-Zor governorate against the Kurdish forces complaining of lack of services, discrimination, forcible conscription, and a failure to release prisoners.²⁹⁶ Deterioration of living conditions and arbitrary arrests of civilians under the accusation of having links with ISIL or Turkey were also identified as main causes for the protests.²⁹⁷ In Deir Ez-Zor the local population is reportedly largely tribal and distrustful of the Kurdish-led forces whom they accuse of ‘trying to control them from outside’.²⁹⁸ Protests against SDF control were also held in Hasaka and Raqqqa governorates.²⁹⁹

Corruption, extortion and abuses of power at the hands of SDF personnel was also reported.³⁰⁰ Arab fighters that refused to join SDF claimed that they have been reportedly subjected to harassment, arbitrary arrests, and confiscations of weapons and cars.³⁰¹

Disputes between the PYD-led Kurdish administration in north-east Syria and Christian communities over the school curriculum during 2018 have led to the temporary closure of 14 Assyrian and Chaldean Catholic schools in the cities of Qamishli, Hasaka and Al-Malikiyeh for refusal to adopt the Kurdish curriculum.³⁰² Christian activists complained in protest that the ‘mandated curriculum denied them their own unique ethnoreligious identities’ and that it aimed to promote Kurdish nationalism.³⁰³

In 2018, Assyrian and Chaldeans protesting the implementation of the PYD curriculum were reportedly arrested or disappeared by PYD forces.³⁰⁴ In February 2019, the SNHR stated that teachers who refuse to fully implement the PYD curriculum were arrested.³⁰⁵

3.4 Targeting of persons associated with Turkey and/or the Syrian National Army

Since the capture of Afrin by Turkish forces and affiliated armed groups in March 2018, YPG and other armed groups were reported to having conducted ‘IED attacks, roadside ambushes, kidnappings and executions’ against the Turkey-backed groups that control the area and suspected collaborators. YPG, together with two other linked armed groups - Ghadab al-Zaytoun and Hezen Rizgariya Efrine [Afrin Liberation Forces] - claimed to have carried out about 220 attacks between late March 2018 and end January 2019. While no reliable data on the number casualties was available, Bellingcat estimated that at least 100 opposition members were killed as a result of the attacks. The attacks have also caused civilian casualties. Ghadab al-Zaytoun has published videos depicting executions of civilians it accused

²⁹⁵ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, United States Institute of Peace, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 8

²⁹⁶ Reuters, Anti-Kurdish protests grow in Syria’s Deir al-Zor: residents, locals, 8 May 2019, [url](#); AP News, Anti-Kurdish protests in east Syria could endanger US plans, 9 May 2019, [url](#)

²⁹⁷ Hassam, M., Protests in Deir Ezzor: Causes and Main Demands, Chatham House, August 2019, [url](#)

²⁹⁸ RI, An Uncertain Future. Fragility and Humanitarian Priorities in Northeast Syria, July 2019, [url](#), p. 10

²⁹⁹ Hassam, M., Protests in Deir Ezzor: Causes and Main Demands, Chatham House, August 2019, [url](#)

³⁰⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 8

³⁰¹ Al Monitor, Deir ez-Zor Arab fighters ‘punished for refusal to join SDF’, 20 June 2019, [url](#)

³⁰² USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#); USCIRF, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2019 Annual Report; Country Reports: Tier 1 Countries (Recommended for CPC Designation): Syria, April 2019, [url](#), p. 5

³⁰³ USCIRF, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2019 Annual Report; Country Reports: Tier 1 Countries (Recommended for CPC Designation): Syria, April 2019, [url](#), p. 5

³⁰⁴ USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 33, 36

³⁰⁵ SNHR, An increasing frequency of arrests and enforced disappearances by Kurdish Self-Management Forces, 18 February 2019, [url](#), p. 2

to be informants for Turkish authorities or members of the Turkish-supported civil administration of Afrin.³⁰⁶

In Afrin, Aleppo governorate, the YPG is reported to wage ‘a low-level insurgency against the Turkish military and its Syrian rebel allies’.³⁰⁷ According to a June 2019 report published by the Netherlands Institute of International Relations, in Afrin Turkey has struggled to ‘establish a basic level of control through tactics of suppression, confiscation and expulsion of the area’s Kurdish population and its leaders which, in turn, has triggered a YPG-led insurgency’.³⁰⁸

The Col report of August 2019 noted that YPG-associated Kurdish armed groups, Ghadab al-Zaytoun and Hezen Rizgariya Efrine, ‘have engaged in asymmetric warfare against factions operating under the Syrian National Army’.³⁰⁹

During July 2017 and January 2018, the Col reported that SDF arrested relatives of members of the FSA and ISIL for interrogation.³¹⁰

In the wake of the Kurdish forces’ withdrawal from the areas captured by Turkey and affiliated Syrian National Army (SNA) in the October 2019 offensive there were unconfirmed reports of SDF forces killing civilians for perceived relations with the SNA in the area around the town of Ras al-Ain, Hasaka governorate.³¹¹

3.5 List of illustrative incidents

- In August 2019, SDF reportedly arrested six humanitarian workers in Raqqa city. While arrests were considered to be part of a wider SDF security operation against ISIL cells the reasons for detaining the humanitarian workers remained unknown. Different sources claimed that the arrests were made either for cooperation with the Syrian regime, Turkey or affiliation with ISIL. SDF denied the arrests.³¹²
- On 16 August 2019, SDF arrested a media activist at his home in the city of Tabqa, Raqqa governorate, reportedly on the basis of accusations from unidentified sources. He was taken to an unidentified location. His fate and whereabouts were unknown.³¹³
- On 16 August 2019, SDF arrested the director of a non-governmental organisation in the city of Karamah, Raqqa governorate for unknown reasons. His fate and whereabouts remain unknown.³¹⁴
- In September 2019, OHCHR ‘documented at least seven incidents of arbitrary arrests or enforced disappearances of civilians, including media and human rights activists, that were

³⁰⁶ Bellingcat, Wrath of the Olives: Tracking the Afrin Insurgency Through Social Media, 1 March 2019, [url](#); Bellingcat is an open source investigative site.

³⁰⁷ DW, Explained: Why Turkey wants a military assault on Syrian Kurds, 9 October 2019, [url](#)

³⁰⁸ Van Leeuwen, J. and van Veen, E., Turkey in northwestern Syria. Rebuilding empire at the margins, Clingendael, June 2019, [url](#), p. 4

³⁰⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 5

³¹⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/37/72], 1 February 2018, [url](#), p. 10

³¹¹ Syria Direct, Civilians the only innocent party in ‘Operation Peace Spring’, 27 October 2019, [url](#)

³¹² Syria Direct, SDF arrest humanitarian workers in Raqqa, raising questions and concerns, 19 August 2019, [url](#)

³¹³ UN Security Council: Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/820], 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 19

³¹⁴ UN Security Council: Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/820], 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 19; Syria Direct, SDF arrest humanitarian workers in Raqqa, raising questions and concerns, 19 August 2019, [url](#)

perceived as critical of the SDF in areas under its control'. Some of the incidents took place in rural Deir Ez Zor governorate.³¹⁵

- On 13 September 2019, SDF raided the house of a media activist in the city of Tabqa in western rural Raqqa governorate. The media activist was arrested and his laptop and mobile phone confiscated. Family members were denied information on his situation and whereabouts, which remained unknown.³¹⁶
- On 31 October 2019, a car bomb attack on a market in Afrin left at least eight people dead and 30 others wounded. Residents and members of rebel armed groups in the area blamed the YPG for the attack.³¹⁷ No group has claimed the attack.³¹⁸
- On 2 November 2019, 13 civilians were killed and more than 30 others injured following a car bomb attack in the town of Tal Abyad, in northern Syria close to the border with Turkey. Some of the casualties were members of Turkish-backed armed groups. No group has taken responsibility for the attack but Turkish authorities have blamed it on YPG elements.³¹⁹ ISW reported that 'likely YPG elements' conducted vehicle-borne improvised explosive attacks (VBIED) on the SNA-held towns of Suluk, Hammam al-Turkman and Tal Abyad, in Turkish-controlled areas in northern Syria.³²⁰

³¹⁵ UN Security Council: Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/820], 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 19

³¹⁶ UN Security Council: Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/820], 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 19

³¹⁷ Reuters, Car blast kills eight in Syria's Afrin, near Turkish border, 31 October 2019, [url](#)

³¹⁸ Middle East Eye, Car bomb kills at least eight in Syria's Afrin, 31 October 2019, [url](#)

³¹⁹ New York Times (The), Explosion in Syrian Town on Turkish Border Kills 13, 2 November 2019, [url](#); RFE/RL, Car Bomb In Northern Syria Kills At Least 13, 2 November 2019, [url](#)

³²⁰ ISW, Syria Situation Report: October 23 – November 5, 2019, 8 November 2019, [url](#)

4. Persons fearing (forced) recruitment by Kurdish forces in areas under their influence

4.1 Compulsory military service

Compulsory military service was first introduced by the Kurdish administration on 14 July 2014 on the basis of the Law on Mandatory Self-Defence Duty.³²¹ The law first came into effect in Afrin in 2015.³²² In 2017, the Legislative Council of the Jazirah Canton amended the Law on Mandatory Self-Defence Duty.³²³ All amendments and previous versions of the Law became null and void after the General Council (*Majlis al-'Am*) agreed on 35 Articles regarding the 'Duty of Self-Defence' (mandatory conscription) in June 2019.³²⁴

Geographically the law is confined to the areas of northern and eastern Syria under control of the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration.³²⁵

Conscription was mandatory for all male residents in the territories under the Autonomous Administration after reaching 18 years (Article 1a, 2019). The law obliged Syrian nationals, so-called *Ajanib* and *Maktumeen* Kurds [stateless Kurds]³²⁶ to join the SDF. Syrians from other parts of the country who have resided in the area longer than five years are obliged to join as well (Article 1j, 2019). The military service has to be completed by the age of 40 years (Article 13).³²⁷ In the first version of the law (2014) conscription was mandatory for all men between 18 and 30 years.³²⁸ Sources interviewed in 2019 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands stated that military service usually lasted six months, but during May 2018 to May 2019, it lasted 12 months.³²⁹

In the case of conscientious objection to military service or arrest, compulsory military service would be 15 months as a punitive measure. Then the conscript is free to join a militia. Men serve in the YPG, while women can serve in the Kurdish Women's Protection Units (YPJ) - the women branch of the YPG - on a voluntary basis.³³⁰

According to a source interviewed in 2019 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, men who served in the SAA also had to complete the mandatory military service in the Kurdish areas. According to Article 10 (2019), the payment of a guaranty (*kafāla*) does not exempt from the mandatory military

³²¹ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria. Update on Military Service, Mandatory Self-Defence Duty and Recruitment to the YPG, September 2015, [url](#), p. 21; Al Jazeera, Syria Kurds impose mandatory military service, 17 July 2017, [url](#)

³²² Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria. Update on Military Service, Mandatory Self-Defence Duty and Recruitment to the YPG, September 2015, [url](#), p. 21

³²³ Legislative Council of Jazirah Canton (Encumena Zagonsazi), Amended Law on the duty of self-defence, 14 August 2018, [url](#)

³²⁴ Basnews, The PYD administration decides Self-Defence Law (compulsory military service) [translated from Arabic], 22 June 2019, [url](#)

³²⁵ Basnews, The PYD administration decides Self-Defence Law (compulsory military service) [translated from Arabic], 22 June 2019, [url](#); Enab Baladi, Enab Baladi publishes Draft Recruitment Law in Autonomous Administration-ruled Areas, 13 May 2019, [url](#)

³²⁶ For clarification on Ajanib and Maktumeen Kurds please see Stateless Journeys, Country Position Paper: Statelessness in Syria, August 2019, [url](#), pp. 14, 16-17

³²⁷ Basnews, The PYD administration decides Self-Defence Law (compulsory military service) [translated from Arabic], 22 June 2019, [url](#)

³²⁸ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria. Update on Military Service, Mandatory Self-Defence Duty and Recruitment to the YPG, September 2015, [url](#), pp. 38-39

³²⁹ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Report Syria. The security situation, July 2019, [url](#), p. 63

³³⁰ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Report Syria. The security situation, July 2019, [url](#), p. 63

service.³³¹ Sources interviewed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands stated that there was also the possibility to pay in order to avoid serving in the military.³³²

Upon assignment the conscript needs to obtain a military booklet and present himself at a Centre for Self-Defence Duty or have an excuse within the legal framework within 60 days; otherwise he will be considered as 'late enlistee' (Article 1 h). Late enlistees serve for an additional month after the mandatory service (Article 15) and have to pay a fine (Article 33).³³³

Students are entitled to postpone the military service under certain circumstances (for example the age until when a student can postpone the service differs depending on the level of education). defined in Articles 16-22 (2019). Other reasons for deferral are defined in Article 25 (including for example categories like those recently returned to Syria, siblings younger than 18 years and a passed away or handicapped father). All deferral cases need a permission granted by the Self-Defence Duty Department.³³⁴

Article 28 (2019) defines the cases of exemptions to the duty of self-defence (i.e. medical reasons, disabled, family members of martyrs holding a proving certificate thereof or only son).³³⁵

In February 2017, the PYD announced the possibility of joining the PYD-run security forces on a voluntary basis, exempting the person from compulsory conscription. The call was towards men not younger than 18 years and not older than 40 years. A volunteer would have to join for the duration of 28 months and receive a monthly salary of USD 100 Dollars.³³⁶ This information could not be verified.

Reportedly, sources from 2015 noted that the conscription in the Kurdish autonomous areas is similar to the conscription system in the areas under the control of GoS. Assignment is reportedly based on civil records and local informants (i.e. neighbours, Asayish). Similarly to GoS-controlled areas, lists of people wanted for the military service were issued in 2015.³³⁷

A 2015 report by DIS stated that, while according to the law, members of ethnic and religious minorities were obliged to serve, the law was not enforced; they rather joined on a voluntary basis.³³⁸ This information could not be corroborated by other sources. On other occasions, conscription policies in Arab areas were halted after the intervention of tribal leaders, as was the case in Manbij and Tabqa in 2017.³³⁹

4.2 Forced recruitment

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands stated in a 2019 report that 'it is known that the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and YPG use forced recruitment in addition to the conscription system

³³¹ Basnews, The PYD administration decides Self-Defence Law (compulsory military service) [translated from Arabic], 22 June 2019, [url](#)

³³² Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Report Syria. The security situation, July 2019, [url](#), p. 63

³³³ Basnews, The PYD administration decides Self-Defence Law (compulsory military service) [translated from Arabic], 22 June 2019, [url](#)

³³⁴ Basnews, The PYD administration decides Self-Defence Law (compulsory military service) [translated from Arabic], 22 June 2019, [url](#)

³³⁵ Basnews, The PYD administration decides Self-Defence Law (compulsory military service) [translated from Arabic], 22 June 2019, [url](#)

³³⁶ Omran Center for Strategic Studies, Military and Security Structures of the Autonomous Administration in Syria, 24 January 2018, [url](#), p. 21

³³⁷ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria. Update on Military Service, Mandatory Self-Defence Duty and Recruitment to the YPG, September 2015, [url](#), p. 21

³³⁸ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria. Update on Military Service, Mandatory Self-Defence Duty and Recruitment to the YPG, September 2015, [url](#), p. 23; EASO, COI Meeting Report Syria 30 November & 1 December 2017, March 2018, [url](#), p. 63

³³⁹ Al Monitor, Manbij residents face off against SDF over conscription policy, 24 November 2017, [url](#); Syria Direct, Tribal leaders halt conscription policy by Kurdish-led forces in Manbij, Tabqa, 8 November 2017, [url](#)

in the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria for men between the ages of 18 and 30 in order to supplement their numbers’.³⁴⁰

Enab Baladi reported that in some cases recruitment conducted by the YPG didn’t respect the law. Cases of arbitrary arrest for recruitment despite applicable postponements for education or medical reasons were documented.³⁴¹ According to Al Monitor, the SDF was intensifying its efforts to forcibly recruit young men in Raqqqa governorate, arresting 20 men in May 2019 for avoiding military service. They were sent to training camps.³⁴² The legal basis for the arrests was reportedly a decision issued on 14 May 2019 by the SDF on mandatory military service in the Euphrates region.³⁴³

The Col stated that the SDF continued to conscript men and children for the reporting period of July 2017 until January 2018, as part of the group’s forced conscription campaigns in the areas under its control. The report stated that the individuals conscripted received basic training and were subsequently sent to the frontlines. For the same reporting period, the Col stated that there were reports that the SDF was asking families returning to Tall Abyad (Raqqqa governorate) to volunteer one man per family for military service, which deterred some families from returning to their homes.³⁴⁴ The same source informed that some families chose to move from the areas under SDF in order to avoid reprisals, including arrest, for not accepting conscription.³⁴⁵

Different sources stated that members of the Arab communities, in areas under SDF control were also subjected to forced recruitment by the SDF.³⁴⁶

In a 2018 report the Col informed that in the governorates of Hasaka, northern Raqqqa, and Aleppo arrests of men of 18 years old and above, who attempted to avoid forced conscription were documented. The perpetrators of these increasing arrests were the SDF, the YPG and Asayish, based on various enforced conscription laws, according to the same source.³⁴⁷

IDPs alleged that, between July 2017 and January 2018, at Mabrouka camp in Hasaka governorate, SDF forces were targeting certain families for forced conscription and that families without sons were ‘reportedly made to pay \$ 300 USD to SDF soldiers’.³⁴⁸

4.3 Recruitment of children

The recruitment and use of child soldiers by the YPG have been documented by Human Rights Watch since 2014.³⁴⁹ The UN verified the recruitment and use of 313 children by YPG/YPJ operating under the SDF umbrella in the period from January to December 2018. Child recruitment in Syria was

³⁴⁰ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Report Syria. The security situation, July 2019, [url](#), p. 66, para. 3.1.2

³⁴¹ Enab Baladi, Compulsory military recruitment in Jazira Region: SDF imposing their authority, 12 July 2019, [url](#)

³⁴² Al Monitor, SDF arrests Syrians who refuse to serve, 28 May 2019, [url](#)

³⁴³ Orient Net, SDF starts a brought campaign to draft Raqqqa’s youth in mandatory military service, 16 May 2019, [url](#)

³⁴⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 11 February 2018, [url](#), p. 10, para. 43

³⁴⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 11 February 2018, [url](#), p. 10, para. 43

³⁴⁶ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 32; Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Report Syria. The security situation, July 2019, [url](#), p. 63, para. 2.1.8

³⁴⁷ Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Detention in the Syrian Arab Republic: A way forward, OHCHR, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 5, para. 16

³⁴⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 11 February 2018, [url](#), p. 28, para. 9

³⁴⁹ HRW, “Maybe We Live and Maybe We Die”. Recruitment and Use of Children by Armed Groups in Syria, 22 June 2014, [url](#), pp. 27-28

particularly prevalent among the YPG and its offspring for female fighters YPJ. Of the children recruited by the YPG/YPJ, 126 were girls.³⁵⁰

Human Rights Watch reported in August 2018 that the SDF recruited children, both boys and girls, who come from IDP camps. Parents usually had no contact with their children once they were recruited and only found out from authorities that their children were in training.³⁵¹ Human Rights Watch documented that the YPG recruited children from three displacement camps in north-east Syria. Among these children were six girls, who voluntarily joined, though without obtaining permission from their families.³⁵²

SNHR noted in a report (covering 1 January - 18 February 2019) that it documented four incidents of conscription of children between the age of 13 and 17 years by the SDF. According to the SNHR, the SDF abducted these children from their families and did not provide them with any information on their children's whereabouts, aside from saying that they were taken to military training centres.³⁵³

In response to the UN and human rights organisation reporting, the SDF-leadership and umbrella organisation for the YPG/YPJ among others declared an end to using child soldiers in July 2018.³⁵⁴ In December 2018, the SDF and the non-governmental organisation Geneva Call reported the SDF had released 56 underage boys to their families.³⁵⁵ In June 2019, the SDF adopted an UN action plan to end the recruitment and use of children in conflict.³⁵⁶

The Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ)³⁵⁷, in a July 2019 report, documented cases of the demobilisation of minors following the signing of the action plan between the SDF and the UN. The source further stated that, at the time that the report was drafted, on 12 July 2019, there were still underage recruits serving in the SDF.³⁵⁸

The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor³⁵⁹ reported in September 2019 that the SDF had abducted approximately 200 children from al-Hol camp and taken them to the group's training camps. The source cited relief sources stating that the majority of the children were between 13 and 16 years old.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁰ UN General Assembly: Children and armed conflict; Report of the Secretary-General [A/73/907-S/2019/509], 30 July 2019, [url](#), p. 27

³⁵¹ HRW, Syria: Armed Group Recruiting Children in Camps, 3 August 2018, [url](#)

³⁵² HRW, Key Steps Taken to End Use of Child Soldiers in Syria, 11 September 2018, [url](#)

³⁵³ SNHR, An increasing frequency of arrests and enforced disappearances by Kurdish Self-Management Forces, 18 February 2019, [url](#), pp. 2-3

³⁵⁴ Newsweek, U.S. Ally in Syria declares end to using child soldiers, 9 July 2018, [url](#)

³⁵⁵ USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 33

³⁵⁶ Defense Post (The), SDF signs UN plan to end use of children in Syrian conflict, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

³⁵⁷ Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) is an initiative to document human rights violations committed in Syria. STJ works in all parts of Syria and builds its own database storing all documented accounts from population on the ground. STJ is founded among others by the German Federal Foreign Office, The Swiss Federal Department of Foreign affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. For more information please see [url](#)

³⁵⁸ STJ, SDF shall Demonstrate Full Commitment to Preventing Recruitment of Children Having Signed an Action Plan with UN, 15 July 2019, [url](#), pp. 3-4

³⁵⁹ Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network is a network of 80 human rights organisations, institutions and individuals based in 30 countries in Europe and the Mediterranean region. For more information see [url](#)

³⁶⁰ Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor, SDF kidnaps dozens of children and youths in eastern Syria, 18 September 2019, [url](#)

5. Persons perceived to be supporting the government and/or opposing anti-government armed groups

This chapter covers targeting by three broader anti-government groups:

- Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other armed groups active in the Idlib area
- Anti-GoS armed groups operating in southern Syria (Dar'a and Rural Damascus governorate)
- The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

Information on targeting by the SNA and the SDF/YPG is available in Section [6.1](#) and [Chapter 3](#), respectively.

The Idlib area in northwestern Syria is viewed as the armed opposition's last stronghold.³⁶¹ The opposition-controlled area is generally referred to as Idlib, but it also includes neighbouring areas in north-western Aleppo, northern Hama and Latakia governorates.³⁶² As of January 2020, a GoS offensive on the Idlib area is ongoing, resulting thus far in the capture of significant rebel-held territories and massive displacement.³⁶³

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham or Organization for the Liberation of the Levant (HTS) is described as the most important and powerful actor in the Idlib area.³⁶⁴ CSIS noted in an October 2018 report that HTS's primary objective is aimed at establishing Islamic rule in Syria through overthrowing the Assad government and ousting Iranian militias.³⁶⁵ The US³⁶⁶, UN, EU³⁶⁷ and Turkey have designated HTS as a terrorist organisation affiliated with Al Qaeda.³⁶⁸

Christopher Kozak assessed that HTS also has a presence in southern Syria and noted that they might be behind or at least deeply involved in the insurgent violence in southern Syria and Damascus, whether in facilitating attacks or creating false groups to mask their return to insurgency in southern Syria.³⁶⁹

Other significant opposition armed groups that are present and active in the Idlib area operate under the umbrella of the National Liberation Front (NLF) - a Turkey-backed alliance of opposition-armed groups³⁷⁰, which merged in October 2019 with the SNA.³⁷¹ The group uses the brand of the Free Syrian

³⁶¹ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 1, 6; Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, United States Institute of Peace, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 27

³⁶² ISW, Syria Situation Report: September 11-24 2019, 27 September 2019, [url](#); International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 1

³⁶³ BBC, Syria war: Rebel-held Idlib 'hit by 200 air strikes in three days', 30 January 2020, [url](#)

³⁶⁴ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 6; BBC, Syria: Who's in control of Idlib?, 22 June 2019, [url](#); al-Tamimi, A., From Jabhat al-Nusra to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham: Evolution, Approach and Future, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 29 June 2018, [url](#), p. 5; HRW, Syria: Arrests, Torture by Armed Group, 28 January 2019, [url](#)

³⁶⁵ CSIS, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, 4 October 2018, [url](#), p. 2

³⁶⁶ USDOS, Country Report on Terrorism 2018 - Chapter 5 - Al-Nusrah Front, 1 November 2019, [url](#)

³⁶⁷ EU, Official Journal of the European Union, Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2018/855 of 8 June 2018 amending for the 286th time Council Regulation (EC) No 881/2002 imposing certain specific restrictive measures directed against certain persons and entities associated with the ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida organisations, 11 June 2018, [url](#)

³⁶⁸ HRW, Syria: Arrests, Torture by Armed Group, 28 January 2019, [url](#)

³⁶⁹ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

³⁷⁰ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 21; Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 57

³⁷¹ Syrian Observer (The), Three Leaders Take Reins of National Army in Northern Syria: Who Are They?, 7 October 2019, [url](#)

Army (FSA), the umbrella armed group formed by the anti-government opposition in 2011.³⁷² Smaller, predominantly Islamist armed opposition groups also operate in the Idlib area and include Hurras al-Din (HAD)³⁷³, Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP)³⁷⁴ and Ansar al-Tawhid³⁷⁵, among others.

Detailed information on the armed groups in the Idlib area is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Actors \(December 2019\)](#)

In southern Syria, armed groups such as Popular Resistance³⁷⁶ and Saraya Qasioun³⁷⁷, and unknown perpetrators carried out IED explosions, assassinations and kidnappings on individuals including members of GoS and affiliated armed groups, as well as reconciled fighters, commanders and facilitators.³⁷⁸

While ISIL's territorial control and governance in Syria ceased to exist after the capture of Baghouz in March 2019, sources maintained that the group remains a serious threat in Syria. In 2019, ISIL was reported to be forming cells across Syria, and that an increase in the number of ISIL attacks in areas controlled by the Syrian government has been reported.³⁷⁹

Detailed information on ISIL is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Actors \(December 2019\)](#)

5.1 Members of the government of Syria and Baath party officials

There is little information available regarding the targeting of members of the government and the Baath Party in the rebel-held areas and other parts of Syria. In a video, Step News Agency, a US-based activist news outlet³⁸⁰, made reference to former Baath Party members as potential targets by the armed groups in Idlib. According to the news agency, GoS operated intelligence networks in Idlib governorate, which comprised mainly of women, implanted elements among the fighters, and merchants moving between government and rebel-held areas. Reportedly, the informants were former Baath Party members who retained allegiance to GoS. The source mentioned that the rebel forces carried out a 'cleansing operation' that targeted former Baath Party members and defected Syrian Army soldiers/officers.³⁸¹ The information could not be corroborated by other sources.

Syria Direct reported in September 2019 that HTS conducted security operations which allegedly targeted ISIL members, Kurdish agents, as well as individuals 'working for the Syrian government'. However, sources interviewed by Syria Direct claimed that 'some of the charges are fabricated and baseless'.³⁸²

³⁷² International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 17

³⁷³ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, United States Institute of Peace, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 22

³⁷⁴ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 56; International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 19

³⁷⁵ According to an activist, a rebel commander and a humanitarian analyst interviewed by International Crisis Group in October-November 2018. International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 20

³⁷⁶ COAR, Southwestern Dar'a. Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, 2019, [url](#), p. 37

³⁷⁷ ACLED, Regional Overview – Middle East, 23 April 2019, [url](#)

³⁷⁸ Al-Jabassini, A., Governance in Daraa, Southern Syria: The Roles of Military and Civilian Intermediaries, European University Institute, 4 November 2019, [url](#)

³⁷⁹ UN Security Council, Twenty-fourth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities [S/2019/570], 15 July 2019, [url](#), pp. 3, 5; UN Office of Counter-Terrorism, Ninth "Report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat", 27 August 2019, [url](#), p. 3

³⁸⁰ AP, Airstrikes, shelling kill 16 in Syria's rebel-held areas, 17 December 2019, [url](#)

³⁸¹ Step News Agency [YouTube], تقرير خاص يعرض لأول مرة تقنيات التجسس التي يستخدمها الأسد في الشمال المحرر [Special Reportage broadcast for the First Time: the Spying Technologies used by Assad in the Liberated North], posted on: 29 June 2019, [url](#)

³⁸² Syria Direct, Hijacking of the "freedom revolution": HTS imprisons activists in northwest Syria (interactive map), 15 September 2019, [url](#)

Newly established local resistance group Saraya Qasioun, which operates in Rural Damascus and Dar'a governorates, claimed attacks on personnel of GoS/Baath Party and affiliated armed groups in April 2019.³⁸³

5.2 Members of government forces and affiliated armed groups

In a July 2019 report published by the Middle East Institute, journalist Danny Makki noted that there have been 'hit-and-run strikes on government checkpoints, assassinations, and a general sense of lawlessness' in Dar'a. Among the casualties of the attacks were soldiers in the SAA, a representative of local authorities and a rebel commander which supported reconciliation with the GoS. He added that the 'killings are not believed to be entirely politically motivated, as some may be related to personal and local issues, yet the violence is growing at an alarming rate'.³⁸⁴ Moreover, a European University Institute research project report published in November 2019 stated that despite the wide presence of the SAA and government security apparatuses in the western region of Dar'a, 'the region witnesses unclaimed guerrilla attacks, IED explosions, assassinations and kidnappings of former rebels, government officials, Syrian army soldiers and security apparatus members'.³⁸⁵

SOHR documented 248 attacks and assassination attempts in Dar'a during June 2019 and January 2020. The attacks included detonating bombs, mines, booby-trapped cars and the use of light and medium weapons. SOHR registered 171 casualties from the attacks, the majority of which were members of the GoS armed forces and affiliated groups (91), former opposition fighters reconciled with GoS (29) and civilians (28).³⁸⁶

According to COAR, the Popular Resistance armed group 'has undertaken a series of increasingly bold attacks on government-linked targets since the turn of the year, but its origins are unknown, and it is rumoured to be a vehicle for carrying out attacks against figures the government considers problematic'.³⁸⁷ The Popular Resistance claimed responsibility for the assassination of several reconciled opposition fighters and reconciliation facilitators.³⁸⁸

Citing sources involved in the opposition to GoS in southern Syria since 2011, Syria expert Charles Lister³⁸⁹ noted that a 'substantial portion of attacks' that took place during 2019 in southern Syria were part of an organised armed insurgency against the GoS that was re-emerging in the area.³⁹⁰

An 'agent of the Syrian regime' was assassinated in April 2019 in Al-Hirak town in Dar'a governorate by unknown individuals. The source observed that assassinations of the Syrian government agents and militia members augmented in Dar'a governorate.³⁹¹ It is not clear whether those agents were civilians or held official status.

In July 2019, a military bus belonging to the Fourth Armored Division was hit with a bomb attack on the road between Dar'a and al-Yabudah town by unknown perpetrators.³⁹² The attack killed five Syrian soldiers and injured 14 others according to Syrian police. SANA attributed the attack to terrorists

³⁸³ ACLED, Regional Overview – Middle East, 23 April 2019, [url](#)

³⁸⁴ Makki, D., As violence flares up in Daraa, control can be an illusion, Middle East Institute, 3 July 2019, [url](#)

³⁸⁵ Al-Jabassini, A., Governance in Daraa, Southern Syria: The Roles of Military and Civilian Intermediaries, European University Institute, 4 November 2019, [url](#)

³⁸⁶ SOHR, Two separate attacks on checkpoints of the Air Force and Military Intelligence in rural Daraa wound and kill eight, 10 January 2020, [url](#)

³⁸⁷ COAR, Southwestern Dar'a. Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, 2019, [url](#), p. 37

³⁸⁸ COAR, Southwestern Dar'a. Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, 2019, [url](#), p. 43

³⁸⁹ Charles Lister is a senior fellow and Director of the Countering Terrorism and Extremism Program at the Middle East Institute where he focuses his work primarily on the Syrian conflict. For more information see [url](#)

³⁹⁰ Lister, C., Southern Syria Shows the War's Changed Nature, Asharq Al-Awsat, 2 October 2019, [url](#)

³⁹¹ El-Dorar, اغتيال أبرز عملاء النظام في مدينة الحراك بدارعا [Assassination of a prominent regime collaborator in the Hirak City in Dara'a], 13 April 2019, [url](#)

³⁹² Syria Direct, Rising assassinations: Is Daraa going back to square one?, 24 July 2019, [url](#)

without mentioning the number of casualties.³⁹³ In another attack carried on the same day a general of the Air Force Intelligence Directorate was killed in a car bomb attack in western Dar'a.³⁹⁴

In July 2019, both Saraya Qasioun and ISIL claimed an IED attack on an NDF commander in Damascus.³⁹⁵ In December 2019, Saraya Qasioun targeted a GoS checkpoint with an explosive attack in Eastern Ghouta suburbs of Damascus. No information on the casualties was available.³⁹⁶

In November 2019, Enab Baladi reported that a series of assassinations targeting officers and members of the Syrian government forces took place in Dar'a governorate. The assassinations led to five military personnel being killed, among them an officer of the NDF, fighters and officers of Air Force Intelligence as well as a former leader of an opposition armed group. No actor has claimed responsibility for the assassinations.³⁹⁷

In areas controlled by the Syrian government, ISIL claimed attacks in Dar'a and launched larger-scale attacks against Syrian security forces from the Badia desert in central Syria.³⁹⁸ Al-Masdar News, a pro-GoS news agency, reported in April 2019 that ISIL executed eight Syrian army soldiers following an ambush in eastern Homs. The images of the execution were posted by ISIL.³⁹⁹ In November 2019, ISIL claimed responsibility for the assassination of the head of the State Security branch of the GoS forces in Enkhel, western Dar'a governorate.⁴⁰⁰

In addition to the fact that HTS seemed to 'equate criticism of their rule with collaboration with the Syrian government',⁴⁰¹ several sources reported that the group did target individuals for affiliation with the Syrian government. An International Crisis Group's report published in March 2019 stated that HTS and other armed groups carried out operations to arrest 'so called "frogs" suspected of being in contact with the regime'.⁴⁰² According to the news agency Nedaa Syria, HTS arrested a cell affiliated to GoS in the western part of Aleppo in July 2018.⁴⁰³ Local sources reported that the group executed 'agents' collaborating with Russia in June 2019⁴⁰⁴ and arrested 'agents' collaborating with GoS in Idlib governorate in May 2019.⁴⁰⁵

³⁹³ SANA, Several martyrs have been targeted in the targeting of a military vehicle by terrorists on the Yadoda road in Daraa, 17 July 2019, [url](#)

³⁹⁴ Syria Direct, Rising assassinations: Is Daraa going back to square one?, 24 July 2019, [url](#)

³⁹⁵ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 22-28 July 2019, [url](#), p. 4

³⁹⁶ ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 17-28, 2019, 9 January 2020, [url](#)

³⁹⁷ Enab Baladi, Series of assassinations targeting Syrian regime figures in Daraa, 28 November 2019, [url](#)

³⁹⁸ International Crisis Group, Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria, 11 October 2019, [url](#), p. 23

³⁹⁹ Al-Masdar Al-Arabi, ISIS executes 8 Syrian soldiers after ambush in eastern Homs, 29 April 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁰⁰ Enab Baladi, ISIS makes its voice heard in Daraa, 6 November 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁰¹ HRW, Syria: Arrests, Torture by Armed Group: Move to Solidify Control, Silence Critics, 28 January 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁰² International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 28

⁴⁰³ Nedaa Syria, Tahrir al-Sham announces the arrest of a cell of the Syrian regime in Idlib, 30 July 2018, [url](#)

⁴⁰⁴ Radio Al-Kul, تحرير الشام تعلن إعدام 7 عملاء لروسيا في الشمال السوري [HTS announces the execution of 7 collaborators with Russia in the Syrian North], 1 June 2019, [url](#); Shaam Network, تحرير الشام تعمد 7 عملاء لروسيا بريف إدلب [Tahrir al-Sham executed 7 Russian agents in Idlib countryside], 1 June 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁰⁵ Jisr TV, تحرير الشام تعلن القبض على عملاء للنظام في قرية كلي [HTS announces the arrest of collaborators with the regime in Killi village], 30 May 2019, [url](#)

5.3 Civilians perceived to be collaborating with the government or the (pro-)government armed forces and/or to oppose anti-government armed groups

5.3.1 Targeting by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

Reporting on the human rights situation in Syria during 2019, Human Rights Watch noted that HTS 'arbitrarily arrested numerous residents in areas under its control'.⁴⁰⁶ Refugees International (RI) noted that 'reportedly, members of HTS frequently commit serious human rights abuses, including harassment, assassinations, kidnapping, and torture'.⁴⁰⁷ The UN and Human Rights Watch reported that in areas where HTS is operating civilians are unlawfully detained, kidnapped and tortured for expressing political dissent.⁴⁰⁸ The UN Security Council noted in August 2019 that civilians, including humanitarian workers and media activists have been targeted and received death threats for being critical of HTS, as well as extorted and used for ransom.⁴⁰⁹ Between September and mid-October 2018, SNHR documented at least 184 cases of detention of individuals, including local activists, humanitarian workers and mosque preachers in Aleppo and Idlib governorates which it attributed to HTS.⁴¹⁰

In an interview with EASO, Christopher Kozak stated that HTS is the primary actor targeting civilians in Idlib governorate. Among other populations, it has targeted suspected informants, with routine executions of suspected ISIL members and informants as well as suspected government and pro-government informants (i.e. people suspected of communicating with the Syrian Government and the Russians). There is less reporting in general out of Idlib governorate because the former proliferation of free activist media outlets has been increasingly clamped down on by HTS, and targeted for harassment, detention, or violence.⁴¹¹

According to Christopher Kozak, HTS also cracked down on populations that are seen as supportive of the Free Syrian Army and the values of the original Syrian Revolution. HTS has particularly targeted communities that have a history of being strong supporters of the moderate secular opposition groups, whether because these towns were the geographic headquarters of those groups or because the population was very vocal in their use of revolutionary symbology and slogans. In Ma'arat al-Numan in the southern Idlib governorate, Atarib in western Aleppo governorate, Ariha south of Idlib City, HTS routinely uses violence to disperse demonstrators and target local activists, media activists, revolutionary activists, even organisers of anti-GoS marches if they were the symbols of the Free Syrian Army such as the green, white and black flag. HTS has targeted those individuals either during the protests themselves or at their homes later.⁴¹²

Various sources referred to HTS's practice of targeting civilians who criticised it or opposed its policies. USDOS stated that 'HTS detained political opponents, perceived government supporters and their families, journalists, activists, and humanitarian workers critical of HTS or perceived as affiliated with other rebel groups at odds with the HTS in Idlib'.⁴¹³ According to a confidential source interviewed by

⁴⁰⁶ HRW, World Report 2020 - Syria, 14 January 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁰⁷ RI, Losing Their Last Refuge; Inside Idlib's humanitarian nightmare, September 2019, [url](#), p. 23

⁴⁰⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 4; HRW, Syria: Arrests, Torture by Armed Group, 28 January 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁰⁹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/674], 21 August 2019, [url](#), p. 6

⁴¹⁰ SNHR, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham Exploits the De-Escalation Agreement and Escalates Their Violations, 21 October 2018, [url](#), p. 1

⁴¹¹ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁴¹² EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁴¹³ USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 26

the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands in March 2019 ‘HTS uses its systematic practices of arbitrary arrest, torture and extortion mainly as retaliation against (alleged) political opponents, rather than targeting specific minorities’.⁴¹⁴

In January 2019, Human Rights Watch reported that HTS was cracking down on ‘perceived opposition’, and stated that according to former detainees, detentions were carried out by members of HTS or its affiliates. Human Rights Watch documented 11 arrests of Idlib residents; in six of the cases individuals were apparently tortured. HTS claimed that arrests without judicial warrant are prohibited under its rule unless ‘a suspect is almost certainly guilty and there is no time to retrieve an arrest warrant’.⁴¹⁵ Syrian rights groups documented hundreds of other cases of detention by HTS in Idlib and Aleppo governorates.⁴¹⁶

SNHR claimed in an August 2019 report that HTS targeted activists and public figures with the aim to intimidate the society in areas under its control.⁴¹⁷ In September 2019, SOHR referred to HTS’s tendency to target civilians who opposed the group’s policies and practices in the region under its control. According to the report, the HTS considered civilians opposing it as agents, infiltrators, or ‘frogs’ (‘a Syrian opposition moniker for someone in surreptitious contact with the GoS and prepared to “jump” to the other side’⁴¹⁸). SOHR shared an HTS circulation, which warned against any attempt to hold demonstrations against any jihadist group in the region under its control; such demonstrations would be treated as affiliation with GoS and participants would be treated as traitors.⁴¹⁹

In August 2019, Enab Baladi reported that ‘a peaceful activist’ died while in detention by HTS for criticism of the group.⁴²⁰ In November 2019, SOHR obtained audio records by an HTS commander in which ‘he called for the killing of all the demonstrators who went out or want to go out in demonstrations against the policy of Hayaat Tahrir Al-Sham and that call for the toppling of its leader “Abu Mohamed Al-Julani”’.⁴²¹ Al Monitor reported that HTS arrests did not spare members of the group who criticised it, such as Abu al-Abd Ashidaa who accused, in a video, the leaders of HTS of corruption.⁴²²

Syria Direct reported in September 2019 that HTS conducted security operations aimed at arresting ISIL cells, GoS affiliates and Kurdish agents; some of those charges, according to sources interviewed by Syria Direct, ‘are fabricated and baseless’.⁴²³ In March 2019, HTS publicly executed 10 alleged ISIL members in Idlib governorate following a suicide bomb attack which killed HTS members.⁴²⁴

In addition to the GoS affiliates, HTS targeted civilians who are in favour of reconciliation with the government. Columb Strack, principal Middle East and North Africa analyst at Risk Consultation/HIS Markit, quoted in the Arab Weekly, stated that ‘HTS remains violently opposed to any kind of future

⁴¹⁴ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Report Syria: The security situation, July 2019, [url](#), p. 42

⁴¹⁵ HRW, Syria: Arrests, Torture by Armed Group: Move to Solidify Control, Silence Critics, 28 January 2019, [url](#)

⁴¹⁶ HRW, Syria: Arrests, Torture by Armed Group: Move to Solidify Control, Silence Critics, 28 January 2019, [url](#)

⁴¹⁷ SNHR, Hay’at Tahrir al Sham Kills an Activist Whom It forcibly Disappeared: Nearly 2,000 Syrians are Still Forcibly Disappeared by Hay’at Tahrir al Sham Extremist Organization, 23 August 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁴¹⁸ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria’s Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 28; BBC, Syria: Who’s in control of Idlib?, 22 June 2019, [url](#)

⁴¹⁹ SOHR, هيئة تحرير الشام والشبيحة الموالية لها تهدد وتتوعد المتظاهرين المعارضين لها في الشمال السوري [HTS and its affiliated Shabbiha threatens demonstrators opposing it in the Syrian North], 3 September 2019, [url](#)

⁴²⁰ Syrian Observer (The), Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham Kills Activist Samer al-Saloum, 14 August 2019, [url](#)

⁴²¹ SOHR, A security official in Hayaat Tahrir Al-Sham calls to kill all of those participating in demonstrations against Tahrir Al-Sham and describes them as being agents of the regime and that Syria is for Hayaat Tahrir Al-Sham alone, 11 November 2019, [url](#)

⁴²² Al Monitor, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham loses third leader in Syria this year, 19 September 2019, [url](#)

⁴²³ Syria Direct, Hijacking of the “freedom revolution”: HTS imprisons activists in northwest Syria (interactive map), 15 September 2019, [url](#)

⁴²⁴ New Arab (The), Syria’s HTS publicly execute ten suspected IS militants following Idlib suicide bombing, 3 March 2019, [url](#)

reconciliation with the Syrian government'.⁴²⁵ Another source noted that HTS succeeded in convincing the tribes in its areas of control in Idlib to stand against reconciliation with the GoS.⁴²⁶

In its report covering 2018, Human Rights Watch mentioned that rebel groups in Idlib detained people who attempted reconciliation with the Syrian government.⁴²⁷ HTS's news agency, Ebaa, announced in August 2018 the arrest of more than 30 members of reconciliation committees.⁴²⁸ Moreover, Smart News Agency⁴²⁹ reported that HTS executed a resident of Al-Hbeit village in April 2019 for being the head of a reconciliation committee.⁴³⁰

With regards to targeting civilians who fall under this profile outside of the areas of control of armed groups, the International Crisis Group stated in March 2019 that the rebel groups in Idlib governorate 'continue to kill Syrian soldiers and civilians in neighbouring areas of Latakia, Hama and Aleppo'.⁴³¹

In areas under its control, HTS has reportedly imposed a conservative dress code for both men and women, banned alcohol, smoking and listening to music, and enforced segregation in schools, hospitals and other public institutions.⁴³² According to a confidential source interviewed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands in March 2019 'in areas where HTS has control over educational provision, women and children from the age of 9 are obliged to cover their bodies and hair. Disobedience would, among other things, be punished with violence or temporary suspension'.⁴³³ According to USDOS (reporting on 2018) 'HTS and its constituent armed groups forced members of religious minorities to convert to Islam and adopt Sunni customs, contributing to minority flight from HTS territories'.⁴³⁴

Christopher Kozak also noted that HTS has imposed in areas under its control hard-line religious beliefs, application of strict sharia law punishments, and application of religious wardrobe restrictions. In Idlib City in particular, this social control exercised by HTS gets denser and stronger the closer you go to Syrian-Turkish Border. This includes towns like Sarmada, and Darkush - the area where the US targeted Baghdadi.⁴³⁵

HTS has also targeted minority populations, but there are not many left in Idlib governorate. The most significant are the Druze in Qalb Lawza north-west of Idlib City, which were forced to convert by HTS.⁴³⁶

5.3.2 Targeting by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

While the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) ceased to control territory in Syria as of April 2019⁴³⁷, it still maintained a presence in government-held territories such as Homs⁴³⁸ and Dar'a

⁴²⁵ Arab Weekly (The), Idlib proves problematic for diplomats in Kazakhstan, 28 April 2019, [url](#)

⁴²⁶ Kanj Al, S., How each side of the Syrian conflict uses tribal influence, July 2019, [url](#)

⁴²⁷ HRW, World Report 2019 - Syria, 17 January 2019, [url](#)

⁴²⁸ Ebaa News, "المصالحات" في قبضة الجهاز الأمني لهيئة تحرير الشام [More than 30 promoters of reconciliation are taken into custody by the security apparatus of HTS] 8 August 2018, [url](#)

⁴²⁹ Smart News Agency is a Syrian news agency created by the France-based NGO Association de Soutien aux Media Libres.

⁴³⁰ Smart News Agency, "تحرير الشام" تعدم شخصاً من جنوب إدلب بتهمة التعامل مع النظام [“HTS” executes a person from the south of Idlib for collaborating with the regime] 18 April 2019, [url](#)

⁴³¹ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 26

⁴³² RI, Losing Their Last Refuge; Inside Idlib's humanitarian nightmare, September 2019, [url](#), pp. 22-23; International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 10

⁴³³ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Report Syria: The security situation, July 2019, [url](#), p. 42

⁴³⁴ USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 31

⁴³⁵ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁴³⁶ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁴³⁷ Wilson Center, Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State, 30 April 2019, [url](#)

⁴³⁸ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2019–June 30, 2019, 6 August 2019, [url](#), p. 20

governorates.⁴³⁹ Moreover, based on interviews with Badiya residents and humanitarian workers, International Crisis Group reported that there have been periodic attacks targeting Syrian military positions in areas close to Palmyra.⁴⁴⁰ An increase in ISIL attacks in areas controlled by the GoS was reported by the UN Office of Counter Terrorism⁴⁴¹. ISIL was also reported to have a latent presence in rebel-held Idlib.⁴⁴² On 27 October 2019, the US President announced the death of ISIL's leader Al-Baghdadi in a US special operation in northwest Syria.⁴⁴³ The group later confirmed the death of Al-Baghdadi and identified Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi as the group's new leader.⁴⁴⁴

In an interview with EASO, Christopher Kozak mentioned that ISIL elements still exist in southern Syria, mainly in Dar'a governorate, and that the group maintains a latent presence in Idlib governorate. He also stated that particularly in southern Syria ISIL claimed low-level attacks targeting in particular reconciled opposition group leaders as well as local security forces and pro-GoS paramilitary groups.⁴⁴⁵

Christopher Kozak further added that ISIL claimed attacks are hard to dissociate from the ongoing insurgency in southern Syria - the emergence of groups such as the Popular Resistance in Dar'a and Saraya Qasiyoun as well as the latent Al-Qaida presence in the south.⁴⁴⁶

An ISW report covering the period of 23 October – 5 November 2019 stated that in the wake of the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIL members in southern Syria pledged allegiance to the group's new leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi. Moreover, ISIL assassinated a Syrian state Security Officer in Inkhil, Dar'a Province.⁴⁴⁷

The US Department of Defense (USDOD) noted in a report (covering the period 1 April 2019 – 30 June 2019) that ISIL 'carried out assassinations, suicide attacks, abductions, and arson of corps in both Iraq and Syria' without specifying the profiles of those targeted.⁴⁴⁸ SNHR reported that ISIL killed 82 civilians, of which 11 were children and seven women in the first half of 2019.⁴⁴⁹ The same source mentioned that in June 2019 alone, ISIL killed nine civilians, including one woman and two children.⁴⁵⁰

ISIL carried out a car bomb attack in July 2019 that targeted a church in the Christian area of Qamishli, which resulted in about a dozen casualties.⁴⁵¹ In July 2018, ISIL carried out simultaneous attacks in Sweida Governorate which left 200 individuals killed and 27 kidnapped.⁴⁵²

For targeting by ISIL in areas under Kurdish control see Chapter 6, [Section 6.2](#).

⁴³⁹ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁴⁴⁰ International Crisis Group, Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria, 11 October 2019, [url](#), p. 23

⁴⁴¹ UN Office of Counter-Terrorism, Ninth "Report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat", 27 August 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁴⁴² EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁴⁴³ US, White House, Remarks by President Trump on the Death of ISIS Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, 27 October 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁴⁴ AP, Islamic State group announces successor to al-Baghdadi, 31 October 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁴⁵ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁴⁴⁶ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁴⁴⁷ ISW, Syria Situation Report: October 23 – November 5, 2019, 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁴⁸ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2019–June 30, 2019, 6 August 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁴⁹ SNHR, 1,864 Civilians, Including Six Media Workers and 21 Medical and Civil Defence Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2019, 01 July 2019, [url](#), p. 8

⁴⁵⁰ SNHR, 1,864 Civilians, Including Six Media Workers and 21 Medical and Civil Defence Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2019, 01 July 2019, [url](#), p. 12

⁴⁵¹ Defense Post (The), The, Syria: Bomb explodes outside church in Qamishli Christian neighbourhood, 11 July 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁵² HRW, World Report 2019 - Syria, 17 January 2019, [url](#)

6. Members of and persons perceived to be collaborating with SDF/YPG

6.1 Targeting by the Syrian National Army

As of December 2019⁴⁵³, in northern Aleppo governorate, opposition armed groups backed by Turkey controlled an area between the cities of Afrin, Azaz, Al-Bab and Jarabulus.⁴⁵⁴ In 2016, Turkey had launched operation Euphrates Shield in northern Aleppo governorate to fight ISIL and contain YPG gains in the area capturing the al-Bab area, including Jarabulus and other towns.⁴⁵⁵ In January 2018, Turkish and affiliated local armed groups then launched an offensive dubbed Operation Olive Branch on the Kurdish-held Afrin district, in Aleppo governorate.⁴⁵⁶ In March 2018, the operation concluded as Turkish forces declared Afrin city officially captured.⁴⁵⁷ Complete control of the Afrin region was announced by Turkish authorities on 23 March 2018.⁴⁵⁸

By the end of 2017, Turkey had incorporated the armed groups that fought alongside them in the Euphrates Shield operation into the Syrian National Army (SNA), under the formal supervision of the so-called Syrian Interim Government's⁴⁵⁹ Ministry of Defence.⁴⁶⁰ In October 2019, the merger between the SNA and the National Liberation Front (NLF) – a Turkey-backed alliance of opposition-armed groups present in the Idlib area⁴⁶¹, under the Syrian National Army banner was announced by the so-called Syrian Interim Government.⁴⁶² The group uses the brand of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) – the umbrella armed group formed by the anti-government opposition in 2011.⁴⁶³ Sources sometimes still use the former name – FSA to refer to the SNA or its constituent groups.

The SNA supported the October 2019 Turkish-led incursion into Kurdish-controlled areas in north-east Syria.⁴⁶⁴

Detailed information on the Syrian National Army is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Actors \(December 2019\)](#)

⁴⁵³ Based on reading of the following maps: ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 17-28, 2019, 9 January 2020, [url](#); Liveuamap, Syria, 31 December 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁵⁴ OHCHR, Between a Rock and a Hard Place – Civilians in North-western Syria, June 2018, [url](#), p. 1; Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 53

⁴⁵⁵ International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, 31 July 2019, [url](#), p. 7

⁴⁵⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/39/65], 9 August 2018, [url](#), p. 5; al-Hilu, K., Afrin Under Turkish Control: Political, Economic and Social Transformations, European University Institute, 25 July 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁴⁵⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/39/65], 9 August 2018, [url](#), p. 5

⁴⁵⁸ al-Hilu, K., Afrin Under Turkish Control: Political, Economic and Social Transformations, European University Institute, 25 July 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁴⁵⁹ The Syrian Interim Government is the government established by the armed opposition to Assad in 2013. See USAID, Syria Complex Emergency - Fact Sheet #1, Fiscal Year (FY) 2020, 8 November 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁴⁶⁰ al-Hilu, K., Afrin Under Turkish Control: Political, Economic and Social Transformations, European University Institute, 25 July 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁴⁶¹ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 21; Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 57

⁴⁶² Syrian Observer (The), Three Leaders Take Reins of National Army in Northern Syria: Who Are They?, 7 October 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁶³ ISW, The Free Syrian Army, March 2013, [url](#), p. 9

⁴⁶⁴ International Crisis Group, Steadying the New Status Quo in Syria's North East, 27 November 2019, [url](#), p. 2

The UN and other human rights organisations documented kidnappings, abductions, torture, extortion and assassinations of civilians at the hands of armed groups operating under the SNA.⁴⁶⁵ Looting, theft and expropriation of Kurdish properties by SNA factions in the aftermath of the capture of Afrin was also reported.⁴⁶⁶ Armed groups and criminal gangs in Afrin abducted civilians of Kurdish origin, wealthy individuals including doctors, businesspersons and merchants for economic, political and security reasons. Perceived supporters of the Kurdish administration were ‘regularly arrested, detained, tortured and extorted’ by armed groups. Those suspected of affiliation with Kurdish authorities were reportedly arrested and asked to pay fines of USD 400 for their release. Abductions were carried out primarily at checkpoints or at the victim’s home during the night.⁴⁶⁷

Confiscation, looting, and destruction of the property of Kurdish civilians in the Afrin district at the hands of Turkish-backed armed groups was also reported.⁴⁶⁸ AI noted in August 2018 that interviewed residents and IDPs from Afrin claimed they were subjected to arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances and confiscation of property on their perceived affiliation with the PYD or YPG.⁴⁶⁹

Turkish-backed armed groups operating in Afrin, such as the Sultan Murad Brigades, Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade and the Hamza Division, were reported to have taken control of over 75 % of the region’s olive industry valued at USD 150 million per year. The seizure was justified by Turkish authorities as denial of potential revenues for the PKK.⁴⁷⁰ Farmers who had their orchards seized by SNA factions were accused of being YPG members.⁴⁷¹

In April 2019, SOHR reported that Turkish-backed forces arrested the president and members of the Kurdish National Council in Afrin, as well as over 2 600 Kurdish citizens. Around 1 100 were reported to still be in detention while the rest were released upon paying a ransom that in some cases reached 10 million Syrian pounds (approximately EUR 17 600).⁴⁷² STJ documented 127 arrests conducted by the SNA in Afrin during September 2019. Most of the arrested were members of the Kurdish forces, but also civilians perceived to be supporting the YPG and a member of a Kurdish political party. The arrests were reportedly arbitrary and did not respect due process. While 70 of the persons arrested were released, the fate and whereabouts of 57 remained unknown, as of November 2019.⁴⁷³

SNHR reported that in December 2019 factions of the armed opposition operating in Afrin arrested and kidnapped civilians, including women, for alleged cooperation with SDF.⁴⁷⁴

In Afrin there have been reports claiming that Turkey has tried to change the area’s demographic composition in favour of Syrian Arabs and Turkmens.⁴⁷⁵ IDPs who returned to Afrin during 2018 found

⁴⁶⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 11-12; AI, Syria: Tell Families of Missing the Fate of Loved Ones, 13 May 2019, [url](#); HRW, World Report 2019 - Syria, 17 January 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁶⁶ al-Hilu, K., Afrin Under Turkish Control: Political, Economic and Social Transformations, European University Institute, 25 July 2019, [url](#), pp. 1; 5-6; HRW, Syria: Turkey-Backed Groups Seizing Property, 14 June 2018, [url](#)

⁴⁶⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 10-11

⁴⁶⁸ HRW, Turkey/Syria: Civilians at Risk in Syria Operation, 11 October 2019, [url](#); USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁶⁹ AI, Syria: Turkey must stop serious violations by allied groups and its own forces in Afrin, 2 August 2018, [url](#)

⁴⁷⁰ Al Monitor, Turkey's 'Olive Branch' takes root in Syrian olive business, 16 December 2018, [url](#); SOHR, After displacing more than 300000 Kurdish residents of Afrin people, Turkish-backed factions seize more than 75% of olive farms and receive the price of the first season in advance, 20 September 2018, [url](#)

⁴⁷¹ Al-Hilu, K., Afrin Under Turkish Control: Political, Economic and Social Transformations, European University Institute, 25 July 2019, [url](#), pp. 16-17

⁴⁷² SOHR, The Turkish authorities and “Olive Branch” operation forces arrest 2 leaders of the Kurdish National Council in Afrin and raise to about 1100, the number their detainees in the area, 1 April 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁷³ STJ, Syria: 127 Arrests in Afrin during September 2019, 11 November 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁷⁴ SNHR, At least 6,671 Cases of Arbitrary Arrests Documented in 2019, 2 January 2020, [url](#), p. 5

⁴⁷⁵ Al-Hilu, K., Afrin Under Turkish Control: Political, Economic and Social Transformations, European University Institute, 25 July 2019, [url](#), p. 14; OHCHR, Between a Rock and a Hard Place – Civilians in North-western Syria, June 2018, [url](#), pp. 6-7

their properties confiscated or destroyed by Turkish-backed armed groups. Some homes belonging to Kurdish residents were redistributed to Sunni Muslim IDPs relocated from government-held areas while returnees were informed that they are precluded from living in the area due to their real or perceived affiliation to YPG.⁴⁷⁶

In October 2019, OHCHR reported that the areas of Afrin, al-Bab, Jarablus, and Azaz, controlled by Turkish forces and affiliated armed groups 'are continuing to face lawlessness and rampant criminality and violence'. Civilians accused of affiliation with Kurdish armed or political groups were subjected to 'intimidation, ill-treatment, killing, kidnapping, looting and seizure of civilians' houses'.⁴⁷⁷ RI also reported on 'systematic looting and pillaging of homes, shops, and farms in population centers taken over by SNA forces'.⁴⁷⁸

The CoI noted that it 'finds that there are reasonable grounds to believe that members of the armed groups in Afrin continued to commit the war crimes of hostage-taking, cruel treatment, torture'.⁴⁷⁹

For the period of the Turkish-led incursion into north-east Syria in October 2019, AI claimed it gathered 'damning evidence of war crimes and other violations by Turkish forces and their allies'. AI claimed that Turkish forces and affiliated armed groups including the SNA were responsible for indiscriminate attacks on residential areas, summary killings and unlawful attacks that have killed and injured civilians, among others.⁴⁸⁰ US Special Envoy for Syria, James Jeffrey, stated that US forces observed 'several incidents which we consider war crimes' by Turkish-backed forces during the incursion into Kurdish-held territories in north-east Syria.⁴⁸¹

In October 2019, Hevrin Khalaf, a Kurdish female politician who was secretary general of the Kurdish Future Syria Party, was summarily killed by members of Ahrar Al-Sharqiya, part of the Turkey-supported SNA. The incident took place on the international highway linking Raqqa to Qamishli.⁴⁸² The SNA-branded group Ahrar al-Sharqiya has been most frequently named as the perpetrator of summary killings and human rights abuses during the October 2019 offensive.⁴⁸³

In November 2019, Human Rights Watch stated that armed factions of the SNA 'have summarily executed civilians and failed to account for aid workers who disappeared while working in the 'safe zone''. Refused returns of Kurdish families displaced by the Turkish-led incursion, killing of three Kurdish returnees to Ras al-Ain, as well as looting and appropriation of property were also reported.⁴⁸⁴

STJ reported that since the capture of Tall Abyad in mid-October 2019 the SNA-affiliate armed groups Levant Front and Ahrar al-Sharqiya have arrested 80 Arab young men who had previously served in the SDF. While some were released upon surrendering their weapons, many were reportedly still in detention.⁴⁸⁵

Syria Untold, Afrin on the Road to Arabization, 13 August 2018, [url](#)

⁴⁷⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/39/65], 9 August 2018, [url](#), p. 7

USCIRF, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2019 Annual Report; Country Reports: Tier 1 Countries (Recommended for CPC Designation): Syria, April 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁴⁷⁷ OHCHR, Press briefing note on Syria, 11 October 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁷⁸ RI, Displacement and Despair: the Turkish Invasion into Northeast Syria, 12 November 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁷⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 12

⁴⁸⁰ AI, Syria: Damning evidence of war crimes and other violations by Turkish forces and their allies, 18 October 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁸¹ CNN, What to know about Trump's announcement today, 23 October 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁸² AI, Syria: Damning evidence of war crimes and other violations by Turkish forces and their allies, 18 October 2019, [url](#); Washington Post (The), Grief, accusations surround killing of Kurdish politician in northeastern Syria, 16 October 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁸³ UN News, Syria war: executions condemned as violence continues 'on both sides' of border with Turkey, 15 October 2019, [url](#); France24, Images document extrajudicial killings by Turkish-backed militia in Syria, 21 October 2019, [url](#); AI Monitor, Eastern Syria fighters accused of brutality after videos emerge, 13 November 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁸⁴ HRW, Syria: Civilians Abused in 'Safe Zones', 27 November 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁸⁵ STJ, Arrests and Tortures by the National Army in Tell Abiad, 9 January 2020, [url](#)

6.2 Targeting by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

The Kurdish-controlled areas in northeast Syria comprise most of the territory that was previously under ISIL control in Syria and which sources assessed as ‘the main theatre for ISIS’s insurgency’. In Raqqa and Hasaka governorates ISIL is thought to operate sophisticated clandestine networks capable of carrying out more complex attacks.⁴⁸⁶ In an August 2019 report (covering the period from 1 April to 30 June 2019), USDOD identified Deir Ez-Zor governorate, parts of Raqqa governorate and Homs governorate near Palmyra as the areas where ISIL displayed the strongest insurgent capabilities.⁴⁸⁷

Detailed information on ISIL is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Actors \(December 2019\)](#)

In Deir Ez-Zor governorate, ISIL has maintained a low-level insurgency since losing Baghouz in early 2019. The attacks included roadside bombs, drive-by shooting and assassinations of local SDF collaborators. Arab elements of the SDF were particularly targeted in the area to deter the predominantly Arab local population from cooperating with the SDF/YPG forces. According to sources interviewed by the International Crisis Group, ISIL attacks in Deir Ez-Zor governorate ‘have been concentrated in a strip along the Euphrates River between the towns of al-Buseira and al-Tayyana’. In Deir Ez-Zor city ISIL has posted lists of SDF recruits and civilian employees on mosques demanding that they ‘repent’.⁴⁸⁸ ISIL tactics have also included assassinations and burning of field of crops in northern Syria.⁴⁸⁹

ISW senior analyst Christopher Kozak assessed that ISIL activity during 2019 was relatively low level as compared to previous years, but a gradual increase in attacks has been registered since June-July 2019, especially in northern Syria. ISIL primarily targeted checkpoints and headquarters of Asayish forces. In the Euphrates River Valley, ISIL targeted governance officials, village elders, people perceived as informants against ISIL, collaborators with the SDF or their affiliates with assassinations. ISIL attacks also targeted political and military figures associated with the SDF, and individuals that have participated in the SDF security apparatus (former members of the Asayish, former fighters with Deir ez-Zour Military Council). Prisons where ISIL detainees were held were also targeted in Qamishli and Hasaka.⁴⁹⁰

USDOD reporting on the period from 1 July to 25 October 2019 also noted that ISIL cells conducted frequent attacks on SDF and local government officials in Deir Ez-Zor governorate.⁴⁹¹ In Kurdish-controlled areas, the US Department of State reported to USDOD that ‘ISIS killed senior civilian and military leaders, and posted death threats in public places’.⁴⁹² Local Kurdish sources reported that ISIL claimed 64 attacks in August 2019. ISIL targeted village elders (*mukhtars*) and local council leaders for assassination in Raqqa and Deir Ez Zor governorates. Attacks on local security forces were also reported.⁴⁹³

During April and June 2019, the United States Central Command reported ISIL attacks on SDF forces aiming to limit their movement and inflict casualties in Hasaka governorate. In Raqqa governorate,

⁴⁸⁶ According to International Crisis Group interview with an US official, 18 May 2019. International Crisis Group, Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria, 11 October 2019, [url](#), pp. 23-24

⁴⁸⁷ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2019–June 30, 2019, 6 August 2019, [url](#), p. 20

⁴⁸⁸ International Crisis Group, Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria, 11 October 2019, [url](#), pp. 24-25

⁴⁸⁹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2019–June 30, 2019, 6 August 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁴⁹⁰ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁴⁹¹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, July 1, 2019 – October 25, 2019, 18 November 2019, [url](#), p. 6

⁴⁹² USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, July 1, 2019 – October 25, 2019, 18 November 2019, [url](#), p. 40

⁴⁹³ Rojava Information Center, Database: August sleeper-cell attacks and raids, 11 September 2019, [url](#)

ISIL conducted assassinations and attacks on local elites ‘to prevent the establishment of capable security and governance structures’.⁴⁹⁴

From March through mid-October 2019 ISIL claimed to have conducted 321 insurgent attacks in Deir Ez-Zor governorate, 100 in Hasaka governorate, 98 in Raqqa governorate, 32 in Homs governorate, 9 in Aleppo governorate, 8 in Dara’a governorate, and 3 in Damascus.⁴⁹⁵ The UN Security Council reported in July 2019 that ISIL has carried out at least 30 attacks against the US-led coalition forces in Syria since the beginning of 2019.⁴⁹⁶

6.2.1 List of illustrative incidents

- On 16 January 2019, an ISIL suicide bomber detonated a suicide vest (SVEST) at a restaurant in Manbij, Aleppo governorate, killing 19 people, including local fighters, civilians and four Americans.⁴⁹⁷
- On 25 March 2019, ISIL fighters killed seven SDF fighters operating a checkpoint at the entrance to Manbij city.⁴⁹⁸
- In April 2019, ISIL claimed responsibility for a car bomb in Raqqa that killed eight people, including four SDF fighters.⁴⁹⁹
- In May 2019, ISIL claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing on an SDF convoy near Shaddadi, Hasaka governorate in which only injuries were reported.⁵⁰⁰
- According to USDOD, in May 2019 ‘ISIL claimed a bombing in Manbij against an SDF command post that killed “several” people outside the headquarters of the Manbij Military Council’.⁵⁰¹
- On 1 June 2019, at least seven civilians were killed and at least 11 others injured as a result of two IED attacks that were claimed by ISIL. Both attacks took place in Raqqa city and targeted an SDF checkpoint and vehicle, respectively.⁵⁰²
- On 7 August 2019, a VBIED attack in the town of Qahtaniyah, Hasaka governorate, killed three children and injured at least two other civilians. ISIL claimed responsibility for the attack and alleged that it had targeted a vehicle belonging to the SDF in the area.⁵⁰³
- On 8-9 October 2019, ISIL conducted a SVEST attack on the headquarters of the SDF and local security forces in Raqqa city. SDF forces reportedly fought off the attack.⁵⁰⁴
- In October 2019, suspected ISIL members shot dead a local mayor and SDF member in Shiheil and Hawayij Thiban, Deir Ez Zor governorate.⁵⁰⁵

⁴⁹⁴ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2019–June 30, 2019, 6 August 2019, [url](#), p. 20

⁴⁹⁵ Washington Institute for Near East Policy (The), The Islamic State in Syria After the U.S. Withdrawal, 23 October 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁹⁶ UN Security Council, Letter dated 15 July 2019 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council, 15 July 2019, [url](#), p. 7

⁴⁹⁷ New York Times (The), ISIS Attack in Syria Kills 4 Americans, Raising New Worries About Troop Withdrawal, 16 January 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁹⁸ AP, 7 US-backed Kurdish fighters killed in ISIS attack in Manbij, 26 March 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁹⁹ Reuters, Bomb kills eight in Syrian city of Raqqa, 9 April 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁰⁰ Kurdistan24, ISIS suicide attack targets SDF demining convoy, 21 May 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁰¹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2019–June 30, 2019, 6 August 2019, [url](#), p. 20

⁵⁰² UN Security Council: Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/674], 21 August 2019, [url](#), p. 19

⁵⁰³ UN Security Council: Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/820], 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 18

⁵⁰⁴ ISW, Syria Situation Report: September 25 – October 10, 2019, 11 October 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁰⁵ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 14-20 October 2019, [url](#), p. 5

- In January 2020, ISIL claimed responsibility for an SVBIED attack in Abu Hammam, Deir Ez-Zor governorate targeting the former headquarters of the Asayish. Two children and a woman were injured in the attack.⁵⁰⁶

For targeting by ISIL in areas outside Kurdish control see [Chapter 5](#).

⁵⁰⁶ ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 17, 2019 – January 7, 2020, 9 January 2020, [url](#)

7. Journalists and other media professionals and bloggers

7.1 General overview

The United Nations Secretary General stated that in 2018 there were reports of threats, injuries and killings of journalists in the Syrian Arab Republic, as a result of the ongoing conflict.⁵⁰⁷ Similarly, for 2017, the same source reported on journalists being threatened, injured and killed.⁵⁰⁸

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) stated that journalists were targeted by all the parties involved in the conflict in Syria - the SAA, its allies and the armed opposition groups, such as HTS, ISIL, Turkish-backed forces and Kurdish-backed forces.⁵⁰⁹ According to an October 2019 UN Security Council Report, non-state armed opposition groups and groups designated as terrorist groups by the Security Council, such as HTS⁵¹⁰, systematically targeted civilians in the northern part of Syria, including media providers, through abductions, killings, imprisonments and torture.⁵¹¹

Freedom House described Syria as not free, with an aggregate freedom score of 0/100. Freedom of press was reported to be restricted and journalists faced censorship, detention, torture and death while in custody. Freedom House also noted that journalists faced physical danger in the whole country, particularly from government forces and extremist groups.⁵¹²

Syria rank 174th out of 180 countries in the 2019 RSF World Press Freedom Index.⁵¹³ RSF stated that journalists were in danger of being arrested, abducted or killed in Syria, noting that in 2018 'at least' 10 journalists were killed.⁵¹⁴ According to the CPJ's 2019 Global Impunity Index⁵¹⁵, Syria rank second among the 13 countries worldwide with the most impunity, meaning that the country had the second lowest record of prosecution of individuals in relation to deaths of journalists.⁵¹⁶

RSF also noted that very few of the new Syrian media that were created by citizen journalists⁵¹⁷ after 2011 have survived.⁵¹⁸

RSF noted that 10 journalists were killed in 2019 in Syria making 2019 the year with the least fatalities among journalists since the start of the civil war in Syria. According to the same source, in 2019 Syria continued to rank as one of the two deadliest countries worldwide for the media.⁵¹⁹ The Committee

⁵⁰⁷ UN Security Council, Protection of civilians in armed conflict. Report of the Secretary-General, 7 May 2019, [url](#), p. 8

⁵⁰⁸ UN Security Council, Protection of civilians in armed conflict. Report of the Secretary-General, 14 May 2018, [url](#), p. 4

⁵⁰⁹ RSF, Syria, n.d., [url](#)

⁵¹⁰ United Nations Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 13

⁵¹¹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁵¹² Freedom House, Freedom in the world, Syria, 4 February 2019, [url](#)

⁵¹³ Reporters Without Borders, 2019 World Press Freedom Index, n.d., [url](#)

⁵¹⁴ Reporters Without Borders, Syria, n.d., [url](#)

⁵¹⁵ The Index and the chart rate countries based on their low record of prosecutions of individuals that kill journalists in direct retaliation for their work

⁵¹⁶ CPJ, Getting away with murder, 29 October 2019, [url](#)

⁵¹⁷ Citizen journalist: 'an ordinary person without special training who records or writes about news stories, for example on the internet'. Source: Cambridge Dictionary, citizen journalist, n.d., [url](#)

⁵¹⁸ Reporters Without Borders, Syria, n.d., [url](#)

⁵¹⁹ RSF, Worldwide round-up of journalists killed, detained, held hostage, or missing in 2019, 16 December 2019 – updated 17 December 2019, [url](#), p. 8

to Protect Journalists (CPJ) stated that seven journalists⁵²⁰ were killed in 2019 in Syria⁵²¹. The SHRC documented eight journalists and media activists killed in 2019 in the country with 26 injured, mostly during indiscriminate bombings or during bombings and shootings while covering the fighting.⁵²²

In its report covering 2018, SHRC stated that there was a decrease of human rights violations against journalists in comparison to the previous years.⁵²³ It documented the death of 16 journalists and media activists during 2018 and the injury of 13, primarily due to bullets and shelling fired indiscriminately while they were covering the conflict.⁵²⁴

The Syrian Center for Journalistic Freedoms (SCJF) and the Syrian Journalists Association (SJA)⁵²⁵ noted in their report covering 2018 that different actors targeted media and media personnel in Syria and highlighted that in 2018, ISIL was no longer among those actors.⁵²⁶ The report also stated that there were 15 documented⁵²⁷ cases of media professionals killed in Syria in that year, while 32 were arrested, detained or abducted, and 25 injured.⁵²⁸ In the first half of 2019, from the beginning of January 2019 until the end of June, the SJA documented 46 violations committed against media professionals in Syria.⁵²⁹

7.2 Targeting by government forces and affiliated armed groups

As documented by the SJA, the GoS was the main actor committing violations against media and media personnel with 27 recorded in 2018 in Syria.⁵³⁰ AI stated that the Syrian security forces detained thousands of individuals without trial and that tens of thousands of people that had disappeared remained so, most of them since 2011, including journalists.⁵³¹

In a May 2019 report SNHR noted that, after 2011, ‘the Syrian regime and its security services became even more lethally brutal and oppressive towards any independent press and media covering events in the country’. The growth of citizen journalism in Syria contributed to the joint preparation of press material in collaboration and coordination with international journalists and media outlets. This constituted one main reason, according to the source, that the Syrian government targeted local journalists. SNHR further stated that it documented ‘multiple, intensive, widespread and clear’ violations of the rights of journalists; journalists were targeted by snipers, arrested, tortured and

⁵²⁰ One of these 7 journalists, according to the CPJ, was killed between September 2016 and July 2019

⁵²¹ CPJ, 7 journalists killed in Syria, n.d., [url](#)

⁵²² SHRC, The 18th Annual Report on Human Rights situation in Syria 2019, January 2020, [url](#), p. 42

⁵²³ In the SHRC 2018 Annual Report are detailed lists of the documented violations against journalists during 2018. The violations include death, injury and arrest and abduction. Source: SHRC, The 17th Annual Report on Human Rights in Syria 2018, January 2018 - December 2018, January 2019, [url](#), p. 52

⁵²⁴ SHRC, The 17th Annual Report on Human Rights in Syria 2018, January 2018 - December 2018, January 2019, [url](#), p. 52

⁵²⁵ The Syrian Journalists Association (SJA) is, according to its website, an independent democratic professional association founded in 2012 with the aim to empower the freedom of expression and press in Syria. Source: Syrian Journalist Association, About us, 30 June 2017, [url](#)

⁵²⁶ SCJF, Violations committed against media professionals in Syria. The 2018 Annual Report, 28 January 2019, Syrian Journalists Association, [url](#), p. 23

⁵²⁷ In the methodology section of the Report, it states that ‘The Centre collects information from victims’ families or their relatives or directly from the media professionals themselves apart from research, monitoring and consistent following of information and updates from concerned different sources.’ Source: SCJF, Violations committed against media professionals in Syria. The 2018 Annual Report, 28 January 2019, Syrian Journalists Association, [url](#), p. 10

⁵²⁸ SCJF, Violations committed against media professionals in Syria. The 2018 Annual Report, 28 January 2019, Syrian Journalists Association, [url](#), p. 13

⁵²⁹ SJA and SCJF, Violations committed against media professionals in Syria. Mid-year casualty count, 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁵³⁰ SCJF, Violations committed against media professionals in Syria. The 2018 Annual Report, 28 January 2019, Syrian Journalists Association, [url](#), p. 23

⁵³¹ AI, Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa. Review of 2018, 2019, [url](#), pp. 62-63

forcibly disappeared. The Syrian government also attempted to discredit them, by undermining the credibility of their reports and statements.⁵³²

OHCHR noted that those who refused reconciliation with GoS in Dar'a governorate following its takeover in summer 2018 and evacuated to rebel-held areas 'included fighters and their families, as well as some who identified as journalists and humanitarian workers who claimed to fear being targeted and/or detained by GoS should they decide to remain in Dar'a'.⁵³³

SNHR additionally reported that citizen journalists and media workers were also in danger in areas that are not under the control of GoS, since they are part of the civilian population that was targeted by 'double-tap' aerial and artillery bombings.⁵³⁴ GoS also targeted journalists in the areas with which it had entered into settlement processes, 'persecuting citizen journalists there and arresting most of them'.⁵³⁵

SHRC also noted that in 2019, journalists that were loyal to the GoS were also targeted, as 'a result of a struggle for power centres that formed within the regime over the course of the war'.⁵³⁶

7.3 Targeting by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

In a January 2019 report, the Col stated that HTS arrested and imprisoned civilians that opposed or criticised its rule, including journalists.⁵³⁷ Similarly, Human Rights Watch stated that HTS targeted journalists, by arbitrarily arresting and kidnapping them.⁵³⁸

According to the Col, individuals such as journalists, perceived to be violating the Islamic law (sharia) as per HTS's interpretation, were 'routinely detained arbitrarily, tortured and subjected to ill-treatment while in detention facilities known to be operated by the group'.⁵³⁹ The group has been following the same pattern of arbitrary arrests since 2014, under its previous form as the Al-Nusra Front or Jabhat al-Nusra.⁵⁴⁰ RSF documented the killing of two Syrian journalists in Syria, in late 2018. The source noted that civil society accused HTS of being responsible for the deaths of the two journalists.⁵⁴¹ According to BBC, one of them was Raed Fares, a prominent Syrian radio journalist, who was killed in the governorate of Idlib.⁵⁴²

Christopher Kozak of ISW noted that there is less reporting in general out of Idlib governorate because the former proliferation of free activist media outlets has been increasingly clamped down on by HTS, and targeted for harassment, detention, or violence.⁵⁴³

SNHR stated that HTS also targeted citizen journalists in the areas under its control, killing those it perceived as a threat to its ideology and policies. The SNHR further stated that it documented 'the

⁵³² SNHR, On World Press Freedom Day: citizen journalists in Syria face retirement or displacement, 3 May 2019, [url](#), pp. 1-3

⁵³³ OHCHR, Human Rights Digest Syria, The "unreconciled" concerns of civilians in Dar'a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁵³⁴ SNHR, On World Press Freedom Day: citizen journalists in Syria face retirement or displacement, 3 May 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁵³⁵ SNHR, On World Press Freedom Day: citizen journalists in Syria face retirement or displacement, 3 May 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁵³⁶ SHRC, The 18th Annual Report on Human Rights in Syria in 2019, January 2020, [url](#), p. 42

⁵³⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 12

⁵³⁸ HRW, World Report 2019 - Syria, 17 January 2019, [url](#)

⁵³⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 12

⁵⁴⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#) p. 12

⁵⁴¹ RSF, 2019 RSF Index: Middle East's journalists deliberately targeted, 16 April 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁴² BBC, Raed Fares: Syria radio host shot dead in Idlib, 24 November 2018, [url](#)

⁵⁴³ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

arrests of dozens of citizen journalists by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham's forces in retaliation for issuing publications contrary to its policies or for participating in activism without obtaining permission'.⁵⁴⁴

7.4 Targeting by the Syrian National Army

In Aleppo governorate, according to a 2018 report by the CoI, the FSA-affiliated groups targeted different individuals, including journalists. Based on reports by residents, the FSA-affiliated groups⁵⁴⁵, after taking over an area, repeatedly proceeded to arbitrary arrests and detentions.⁵⁴⁶

Similarly, SNHR noted that citizen journalists in the areas under control of the 'armed opposition' (not further specified by the source) were targeted systematically; they were harassed, extorted, intimidated, detained and tortured.⁵⁴⁷

The CoI reported that in February 2019 a journalist was arrested by an armed opposition group in Afrin, Aleppo governorate under the accusation of 'sharing information with foreign news agencies'. The journalist was reportedly severely beaten during his interrogation.⁵⁴⁸

7.5 Targeting by the SDF/YPG

According to the SNHR, the SDF mostly suppressed the freedom of press, particularly when opposing the SDF's policies. The source documented a large number of arrests, enforced disappearances and torture of citizen journalists that criticised the policies and regime of the SDF in the areas under their control.⁵⁴⁹

An October 2019 UN Security Council report stated that OHCHR documented at least seven incidents of arrests and enforced disappearances of civilians, including media personnel perceived to criticise the SDF, in the areas under their control.⁵⁵⁰

The CoI, in a 2018 report, stated that the SDF intimidated and arrested journalists that reported on alleged violations by the SDF and the international coalition in Raqqa city, Tall Abyad and Tabqa.⁵⁵¹

Reporting for the period July 2017 to January 2018, the CoI stated that journalist and activists that reported on human rights violations committed by SDF were subjected to intimidation and arbitrary arrests in Raqqa, Tall Abyad and Tabqa. Elements associated with the SDF detained several relatives of wanted activists in territories under its control for periods of up to six weeks to obtain information about their whereabouts and pressure the activists to surrender.⁵⁵²

⁵⁴⁴ SNHR, On World Press Freedom Day: citizen journalists in Syria face retirement or displacement, 3 May 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁵⁴⁵ According to the same 2018 HRC Report, the following groups are part of the FSA-affiliated armed groups: Ahrar al-Sham, Faylaq al-Sham, Jaish al-Nukhba, Jaish al-Sharqiya, Jabhat al-Shamiya and Nur al-Din al-Zinki. Source: UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 9 August 2018, [url](#), p. 5

⁵⁴⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 9 August 2018, [url](#), pp. 6-7

⁵⁴⁷ SNHR, On World Press Freedom Day: citizen journalists in Syria face retirement or displacement, 3 May 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁵⁴⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 12

⁵⁴⁹ SNHR, On World Press Freedom Day: citizen journalists in Syria face retirement or displacement, 3 May 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁵⁵⁰ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 19

⁵⁵¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 1 February 2018, [url](#), p. 10

⁵⁵² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/37/72], 1 February 2018, [url](#), p. 10

7.6 Targeting by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

Human Rights Watch noted in its report covering 2019 that ‘ISIS seized thousands of individuals, including activists, humanitarian workers, and journalists, whose fate remained unknown, according to local human rights monitors and families of those kidnapped’.⁵⁵³ The report does not provide further details on when the events took place.

The SNHR, in a May 2019 report, stated that citizen journalists were also targeted by ISIL who pursued, arrested and terrorised media personnel and citizen journalists. In addition, ISIL used citizen journalists, forcing them to promote its ideology and propaganda. ISIL threatened them with torture and death, according to the SNHR report, in order to make the citizen journalists comply.⁵⁵⁴ The source did not provide the specific period when these violations took place.

According to a CoI 2018 report (covering the period between July 2017 and January 2018), ISIL detained civilians, including journalists, in the governorates of Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zor and Hama, who were accused of reporting on alleged violations committed by ISIL.⁵⁵⁵

⁵⁵³ HRW, World Report 2020 - Syria, 14 January 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁵⁴ SNHR, On World Press Freedom Day: citizen journalists in Syria face retirement or displacement, 3 May 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁵⁵⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 1 February 2018, [url](#), p. 15

8. Human rights activists

According to the organisation Front Line Defenders⁵⁵⁶, human rights defenders in Syria have been facing an increased ‘risk of targeting and persecution’ after 2011. Human rights defenders were in danger of arbitrary arrests and detention, abductions, prosecution, death threats, restriction of movement, defamation, as well as other forms of intimidation and harassment.⁵⁵⁷

AI stated that human rights activists were amongst the tens of thousands of people who have been abducted or subjected to enforced disappearances since 2011 in Syria.⁵⁵⁸

8.1 Targeting by government forces and affiliated armed groups

According to the Col, covering the period 11 July 2018 to 10 January 2019, activists were amongst the most likely individuals to be arbitrarily detained in Syria by the GoS forces in areas under their control.⁵⁵⁹

The same source stated in August 2019 that government forces, after recapturing the Dar’a governorate from armed groups, requested civilians to sign an oath of loyalty as part of the government-imposed ‘reconciliation’ process. The oath included stipulations infringing on human rights and one of the demands was for civilians to report the contact details of human rights activists.⁵⁶⁰ Citing confidential sources, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands noted that, in the areas recaptured by the government and in cities like Douma, Daraa and the northern part of Homs, the Syrian government, after the bombardments, proceeded to carry out arbitrary arrests and detentions. One of the main groups targeted were human rights activists.⁵⁶¹

A FIS report, based on a fact-finding mission to Damascus and Beirut in April 2018, stated that the GoS had ‘a good capacity to monitor phones and social media’ and that, according to an interviewed Syrian expert, the government monitored the phones of activists and that ‘they might be regularly taken in for questioning’.⁵⁶²

According to Human Rights Watch, Syrian intelligence branches arbitrarily detained individuals, and subjected them to enforced disappearances and harassment in areas re-claimed from anti-government groups. Human Rights Watch documented 11 cases of arbitrary detention, disappearances and harassment of civilians from reconquered areas of Dar’a, Eastern Ghouta and southern Damascus. Activists were among those civilians targeted. In all cases, the targeted individuals had signed reconciliation agreements with the government.⁵⁶³

⁵⁵⁶ The Front Line Defenders is an organization with the aim to protect human rights defenders at risk, who work in a non-violent manner with the goal to safeguard the rights included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Source: Front Line Defenders, About us, n.d., [url](#)

⁵⁵⁷ Front Line Defenders, Syria, n.d., [url](#)

⁵⁵⁸ AI, Syria: Families left alone to find answers about disappeared relatives, 30 August 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁵⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 15

⁵⁶⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 13

⁵⁶¹ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Report: Syria. The Security Situation, July 2019, [url](#), p. 44

⁵⁶² Finland, FIS, Syria: Fact-finding mission to Beirut and Damascus, April 2018, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 38

⁵⁶³ HRW, Syria: Detention, Harassment in Retaken Areas, 21 May 2019, [url](#)

Different sources stated that human rights activists and defenders were arrested⁵⁶⁴, detained⁵⁶⁵ and kidnapped by government forces.⁵⁶⁶ Human rights activists were amongst those detained without access to a fair public trial.⁵⁶⁷ They were also arrested and kidnapped mainly by GoS forces and the militias affiliated to them.⁵⁶⁸ According to AI, after the government forces ceased the siege of Eastern Ghouta, the security forces forcibly disappeared many of the individuals they had detained, activists included. They were also tortured or subjected to other forms of ill-treatment, actions that resulted to death in detention.⁵⁶⁹

8.2 Targeting by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

SNHR informed that since September 2018 they recorded an escalation of HTS violations in the north of Syria, particularly in Idlib, where the group was conducting raids in villages, targeting and arresting local activists among other individuals.⁵⁷⁰ The same source reported that they recorded at least 184 incidents of abductions and arbitrary arrests in the period of September until mid-October 2018, including arrests of local activists that were criticising the group's practices in social media.⁵⁷¹

In its January 2019 report, the Col noted that HTS targeted civilians criticising the group, including activists. Activists, alongside other civilians, that were perceived to violate the group's interpretation of the Islamic law (sharia) were regularly detained arbitrarily, tortured and mistreated while being detained in facilities operated by the group.⁵⁷²

SOHR reported that in November 2019 HTS arrested what the source described as a 'civilian activist' at the checkpoint of al-Bayda, amongst arrests of other individuals that opposed the group in the areas under its control.⁵⁷³

8.3 Targeting by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

According to the Col, one of the steps that ISIL took in order to gain control in Syria was to target local leaders and activists.⁵⁷⁴ The same source noted that during the reporting period July 2017 to January 2018 across the governorates of Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zor, and Hama, ISIL detained, among other civilians, activists who were accused of reporting on alleged violations the group had committed.⁵⁷⁵

⁵⁶⁴ SNHR, Eight years since the start of the popular uprising in Syria, terrible violations continue, 11 March 2019, [url](#), p. 6; AI, Human rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Review of 2018 - Syria [MDE 24/9903/2019], 26 February 2019, [url](#), p. 60

⁵⁶⁵ USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2018 – Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 15; SNHR, Eight years since the start of the popular uprising in Syria, terrible violations continue, 11 March 2019, [url](#), p. 6;

⁵⁶⁶ SNHR, Eight years since the start of the popular uprising in Syria, terrible violations continue, 11 March 2019, [url](#), p. 6;

⁵⁶⁷ The source states that tens of thousands of individuals were detained without access to fair trial. USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2018 – Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 15

⁵⁶⁸ SNHR, Eight years since the start of the popular uprising in Syria, terrible violations continue, 11 March 2019, [url](#), p. 6

⁵⁶⁹ AI, Human rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Review of 2018 - Syria [MDE 24/9903/2019], 26 February 2019, [url](#), p. 60

⁵⁷⁰ SNHR, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham exploits the de-escalation agreement and escalates their violence, 21 October 2019, [url](#), p. 1; SNHR, The Annual Report of the most notable violations of human rights in Syria in 2018, 15 January 2019, [url](#), p. 17

⁵⁷¹ SNHR, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham exploits the de-escalation agreement and escalates their violence, 21 October 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁵⁷² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 12

⁵⁷³ SOHR, Hayyaat Tahrir al-Sham arrests 4 activists of its oppositionists in its areas of control and takes them to an unknown destination, 12 November 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁷⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 1 February 2018, [url](#), p. 9

⁵⁷⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 1 February 2018, [url](#), p. 15

In its annual report on human rights violations (covering 2018), SNHR stated that ISIL used torture methods while interrogating detainees in order to extract information, intimidate, take revenge and spread fear. Activists constituted one of the groups⁵⁷⁶ that, according to the SNHR, suffered the ‘most severe’ forms of torture at the hands of ISIL.⁵⁷⁷

Human Rights Watch stated that, according to local human rights organisations, ISIL ‘took into custody’ at least 8 000 people in Syria, including activists, in the time that the group controlled territory.⁵⁷⁸ Human Rights Watch documented many cases of individuals, including activists, who had disagreements with local ISIL members, were detained by ISIL and whose whereabouts remain unknown.⁵⁷⁹

8.4 Targeting by the SDF/YPG

OHCHR documented in September 2019 at least seven enforced disappearances or arbitrary arrests of civilians including human rights activists. Those individuals were perceived as critical towards the SDF in the areas under their control.⁵⁸⁰

According to the same source, the SDF targeted activists and journalists; they were ‘intimidated and arrested for reporting on alleged violations committed by the Syrian Democratic Forces and the international coalition in Raqqa city, Tall Abyad and Tabqa’. The report noted that there were cases of the SDF arresting and detaining relatives of activists in order to obtain information about the location of activists and to pressure them to come out of hiding.⁵⁸¹

SNHR stated that the SDF, after claiming areas in the governorates of Raqqa and Deir Ez Zor, targeted activists amongst other groups. They were subjected to beatings, and deprived of food and access to healthcare.⁵⁸²

8.5 Targeting by the Syrian National Army

The Col, in its August 2018 report, stated that, according to residents, the FSA-affiliated armed groups displayed patterns of arbitrary arrests, kidnappings, detention and beatings in the areas under their control, targeting, among other groups, activists.⁵⁸³ On February 2018, the Turkish air force launched an attack against a convoy of vehicles allegedly carrying weapons, terrorists and ammunition, resulting in at least one fatality and twelve injuries. The Col informed that, after reviewing the evidence, the convoy appeared to have carried activists, nurses, a doctor and demonstrators.⁵⁸⁴

AI noted that activists were also targeted by the pro-Turkey armed group Sultan Murad. They were arbitrarily detained and some were tortured and ill-treated in other ways.⁵⁸⁵

⁵⁷⁶ The other groups are military captives and abducted foreigners

⁵⁷⁷ SNHR, The Annual Report of the most notable violations of human rights in Syria in 2018, 15 January 2019, [url](#), p. 59

⁵⁷⁸ HRW, Fate of ISIS Kidnapping Victims in Syria Remains Uncertain, 16 April 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁷⁹ HRW, Syria: Reveal Fate of Missing Victims of ISIS, 14 May 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁸⁰ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 19

⁵⁸¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 1 February 2018, [url](#), p. 10

⁵⁸² SNHR, Eight years since the start of the popular uprising in Syria, terrible violations continue, 11 March 2019, [url](#), p. 9

⁵⁸³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 9 August 2018, [url](#), pp. 6-7

⁵⁸⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 9 August 2018, [url](#), p. 6

⁵⁸⁵ AI, Human rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Review of 2018 - Syria [MDE 24/9903/2019], 26 February 2019, [url](#), p. 62

9. Targeting of doctors and medical professionals

9.1 Targeting by government forces and affiliated armed groups

GoS forces have targeted doctors, nurses and assistant health personnel. Medical personnel working at medical facilities has been subjected to military attacks by GoS and allied forces throughout the years of conflict, according to the Syria Independent Monitoring (SIM) consortium, a group of organisations reporting upon the request of the UK Government⁵⁸⁶, and Syria expert Aron Lund.⁵⁸⁷ The Col stated in a January 2019 report that ‘Since 2013, the Commission has documented how pro-government forces systematically target health-care infrastructure in opposition-held areas to deprive both civilians and belligerents of medical treatment’.⁵⁸⁸

The US-based NGO Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) documented and mapped a total of 583 attacks on at least 350 separate health facilities from March 2011 through August 2019, of which PHR attributed more than 90 % to state forces.⁵⁸⁹

Aron Lund noted that some activists and UN officials wonder if a UN list of health facilities agreed to be protected under the Geneva Convention and circulated to the Syrian, Russian and Turkish military commands for that purpose, may instead have been deliberately used to pick hospitals as targets.⁵⁹⁰ The Guardian cited in June 2019 a call by prominent doctors that stated that Syrian and Russian air force both took part in a bombing campaign in May 2019, which targeted more than 20 hospitals in the north-west of Syria. The location of many of hospitals that were hit was on the UN list.⁵⁹¹ According to the Col, government forces carried out airstrikes on at least four hospitals in Idlib governorate between March and May 2019. All hospitals were included on the UN ‘deconfliction’ list and their coordinates were available to GoS forces.⁵⁹²

In August 2019, the UN announced that the UN Secretary-General would launch an investigation into hospital attacks in north-west Syria covering ‘destruction of, or damage to facilities on the deconfliction list and UN-supported facilities in the area’.⁵⁹³ At the time of writing, no findings were made public.

The New York Times published analysis of recordings of Russian pilots’ communications as well as other evidence the newspaper had obtained, which indicated Russian military aircraft bombing four hospitals in Idlib on 5 May 2019.⁵⁹⁴ In May 2019, AI accused the Syrian military and its ally Russia of ‘carrying out a deliberate and systematic assault on hospitals and other medical facilities in Idlib and Hama’.⁵⁹⁵ Media sources reported in August and September 2019 that hospitals were being bombed

⁵⁸⁶ Syria Independent Monitoring Consortium, Protecting Healthcare in Syria, August 2018, [url](#), p. 5

⁵⁸⁷ Lund, A., The UN Made a List of Hospitals in Syria. Now They’re Being Bombed, The Century Foundation, 13 June 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁸⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 7, footnote 12

⁵⁸⁹ PHR, PHR Briefing to U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing on Protecting Health Care During Armed Conflict, 30 October 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁹⁰ Lund, A. The UN Made a List of Hospitals in Syria. Now They’re Being Bombed, The Century Foundation, 13 June 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁹¹ Guardian (The), Stop the carnage: doctors call for an end to Syria hospital airstrikes, 2 June 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁹² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 9-10

⁵⁹³ UN Secretary General, Statement attributable to the Spokesman for the Secretary-General – on UN Board of Inquiry in northwest Syria, 1 August 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁹⁴ New York Times (The), 12 Hours. 4 Syrian Hospitals Bombed. One Culprit: Russia, 13 October 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁹⁵ AI, Syria: Security Council must address crimes against humanity in Idlib, 17 May 2019, [url](#)

in Idlib.⁵⁹⁶ According to the World Health Organization (WHO), seven health centres were bombed in late August 2019 in Idlib governorate.⁵⁹⁷

Various sources reported that many personnel working in health facilities were killed in the military attacks. For example, SNHR reported 53 medical personnel killed in 2018, the large majority by Syrian state forces and allied militias.⁵⁹⁸ PHR reported 912 personnel killed in military attacks in the period March 2011 to August 2019.⁵⁹⁹

PHR indicated in a briefing to the UN Security Council in July 2019 that Syrian government forces' attacks on medical facilities constituted crimes against humanity and were used as a 'tactic of terror [which] turns places of safety and life into danger zones and death traps'.⁶⁰⁰ In an interview conducted in May 2019, Lynn Maalouf, Middle East research director for AI stated that 'in all of their military operations—Ghouta, Aleppo, Douma—the government of Syria has destroyed civilian facilities deliberately to pressure the civilian population and the armed groups into surrendering'. Maalouf further noted that in AI's assessment 'attacks against hospitals are widespread and systematic, and this is what brings us to say the attacks against hospitals in Syria are a crime against humanity'.⁶⁰¹

9.2 Targeting by non-state armed groups

According to PHR data, anti-government armed groups were responsible for 24 attacks on medical facilities and ISIL for 10 since that start of the conflict in 2011.⁶⁰²

Several reports pointed out that medical personnel were arbitrarily arrested and mistreated by non-state armed groups. The news outlet Smartnews, an opposition media agency, reported that a doctor was kidnapped in Afrin by the SNA in January 2019.⁶⁰³ SOHR reported in October 2019 that a doctor in Afrin was beaten by members of Turkish-backed armed groups when he asked militia members who came for treatment to wait for their turn, and that another doctor in Afrin had been abducted from his house by pro-Turkish military police.⁶⁰⁴ AI reported in October 2019 that two civilian men, both working with a local medical organisation and transporting medicine, were abducted in northeast Syria by Ahrar al-Sharqiya, a Turkish-backed Syrian group.⁶⁰⁵

Another opposition source - STJ reported in June 2018 about the abductions of four doctors in Idlib Governorate by unknown persons and one by HTS.⁶⁰⁶ Enab Baladi noted in early 2019 that abductions of medical personnel in Idlib seemed to be on the rise as tensions had otherwise begun to decrease.⁶⁰⁷ Syrian American Medical Society Foundation (SAMS) reported that in September 2019 HTS kidnapped

⁵⁹⁶ BBC, Syria war: Idlib's secret hospitals hiding from air strikes, 12 September 2019, [url](#); UN News, Hospitals among seven health centres attacked in Syria's north-east, 2 September 2019, [url](#); CBS, Syrians trapped by Assad's ruthless Russian-backed barrage in Idlib beg for help, 29 August 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁹⁷ WHO, WHO statement on attacks on health facilities in north west Syria, 1 September 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁹⁸ SNHR, 91 medical, Civil Defense, and Red Crescent personnel Documented killed in Syria, and 198 attacks on their Related Facilities in 2018. One Civil Defense Worker Documented Killed, and 11 Attacks on Vital Medical, Civil Defense Facilities in December, 6 January 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁵⁹⁹ PHR, Briefing to U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing on Protecting Health Care During Armed Conflict, 30 October 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁰⁰ PHR, Briefing to the United Nations Security Council on Attacks on Health Facilities and Personnel in Syria, 30 July 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁰¹ Lund, A. The UN Made a List of Hospitals in Syria. Now They're Being Bombed, The Century Foundation, 13 June 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁰² PHR, Illegal Attacks on Health Care in Syria, n.d., [url](#)

⁶⁰³ Smartnews, National Army fighters torture doctor in Afrin, 27 January 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁰⁴ SOHR, Members of the Turkey-loyal factions beat a doctor and an engineer in Afrin city as part of the series of continue violations in the area, 4 October 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁰⁵ AI, Syria: Damning evidence of war crimes and other violations by Turkish forces and their allies, 18 October 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁰⁶ STJ, Idlib: Assaulting Medical Personnel Becomes more Frequent, 29 June 2018, [url](#)

⁶⁰⁷ Enab Baladi, The Medical Sector in the North of Syria Stumbling Forward, 3 January 2019, [url](#)

and beat up a doctor in north-west Syria, and then kidnapped him again while he was being treated for the injuries from the beatings.⁶⁰⁸

In September 2019, a doctor who was abducted in Idlib by HTS was released several hours later after the Idlib Doctor's Union announced it was ceasing all medical treatment in the governorate, as reported by Counter Extremism Project, an international clearinghouse of extremist groups.⁶⁰⁹ STJ pointed out that in some cases armed groups abducted doctors in order to intimidate.⁶¹⁰

SNHR reported in January 2019 that ISIL had raided makeshift hospitals and dispensaries and abducted some of the wounded, doctors, and paramedics.⁶¹¹

In some reported incidents, attacks could have been indiscriminate or unintended when being carried out in connection with other military activity. One such incident occurred in November 2019 when a Kurdish ambulance was hit by Turkish forces engaged in Turkey's incursion in north-east Syria. According to a representative of a humanitarian aid organisation interviewed by the Guardian, it was hard to tell if the ambulance was deliberately targeted.⁶¹²

9.3 Targeting by unspecified armed actors

PHR recorded 20 attacks on medical facilities by unknown actors since that start of the conflict in 2011.⁶¹³ In one such incident which took place in September 2019 in the western countryside of Aleppo, two doctors were kidnapped by unidentified armed men who demanded ransom for their release.⁶¹⁴ The Gulf-based newspaper The National, writing in November 2018, reported that at least 12 doctors, as well as pharmacists and administrative health personnel were abducted in Idlib by gangs and unnamed militias during the year.⁶¹⁵ Reuters reported in 2018 that kidnapping for ransom in Idlib had begun in 2016 and then increased, and that there were 10 such cases involving 'armed gangs' recorded in north-west Syria in 2018. Doctors became targeted because they are well-known, comparatively well-paid and inclined to express views that put them at odds with their kidnappers, according to Reuters.⁶¹⁶

In June 2018, doctors and pharmacists in Idlib suspended their work for three days in protest against 'violations committed against the medical sector in the province'. Many doctors were reportedly abducted by unknown actors, who demanded huge ransoms for their release.⁶¹⁷ A doctor who was abducted from a village in the Latakia countryside in August 2018 by unknown men was held for a week, questioned and exposed to jihadist music and propaganda but not physically mistreated, according to the STJ.⁶¹⁸

⁶⁰⁸ SAMS, SAMS' statement on violations against humanitarian workers, 5 September 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁰⁹ Counter Extremism Project, Nusra Front (Jabat Fateh aal-Sham), n.d., [url](#)

⁶¹⁰ STJ, Idlib: Assaulting Medical Personnel Becomes more Frequent, 29 June 2018, [url](#)

⁶¹¹ SNHR, 91 Medical, Civil Defense, and Red Crescent personnel Documented killed in Syria, and 198 Attacks on Their Related Facilities in 2018. One Civil Defense Worker Documented Killed, and 11 Attacks on Vital Medical, Civil Defense facilities in December, 6 January 2019, [url](#)

⁶¹² Guardian (The) Kurdish medics injured in apparent attack on ambulance in Syria, 10 November 2019, [url](#)

⁶¹³ PHR, Illegal Attacks on Health Care in Syria, n.d., [url](#)

⁶¹⁴ SOHR, Unidentified gunmen kidnap 2 doctors in the western countryside of Aleppo within the continued security chaos in Idlib province and the surrounding countryside controlled by Hayyat Tahrir Al-Sham and other factions, 16 May 2019, [url](#)

⁶¹⁵ National (The), Medical workers in Syria's Idlib being kidnapped at an alarming rate, 10 November 2018, [url](#)

⁶¹⁶ Reuters, 'Neither war nor peace': Doctors targeted in Syria's lawless rebel region, 21 December 2018, [url](#)

⁶¹⁷ Enab Baladi, The Medical Sector in the North of Syria Stumbling Forward, 3 January 2019, [url](#)

⁶¹⁸ STJ, Update: Armed men Kidnap Dr. Khali Agha and Hospitals Suspend Work in Protest, 14 August 2019, [url](#)

10. Members of specific ethnic and religious groups

10.1 Overview on ethno-religious demography

There are different estimations regarding the ethnic and religious composition of the Syrian society. According to USCIRF, the religious demography of Syria is as follows: 74 % Sunni, 13 % Alawite, Ismaili and Shi'a, 10 % Christian, and 3 % Druze.⁶¹⁹ The same breakdown of the population of Syria was shared by the USDOS 2018 International Religious Freedom report.⁶²⁰ Syria expert Fabrice Balanche stated that in 2010, the ethno-religious composition of Syrian society comprised of 65 % Sunni Arabs, 15 % Kurdish, 10 % Alawite, 5 % Christian, 3 % Druze, 1 % Ismaili, and 1 % Twelver Shia.⁶²¹ In terms of ethnic groups, the US Congressional Research Service (US CRS) estimated that 90.3 % are Arabs while Kurdish, Armenian and other groups constitute 9.7 % of the population.⁶²²

Finally, according to Minority Rights Group International (MRGI), 75 % of Syrians are Sunni, 12 % Alawite, 2 % other Muslim, 10 % Christian, 3-4 % Druze, and 1 % Yazidi. The source observed that 'specific demographic data for Syria is unreliable. Some minority groups are defined primarily by religion, others by ethnicity, and some are relatively recent immigrants. Many of them can also be found in neighbouring countries'.⁶²³

With regards to the distribution of the different religious groups, USDOS stated that Sunni Muslims reside throughout the country, Shia Muslims in rural areas of Idlib and Aleppo governorates as well as in and around Damascus, Aleppo and Homs. Alawites dwell in the coastal side of Syria with a presence in the cities of Latakia, Tartous, Homs and Damascus. Ismailis are concentrated in the city of Salamiya in Hama governorate. Christians live in and around the cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Latakia and in the Hasaka governorate. They constituted 10 % of the population of Syria, but as many of them fled Syria due to the ongoing war, the percentage 'is now considerably lower'. The Druze reside mainly in Jabal Al-Druze in the Sweida governorate, while Yazidis are found in north-east Syria.⁶²⁴ Christopher Kozak of ISW, interviewed by DIS in August 2019 stated that the number of Christians, Druze, Alawites, and Twelver Shi'a 'is very minimal' in opposition-held areas.⁶²⁵

Syria's sectarian distribution, however, has been modified according to Fabrice Balanche due to 'ethnic cleansing in different areas, whether under the aegis of the Syrian government, the rebels, ISIL, or the Kurds'.⁶²⁶ According to MRGI, the demographics of Syria 'have been redrawn' as the religious minorities relocated to government-held areas, leaving the north of the country largely Sunni.⁶²⁷

⁶¹⁹ USCIRF, 2019 Annual Report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, April 2019, [url](#), p. 105

⁶²⁰ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2018, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁶²¹ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute of Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 13

⁶²² US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 25 March 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁶²³ Minority Rights Group International, Syria, May 2018, [url](#)

⁶²⁴ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2018, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁶²⁵ Denmark, DIS, Syria - Access to Damascus Province for Individuals from Former Rebel-held Areas, September 2019, [url](#), p. 18

⁶²⁶ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute of Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. XV

⁶²⁷ Minority Rights Group International, Syria, June 2019, [url](#)

10.2 The sectarian nature of the conflict in Syria

Sources provide distinct views with regards to the sectarian nature of the Syrian conflict, and whether religious and ethnic groups are targeted for their religious/ethnic affiliation or their (perceived) political stance. In the case of ISIL, this is less problematic as according to USDOS, the group, together with HTS, ‘targeted religious minorities, including Shia and Ismaili Muslims, Christians, Alawites, and Yazidis, and members of the majority Sunni community who violated their strict interpretations of Islamic law’.⁶²⁸ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands assessed following interviews with confidential sources that ‘apart from ISIS, sources do not mention any other parties to the conflict that target particular groups on grounds of ethnicity, religion, profession or other characteristics for ideological motives. Enmity is based on opposing political affiliations and ideologies in which religion may play a role’.⁶²⁹ An October 2019 report published by the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre⁶³⁰ assessed that many ethno-religious groups ‘came under attack less for religious reasons and more for perceived bias or sympathy with a particular protagonist in the conflict’.⁶³¹

Aron Lund assessed that ‘despite its lopsided internal sectarian make-up, the government continues to uphold Baath Party secularism and promotes a vision of religious coexistence’.⁶³²

USDOS’s 2018 report on religious freedom observed that the attempts of the GoS to eliminate the opposition ‘was sectarian in its effects, although it was not motivated primarily by sectarian ideology’.⁶³³ Yassin Al-Haj Saleh from the Century Foundation argued that the GoS used ‘minorities as a shield’ in its attempt to protect itself.⁶³⁴ According to MRGI, Assad mobilised ‘communal anxieties’ in his war against the Syrian opposition, benefitting from the growing influence of extremism among the latter, which ‘resulted in an increasingly sectarian landscape’.⁶³⁵

Fabrice Balanche observed that as a result of the war, ‘Syria’s sectarian identities have been awakened more powerfully than ever’ and that ‘in April 2013, Syria’s battle map largely aligns with the map of its sectarian distribution’.⁶³⁶

According to Syria expert Raymond Hinnebusch, Syria ‘became a battleground of rivalry between Iran and the Sunni powers’ and sectarianism was used as the ‘main tool’ of the military interventions that followed, each state ‘favoring sectarian groups aligned with its own sectarian composition’.⁶³⁷ The SAA was supported by Shia militias from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Lebanon, which continued to operate in Syria, albeit at a lower scale since 2018.⁶³⁸ Sunni Arab rebels also received outside help in the form of ‘air support, heavy weapons, and legions of foreign fighters’.⁶³⁹

⁶²⁸ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2018, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 13

⁶²⁹ Netherlands (the), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Syria: The Security Situation, July 2019, [url](#), p. 42

⁶³⁰ The Governance and Social Development Resource Centre is a research and knowledge management centre specialising in governance, social development, conflict and humanitarian issues. For more information see [url](#)

⁶³¹ Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, Challenges religious minorities face in accessing humanitarian assistance, 14 October 2019, [url](#), p. 7

⁶³² Lund, A., From Cold War to Civil War: 75 Years of Russian-Syrian Relations, Swedish Institute of International Affairs, July 2019, [url](#), p. 33

⁶³³ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2018, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 7

⁶³⁴ Al-Haj Saleh, Y., The Dark Path of Minority Politics: Why Privileging Minorities Will Only Perpetuate the Syrian Catastrophe, The Century Foundation, 18 April 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁶³⁵ Minority Rights Group International, Syria, June 2019, [url](#)

⁶³⁶ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War, Washington Institute of Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 3

⁶³⁷ Hinnebusch, R., The Sectarian Revolution in the Middle East, R/evolutions: Global Trends & Regional Issues, Vol 4, No. 1, 2016, (ISSN: 2449-6413), pp. 120-152, 2016, [url](#), p. 142

⁶³⁸ USCIRF, 2019 Annual Report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, April 2019, [url](#), p. 106

⁶³⁹ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War, Washington Institute of Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 13

10.3 Sunni Arabs

As mentioned above, Syria's Sunni population constitutes the majority and resides across the country. However, according to Yassin Al-Haj Saleh, Syria's Sunni Arabs 'are far from being homogenous or majoritarian', and cannot be perceived as a unified group that may pose a threat to the other minorities. He argued that most of the victims of the Syrian civil war were Sunni Arabs, and that members of this group varied significantly in terms of their political affiliation and had 'convergent stances on public affairs'.⁶⁴⁰ This diversity of stance resulted in them being targeted by different actors. Moreover, he stated that 'it is certain that when international media reports that "70 percent of Syria is composed of Sunni Arabs," it disguises a huge diversity of practice and identity within this "majority"'.⁶⁴¹ Fabrice Balanche subscribed to the view that Syria's Sunnis cannot be regarded as a unified community, but rather as a community divided into 'practicing believers, atheists, secularists, followers of Sufism, quietists, and radicals who wish to impose sharia law and strict (mis)interpretations of Islam'. Regional and tribal loyalties add to the divide between the Sunni communities.⁶⁴²

Kheder Khaddour from the Carnegie Middle East Center argued that Syria's Sunni Islamic religious landscape was changed by the conflict that started in 2011. He added that the uprising 'led to a territorial and ideological separation between the Islam practiced in areas under regime control and outside of them'.⁶⁴³

The relationship between Sunni Arabs and the other minorities in Syria is complex. According to the USCIRF, the Assad government has much invested in 'forging strategic ties with prominent Sunni families and religious authorities' in order to consolidate power, all while maintaining 'a rigid but uneasy framework of authority over the country's diverse religious and ethnic groups'.⁶⁴⁴ However, the majority of the high-ranking officers in the Syrian army and the security apparatus were Alawites⁶⁴⁵, which created a sense of injustice among Syria's Sunnis who felt left out. According to Fabrice Balanche, 'these sectarian feelings are more apparent in areas where Sunnis and Alawites live in close proximity'.⁶⁴⁶ According to the USCIRF, the Syrian government marginalised Sunni Muslims across the country, 'handing traditional Sunni Muslim-held offices to Christian and Shi'a Muslim loyalists'.⁶⁴⁷

As Middle East expert Daniel Gerlach put it, hatred towards minorities among the Sunni population was fuelled by Sunni extremist groups, while the Syrian government fed on the existential fears of minorities 'of extinction, forced submission, or a total Islamist takeover'.⁶⁴⁸

⁶⁴⁰ Al-Haj Saleh, Y., The Dark Path of Minority Politics: Why Privileging Minorities Will Only Perpetuate the Syrian Catastrophe, 18 April 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁶⁴¹ Al-Haj Saleh, Y., The Dark Path of Minority Politics: Why Privileging Minorities Will Only Perpetuate the Syrian Catastrophe, 18 April 2019, [url](#), p. 11

⁶⁴² Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, 2018, Washington Institute of Near East Policy, [url](#), p. 13

⁶⁴³ Carnegie Middle East Center, Localism, War, and the Fragmentation of Sunni Islam in Syria, 28 March 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁴⁴ USCIRF, 2019 Annual Report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, April 2019, [url](#), p. 105

⁶⁴⁵ Tsurkov, E., Between Regime and Rebels: A Survey of Syria's Alawi Sect, The New York Reviews of Books, 22 July 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁴⁶ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, 2018, Washington Institute of Near East Policy, [url](#), p. 13

⁶⁴⁷ USCIRF, 2019 Annual Report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, April 2019, [url](#), p. 107

⁶⁴⁸ Gerlach, D., A Turn Towards Idlib in Syria – Is the Goal to 'Achieve Homogeneity' in the Country, Washington Institute of Near East Policy, 5 April 2019, [url](#); Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI 2018 Country Report: Syria, 2018, [url](#), p. 7

Sunni Arabs comprised most casualties of the Syrian war.⁶⁴⁹ A part of the Sunni population has supported GoS throughout the conflict.⁶⁵⁰ Conditions for Sunni conscripts in the SAA were reportedly worse than those of the Alawite minority. Sunni soldiers have been kept near the front lines for months, were poorly paid and insufficiently supplied. By comparison, Alawites were reportedly kept away from the front lines and said to receive preferential treatment, as stated in a December 2018 report.⁶⁵¹

10.3.1 Targeting by the government forces and affiliated armed groups

As some of the rebel groups self-identified as Sunni Arab, this gave a sectarian element to GoS' targeting of the opposition.⁶⁵² The Syrian government 'reserved its harshest repression for the Sunni Muslims population over its perceived support for the opposition movement'⁶⁵³, with USDOS making reference to 'continued reports' that 'the war waged by the Alawi dominated government against opposition forces and terrorist groups resulted in significant casualties among the majority Sunni population'. Allegedly, the government used systematic unlawful killings, enforced disappearances, torture, and chemical weapons.⁶⁵⁴

USDOS cited analysts according to whom the use of foreign Shia militias in Syria against a 'mostly Sunni opposition further exacerbated sectarian divisions'.⁶⁵⁵ Such militias, the report added, were involved in killings, arrests, and physical abuses of individuals in rebel-held areas; such actions were aimed at defeating the rebels and intimidating 'Sunni communities that might support opposition groups'.⁶⁵⁶ Furthermore, the Syrian news outlet, Jesr Press, reported that the residents of the Sunni-majority town of Hujjeira, located to the south of Damascus, have been suffering from a lack in essential services such as electricity and water due to authority negligence, while this phenomenon did not exist in Shia-inhabited neighbourhoods.⁶⁵⁷

USDOS stated that the government's support for radio and television programmes that propagated 'the practice and study of a form of Islam it deemed appropriate' continued, with only approved clerics granted access to public channels. Furthermore, the government 'continued to warn the Sunni population against communications with foreign coreligionists that it described as communication for purpose of political opposition or military activity'; for most of the other religious groups, however, such communication was not banned.⁶⁵⁸

10.3.2 Forced displacement and denial of return

Daniel Gerlach noted that the core supporters of the GoS would consider the ongoing expansion of Syria's Sunni majority as a threat to the country's peaceful coexistence.⁶⁵⁹ USDOS cited multiple press

⁶⁴⁹ Tsurkov, E., Between Regime and Rebels: A Survey of Syria's Alawi Sect, The New York Reviews of Books, 22 July 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁵⁰ Tsurkov, E., Between Regime and Rebels: A Survey of Syria's Alawi Sect, The New York Reviews of Books, 22 July 2019, [url](#); Cambanis, T. et. al, Hybrid Actors. Armed Groups and State Fragmentation in the Middle East, The Century Foundation, 15 November 2019, [url](#), pp. 59-60, 69

⁶⁵¹ Khatib, L. and Sinjab, L., Syria's Transactional State How the Conflict Changed the Syrian State's Exercise of Power, Chatham House, October 2018, [url](#), p. 14

⁶⁵² USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2018, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 9

⁶⁵³ USCIRF, 2019 Annual Report of the US Commission in International Religious Freedom, April 2019, [url](#), p. 106

⁶⁵⁴ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2018, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 7

⁶⁵⁵ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2018, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 10

⁶⁵⁶ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2018, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 8

⁶⁵⁷ Jesr Press, جنوب دمشق: الخدمات على أساس طائفي والتوسع الإيراني مستمر [Southern Damascus: Services are provided on a sectarian basis and the Iranian expansion is ongoing], 4 October 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁵⁸ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2018, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 11-12

⁶⁵⁹ Gerlach, D., A Turn Towards Idlib in Syria – Is the Goal to 'Achieve Homogeneity' in the Country, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 5 April 2019, [url](#)

reports and human rights organisations which allegedly observed that ‘the vast majority of refugees and displaced were Sunni and viewed with suspicion by the government’.⁶⁶⁰ This was particularly the case in Damascus, where forced displacement of ‘mostly Sunni residents’ took place in the wake of the government’s military victories.⁶⁶¹ According to Fabrice Balanche, ‘before and during the war, the Alawite and Druze/Christian districts were permitted to extend their boundaries close to the strategic points that connect Damascus with the rest of the country, in the process cutting the Sunni areas off from each other and the rest of the rebellion’.⁶⁶²

Human Rights Watch reported on a new law, Law 10 of 2018, which ‘empowers the government to confiscate residents’ property without due process or adequate compensation’. Moreover, in Qaboun⁶⁶³ and Darayya⁶⁶⁴, the government blocked attempts of displaced civilian residents to return to their homes and ‘unlawfully demolished residents’ private homes, without providing notice, alternative housing, or compensation’.⁶⁶⁵ Confidential sources interviewed in March 2019 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands stated that ‘Sunnis and Christians are prevented from returning to their homes in Damascus’.⁶⁶⁶

Syrian security forces also refused to grant authorisation to ‘most Sunni Muslim civilians’ who wanted to return to their homes in Homs city.⁶⁶⁷ Furthermore, this law, according to the Financial Times, together with other measures like ‘vetting of Sunni men of fighting age; military service; imprisonment’, helped to change the face of Syria in favour of Iran-backed Shia groups.⁶⁶⁸ In a report, the Middle East Media Research Institute claimed that ‘several websites reported that the regime was naturalizing thousands and even millions of Shi’ites, members of Iranian and Iran-backed militias that are fighting alongside the Syrian army’.⁶⁶⁹

10.3.4 Targeting by non-state armed groups

According to Yassin Al-Haj Saleh, extremist groups like ISIL, HTS, and Jaysh Al-Islam targeted Sunnis ‘who were deemed inadequately devout, or apostate’.⁶⁷⁰ Several rebel groups identified themselves as Sunni Arab and built on the support of the Sunni group in their areas of control. They continued to apply their versions of sharia law, punishing non-devout individuals with floggings, imprisonment, or executions for religious offenses such as blasphemy, apostasy and cursing God. Furthermore, HTS and affiliated groups made use of schools and training camps to radicalise children.⁶⁷¹

⁶⁶⁰ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2018, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 10

⁶⁶¹ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2018, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 8

⁶⁶² Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War*, 2018, Washington Institute of Near East Policy, [url](#), p. 32

⁶⁶³ According to Syria INGO Regional Forum (SIRF), Qaboun was classified by the UN as ‘besieged’ in April 2017, and underwent ‘mass evacuations of residents to Idlib governorate’. SIRF, Syria Community Profile Update: Qaboun, December 2017, [url](#), p. 1

⁶⁶⁴ According to PAX, the SAA started ‘a scorched earth campaign against Darayya that resulted in the destruction and complete depopulation of the city in August 2016.’ PAX, *Siege Watch Final Report: Out of Sight, Out of Mind: The Aftermath of Syria’s Sieges*, [url](#), p. 18

⁶⁶⁵ HRW, *World Report 2019 - Syria*, 17 January 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁶⁶ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Country of Origin Information Syria: The Security Situation*, July 2019, [url](#), p. 56

⁶⁶⁷ USCIRF, *2019 Annual Report of the US Commission in International Religious Freedom*, April 2019, [url](#), p. 107

⁶⁶⁸ Financial Times, *Syria is witnessing a violent demographic re-engineering*, 2 October 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁶⁹ Middle East Media Research Institute, *Anti-Syrian Regime Websites: Regime Granting Citizenship to Millions of Iranians, Hizbullah Operatives to Change Country’s Demographics From Sunni to Shi’ite Majority, Conceal the Fighters’ Presence in Syria*, 21 November 2018, [url](#)

⁶⁷⁰ Al-Haj Saleh, Y., *The Dark Path of Minority Politics: Why Privileging Minorities Will Only Perpetuate the Syrian Catastrophe*, 18 April 2019, [url](#), p. 11

⁶⁷¹ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2018, 21 June 2019, [url](#), pp. 14, 16

MRGI stated that ‘there have also been previous reports of Kurdish armed groups demolishing Arab and Turkmen homes in the region and displacing their residents’.⁶⁷²

10.4 Kurds

According to estimates from 2010, around 15 % of the population was Kurdish.⁶⁷³ Fabrice Balanche noted that before the war the Kurds were about 3 million in Syria: 2 million ‘who feel they are Kurds’, and 1 million who are ‘Arabised’ Kurds who were in Damascus or other areas before the war and more generations, and were not strongly involved in the ‘Kurdish cause’.⁶⁷⁴

Prior to March 2011, the number of stateless Kurds in Syria amounted to 517 000⁶⁷⁵, and they fell into two categories: *ajanib* (foreigners) and *maktumeen* (concealed; not included in the registries).⁶⁷⁶ A RI report published in 2006 stated that the ‘difficulties faced by stateless Kurds in Syria are numerous ... Individuals have irregular access to education, health care, livelihoods, travel, property ownership, judicial and political systems, and registration of businesses, marriages, and children’.⁶⁷⁷ USDOS noted that ‘stateless Kurds do not have the right to inherit or bequeath assets, and their lack of citizenship or identity documents restricted their travel to and from the country’.⁶⁷⁸

In April 2011, Decree No. 49 was issued⁶⁷⁹ whereby 326 489 *ajanib* were naturalised while 19 753 remained stateless. Regarding the *maktumeen*, 50 400 obtained Syrian nationality, while around 41 000 remained stateless.⁶⁸⁰ Citing Nadim Houry from Human Rights Watch, the DIS stated that ‘Ajanib Kurds who have obtained Syrian nationality were called to serve in the Syrian army like other citizens when the uprising began ... However, the government’s access to these Kurds has been limited as most of them live in the PYD-dominated areas’.⁶⁸¹

A DIS report published in June 2019 addressed the situation of Kurds in Damascus. According to the report citing Fabrice Balanche and an international regionally based humanitarian organisation, there have been no security incidents targeting Kurds in Damascus. The report added that Kurds in Damascus work in different sectors, and that some public positions ‘are restricted for Kurds, for instance positions within Air Force’, and that stateless Kurds cannot work in the public sector.⁶⁸² Finally, according to an international regionally based humanitarian organisation operating in Syria cited by the DIS, while there is no social discrimination against Kurds in Damascus, they are prevented from practicing their culture and ‘there is always a feeling of being second-class citizen and not being welcomed’.⁶⁸³

⁶⁷² Minority Rights Group International, Syria, June 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁷³ Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War*, Washington Institute of Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 13

⁶⁷⁴ Balanche, F., EASO, EASO COI Meeting Report: Syria; 30 November & 1 December 2017; Valletta, Malta, March 2018, [url](#), p. 54

⁶⁷⁵ STJ, *Syrian Citizenship Disappeared: How the 1962 Census Destroyed Stateless Kurds’ Lives and Identities*, 2018, [url](#), p. 5

⁶⁷⁶ Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion, *From Syria to Europe: Experiences of Stateless Kurds and Palestinian Refugees from Syria Seeking Protection in Europe*, January 2019, [url](#), p. 9

⁶⁷⁷ RI, *Buried Alive: Stateless Kurds in Syria*, January 2006, [url](#), p. 2

⁶⁷⁸ USDOS, *Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria*, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 53

⁶⁷⁹ Syrian Arab Republic, *Legislative Decree No. 49 of 2011, منح الجنسية العربية السورية للمسجلين في سجلات أجناب الحسكة*, 2011, [url](#)

⁶⁸⁰ STJ, *Syrian Citizenship Disappeared: How the 1962 Census Destroyed Stateless Kurds’ Lives and Identities*, 2018, [url](#), pp. 18-20

⁶⁸¹ Denmark, DIS, *Syria: Military Service, Mandatory Self-Defense Duty and Recruitment to the YPG*, 26 February 2015, [url](#), p. 8

⁶⁸² Denmark, DIS, *Syria: Consequences of illegal exit, consequences of leaving a civil servant position without notice and the situation of Kurds in Damascus*, June 2019, [url](#), p. 9

⁶⁸³ Denmark, DIS, *Syria: Consequences of illegal exit, consequences of leaving a civil servant position without notice and the situation of Kurds in Damascus*, June 2019, [url](#), p. 10

In northern Syria, Turkish forces, together with Syrian allied groups, launched an operation entitled ‘Operation Olive Branch’ between January and March 2018. The operation resulted in the displacement of 137 000 people, including ‘400 Kurdish converts to Christianity, who feared repression from Islamist factions of the FSA’. Reportedly, the FSA seized or demolished property belonging to Kurds in Afrin and resettled Sunni Muslim IDPs who came from Eastern Ghouta.⁶⁸⁴ An OHCHR report published in June 2018 stated that ‘civilians, particularly ethnic Kurds from Afrin, are being targeted for discrimination by the *de facto* authorities’.⁶⁸⁵ Human Rights Watch noted this practice of the FSA, which ‘seized, destroyed, and looted properties of Kurdish civilians in Afrin’.⁶⁸⁶ The Financial Times concluded that ‘the aim is to change the demography and dilute the Kurds with a big influx of Sunni Arabs’.⁶⁸⁷ Furthermore, HTS used ‘sectarian language to describe the Kurdish-dominated People’s Protection Unit (YPG) and SDF’.⁶⁸⁸

For more information on targeting of Kurds see [Chapter 6](#).

10.5 Druze

MRGI estimated that the Druze make up between 3 and 4 % of Syria’s population.⁶⁸⁹ In a research paper published in August 2019 by the European University Institute, the Druze were described as ‘an ethnicity that exists both as a tribe and a religious sect’.⁶⁹⁰ Syria’s Druze are concentrated in the Sweida governorate to the south-east of Damascus.⁶⁹¹ According to MRGI, the majority of the Druze avoided taking sides in the Syrian conflict, remaining neutral.⁶⁹² Another source stated that in the wake of the conflict in Syria, the Druze split to three categories: those who supported the Syrian opposition, those who remained loyalist to the GoS, and those who maintained neutrality; the latter constituted the majority of the Druze population.⁶⁹³

The Syrian Observer stated that the Druze refused to be conscripted in the SAA and joined local militias instead. Although GoS turned a blind eye to those militias, the Syrian President called upon Druze men to join the SAA.⁶⁹⁴

Since mid-2018, GoS and its allies, Russia and Iran, have been pressuring the Druze to find a solution to the issue of the tens of thousands of youth who evaded conscription⁶⁹⁵, either by hiding or migrating to Lebanon.⁶⁹⁶

In July 2018, ISIL targeted the Druze community in Sweida governorate with a deadly attack that resulted in the death of 300 people and the kidnapping of 20 women and 16 children, most of whom were released later.⁶⁹⁷ According to Human Rights Watch, one of the kidnapped was executed.⁶⁹⁸

⁶⁸⁴ USCIRF, 2019 Annual Report of the US Commission in International Religious Freedom, April 2019, [url](#), p. 108

⁶⁸⁵ OHCHR, Between a Rock and a Hard Place – Civilians in North-western Syria, June 2018, [url](#), p. 6

⁶⁸⁶ HRW, World Report 2019 - Syria, 17 January 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁸⁷ Financial Times, Syria is witnessing a violent demographic re-engineering, 2 October 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁸⁸ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2018, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 15

⁶⁸⁹ Minority Rights Group International, Druze, March 2018, [url](#)

⁶⁹⁰ Al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on regional and Local Conflicts, European University Institute, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁶⁹¹ Al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on regional and Local Conflicts, European University Institute, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁶⁹² Minority Rights Group International, Druze, March 2018, [url](#)

⁶⁹³ Al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on regional and Local Conflicts, European University Institute, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁶⁹⁴ Syrian Observer (The), Assad Pressures Syria’s ‘Neutral’ Druze to Join His Conscripts, 15 November 2018, [url](#)

⁶⁹⁵ Al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on regional and Local Conflicts, European University Institute, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁶⁹⁶ USCIRF, 2019 Annual Report of the US Commission in International Religious Freedom, April 2019, [url](#), p. 107

⁶⁹⁷ USCIRF, 2019 Annual Report of the US Commission in International Religious Freedom, April 2019, [url](#), p. 107

⁶⁹⁸ HRW, World Report 2019 - Syria, 17 January 2019, [url](#)

The other location with a Druze presence in Syria is Jabal Al-Summaq in the Idlib Province. According to Mohannad Hage Ali from the Carnegie Middle East Center, the Druze of Jabal Al-Summaq ‘suffered persecution under the then al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra (Nusra Front) and were forced to flee en masse as a result’.⁶⁹⁹ Christopher Kozak of ISW, interviewed by DIS in August 2019 noted that the Druze residents of Qalb Lawza, Idlib governorate were forcibly converted to Islam by HTS.⁷⁰⁰ However, the COI report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands stated that ‘sources report that religious minorities such as Christians and Druze are treated fairly well by both the authorities and Islamic opposition groups’.⁷⁰¹

According to Rami Abdurrahman of SOHR, interviewed by DIS in August 2019 ‘in general minorities such as Christians, Shia Muslims, Alawites and Druze are not subjected to interrogation or checks at the checkpoints in Damascus’.⁷⁰²

10.6 Alawites

Alawites numbered an estimated 2.1 million persons. They are located in the coastal part of north-west Syria, while also having sizeable communities in Homs and Hama governorates.⁷⁰³ MRGI noted that ‘due to their close identification with the Assad regime, the Alawite community as a whole is in danger of violent persecution in post-2011 Syria, regardless of their degree of individual support for the government’.⁷⁰⁴

Journalist Sam Dagher argued in an article written for the Atlantic that ‘though the Alawites represent a small portion of the country overall, they hold key regime positions, dominate the police, and supply the main fighting forces who have been defending the regime since 2011’.⁷⁰⁵ According to Elizabeth Tsurkov, prior to the civil war in Syria, ‘87 percent of high-ranking Syrian Army officers, such as division commanders, were Alawi. The various branches of the Mukhabarat are dominated and commanded by Alawis, as are all the elite military and militia units’.⁷⁰⁶ Recruitment to the officer corps has long favoured Alawites, and during the conflict the selection of recruits for officer training has concentrated on Alawite-populated governorates such as Latakia and Tartous.⁷⁰⁷ According to a 2018 report by Aron Lund, Alawites are overwhelmingly leading the Syrian Armed Forces.⁷⁰⁸

Moreover, Syria’s Alawites enjoyed a status of immunity due to their presumed loyalty, which excludes them from torture and detention. Their relationship with the Sunni Syrians is characterised by fear and distrust, which drives them to ‘support the regime’s minority rule even when it uses force

⁶⁹⁹ Hage Ali, M., The Weaponization of Minorities in Syria and Beyond, Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 9 January 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁰⁰ Denmark, DIS, Syria - Access to Damascus Province for Individuals from Former Rebel-held Areas, September 2019, [url](#), p. 18

⁷⁰¹ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Syria: The Security Situation, July 2019, [url](#), p. 42

⁷⁰² Denmark, DIS, Syria - Access to Damascus Province for Individuals from Former Rebel-held Areas, September 2019, [url](#), p. 16

⁷⁰³ MRGI, Alawis, March 2018, [url](#)

⁷⁰⁴ MRGI, Alawis, March 2018, [url](#)

⁷⁰⁵ Dagher, S., The Families who Sacrificed Everything for Assad: Syria’s Alawite community have been a key source of support for the regime. But even they could turn on him, The Atlantic, 12 April 2018, [url](#)

⁷⁰⁶ Tsurkov, E., Between Regime and Rebels: A Survey of Syria’s Alawi Sect, The New York Reviews of Books, 22 July 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁰⁷ Khaddour, K., Strength in Weakness: The Syrian Army’s Accidental Resilience, Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 March 2016, [url](#)

⁷⁰⁸ Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 42-43

and intimidation to maintain the Syrian state's nominally secular character'.⁷⁰⁹ According to Fabrice Balanche, 'most Alawites see the war as an existential fight against a Sunni Islamist threat'.⁷¹⁰

Fabrice Balanche assessed in a June 2019 interview with DIS that 'in general, if you are Alawite and use good connections (Arabic: *Wasta*), your chance of being employed in public positions is much higher than other groups such as Christians, Sunni Arabs or Kurds'.⁷¹¹

Sam Dagher observed that almost every Alawite family was affected by the war; which many Alawites viewed it as a price paid to preserve the community's very existence rather than only to save the Assad government. He argued that the war in Syria 'has empowered many Alawite militia leaders and warlords who demand more toughness from Assad ... [who] needs these people, and knows that any major rift within his Alawite community could cost him power in the parts of the country he does control, even with the full support of Iran and Russia'.⁷¹²

The Alawite minority was targeted by different non-state actors. Islamist groups within the armed opposition groups destroyed Alawi shrines among other sacred places and monuments.⁷¹³ Throughout the conflict Alawite civilians were subjected to summary executions at the hands of anti-government armed groups, 'often in retaliation for government attacks on Sunni areas'.⁷¹⁴ USDOS reported that Alawite opposition activists were reportedly targeted by government forces for arbitrary arrest, torture, detentions and killing.⁷¹⁵ HTS continued to use derogatory terms in reference to supporters of the government 'on the basis of their Alawite religious identity'. Moreover, in February 2018, the anti-GoS group Ahrar Al-Sham launched mortars on 'the predominantly Alawite populated' Esh Al-Warwar neighbourhood of Damascus, which resulted in the death of at least seven civilians.⁷¹⁶ Regarding the treatment of minorities in the Kurdish-controlled areas in north-east Syria, sources interviewed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands in April 2018 and March 2019 noted that Alawites are at risk 'of being treated as adversaries' based on their political affiliation with the Syrian government rather than their religious affiliation.⁷¹⁷

According to confidential sources interviewed in June 2019 by the same source, the Alawite community has taken heavy casualties during the war, which has in turn led young Alawites to go into hiding to avoid conscription, as well as to calls that non-Alawites from formerly-held opposition areas should be sent to the front instead.⁷¹⁸

Describing the situation of Alawites living on the Syrian Coast (Latakia and Tartous governorates), Christopher Kozak noted that the Alawite population has taken a large demographic hit. In some instances, between 60 % and 70 % of the Alawite young males have either served and were killed or were wounded in action. Villages, smaller villages in particular, have been emptied of young men, but there are still young men on the Syrian Coast. It is more the case that every family has someone that has previously served, is currently serving, or has died fighting in the Syrian Civil War. The young men

⁷⁰⁹ Tsurkov, E., Between Regime and Rebels: A Survey of Syria's Alawi Sect, The New York Reviews of Books, 22 July 2019, [url](#)

⁷¹⁰ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute of Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 36

⁷¹¹ Denmark, DIS, Syria: Consequences of illegal exit, consequences of leaving a civil servant position without notice and the situation of Kurds in Damascus, June 2019, [url](#), p. 15

⁷¹² Dagher, S., The families who sacrificed everything for Assad: Syria's Alawite community have been a key source of support for the regime. But even they could turn on him, The Atlantic, 12 April 2018, [url](#)

⁷¹³ USCIRF, 2019 Annual Report of the US Commission in International Religious Freedom, April 2019, [url](#), p. 108

⁷¹⁴ MRGI, Alawis, March 2018, [url](#)

⁷¹⁵ USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 66

⁷¹⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syria Arab Republic A/HRC/39/65, 9 August 2018, [url](#), p. 21

⁷¹⁷ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Syria: The Security Situation, July 2019, [url](#), p. 43

⁷¹⁸ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Syria: The Security Situation, July 2019, [url](#), p. 65

that are home are either the ones that are not of age yet, have suffered combat injuries, or had other factors that have helped them avoid conscription.⁷¹⁹

10.7 Christians

Syria's Christians counted two million prior to the conflict, and the number dropped down to 450 000, with many of them migrating to Europe and the United States.⁷²⁰ As mentioned above, the Christian minority lives in and around the cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Latakia and in the Hasaka governorate.⁷²¹ The Christians that stayed in Syria during the conflict were reported to be 'heavily concentrated in government-controlled areas or in the North East'.⁷²² The CoI reported in a March 2018 report that most Christians and Druze from Idlib governorate left the area out of fear of being forced to convert to Islam, follow dress codes or having restricted freedom of movement on women.⁷²³

Numerous sources tackled the targeting of Christians by different actors. According to the Voice of America, ISIL claimed a suicide attack that targeted a church in Qamishli in July 2019 and which resulted in 12 casualties at least.⁷²⁴ In November 2019, ISIL claimed responsibility for the killing of an Armenian Catholic pastor in eastern Deir Ez Zor governorate.⁷²⁵ In 2015, ISIL launched a massive attack on Hasaka, which forced more than 9 000 Assyrian Christians to flee. According to USCIRF, few of them returned to their homes, while the fate of 25 Christians abducted by ISIL earlier is still unknown, including that of five religious leaders.⁷²⁶

Reportedly, HTS engaged in seizing the properties of Christians in its areas of control, especially of those who fled their homes due to the security situation.⁷²⁷ Fabrice Balanche stated that the towns of Mahardah and Suqaylabiyah in Hama governorate have been targeted by rebel groups and that around 20 civilians were killed in Mahardah since May 2019.⁷²⁸ Moreover, despite their significant loss of territory, Al-Qaida affiliated groups in Idlib targeted the predominantly Christian town of Maharda with missiles in September 2018 killing at least ten civilians and wounding 20.⁷²⁹ According to the NGO Aid to the Church in Need, in February 2018, rebel groups bombarded the Christian neighbourhood of Bab Touma in Damascus with mortars.⁷³⁰ Furthermore, in June 2018, the FSA seized a church in Afrin to use it as a military base and burnt another.⁷³¹

Reportedly, Syria's Christians 'feel threatened by religious intolerance among the opposition as the influence of violent extremist groups increased'.⁷³² According to the Morocco-based research centre, Mominoun Without Borders, Syria's Christians supported the government because it was perceived as a guarantor for their security, especially after the ethnic cleansing and the burning of churches in

⁷¹⁹ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁷²⁰ Hage Ali, M., The Weaponization of Minorities in Syria and Beyond, Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 9 January 2019, [url](#)

⁷²¹ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2018, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁷²² Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, Challenges religious minorities face in accessing humanitarian assistance, 14 October 2019, [url](#), p. 14

⁷²³ UN Human Rights Council, "I lost my dignity": Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic; Conference room paper of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/37/CRP.3], 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 14

⁷²⁴ VOA, Syrian Christians Targeted Again by Islamic State, 12 July 2019, [url](#)

⁷²⁵ Enab Baladi, ISIS claims responsibility for assassination of Armenian Catholic Church pastor in Deir Ezzor, 12 November 2019, [url](#)

⁷²⁶ USCIRF, 2019 Annual Report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, April 2019, [url](#), p. 107

⁷²⁷ USCIRF, 2019 Annual Report of the US Commission in International Religious Freedom, April 2019, [url](#), p. 108

⁷²⁸ Balanche, F., A Humanitarian Time Bomb in Idlib, Washington Institute of Near East Policy, 28 June 2019, [url](#)

⁷²⁹ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2018, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 13

⁷³⁰ Aid to the Church in Need, Syria: When the sky turned black with bombs, 21 February 2018, [url](#)

⁷³¹ USCIRF, 2019 Annual Report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, April 2019, [url](#), p. 108

⁷³² USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2018, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 16

Ma'aloula and Qseir at the hands of the 'armed opposition'.⁷³³ According to USDOS, Christians, among other minorities, stated that 'the government had their support because it protected them from violent Sunni extremists'.⁷³⁴

In the Kurdish-controlled areas, religious and ethnic minorities enjoyed religious freedom and safety according to 'representatives of religious and ethnic minorities living in the autonomous region' cited by the USCIRF. The only reported point of dispute among Christians and the Kurdish authorities was school curriculum, which escalated after the 'authorities reportedly ordered the closure of up to two dozen Assyrian and Armenian schools, accusing them of having failed to implement an AA [Autonomous Administration]-approved curriculum'.⁷³⁵ USDOS elaborated that 14 Syriac Christians schools were shut in Qamishli, Hasakah, and Al-Malikiyeh after 'their refusal to implement a new school curriculum that required courses to be taught in the Kurdish language'. The Syriac community accused the SDF 'of attempting to "erase" Syriac history and culture and imposing a Kurdish nationalist curriculum'.⁷³⁶

A SNHR report published September 2019 stated that 124 attacks against Christian churches were document between March 2011 and September 2019, of which 75 were by the GoS forces, 33 by opposition armed groups, 10 by ISIL, two by HTS and four by other parties.⁷³⁷ According to the report, a large number of those churches were targeted more than once, some by more than one actor.⁷³⁸ Examples of churches targeted in Syria included:

- Greek Orthodox St. George's Church in Eastern Ghouta on 8 February 2018 – Syrian government forces.
- Monastery of St. Elian in Homs governorate on 19 August 2015 – ISIL.
- Latin Church on 25 October 2015, St. Joseph Church on 24 April 2016, St. Demetrius Church on 2 July 2016, and Church of the Lady of Transition on 16 September 2016, in Aleppo city – Armed opposition.⁷³⁹

10.8 Yazidis

In October 2019, Time magazine stated that the Yazidi minority counted about 550 000 members, mainly present in Iraq but with a 'substantial number' residing in northern Syria.⁷⁴⁰ MRGI noted that Yazidi communities were located in the Jabal Sim'an and Afrin valley in the north-west, and a larger number around Hasaka and Aleppo. Following ISIL attacks on Yazidis in Iraq, the majority of Syrian Yazidis were estimated to have fled.⁷⁴¹

Probably the most major event in which Yazidis were targeted was at the hands of ISIL in 2014, where thousands of Yazidi women were abducted in Iraq and brought to Syria to be sold as sex slaves, solely for their religious belief.⁷⁴² Following the SDF offensive into the last ISIL-held territory in Syria, mass

⁷³³ Mominoun without Borders, انحسار الوجود وفقدان الهوية: هجرة مسيحيي العراق وسوريا بين مواقف التشجيع والرفض [The decline of existence and the loss of identity: the migration of Christians in Iraq and Syria. Between positions of encouragement and rejection], 2 April 2019, [url](#), pp. 16, 24

⁷³⁴ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2018, 21 June 2019, [url](#), pp. 11-12

⁷³⁵ USCIRF, 2019 Annual Report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, April 2019, [url](#), p. 108

⁷³⁶ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2018, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 16

⁷³⁷ SNHR, Targeting Christian Places of Worship in Syria is a Threat to World Heritage: The Syrian Regime Bears Primary Responsibility for 61% of the Targeting of Christian Places of Worship in Syria, 5 September 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁷³⁸ SNHR, Targeting Christian Places of Worship in Syria is a Threat to World Heritage: The Syrian Regime Bears Primary Responsibility for 61% of the Targeting of Christian Places of Worship in Syria, 5 September 2019, [url](#), p. 7

⁷³⁹ SNHR, Targeting Christian Places of Worship in Syria is a Threat to World Heritage: The Syrian Regime Bears Primary Responsibility for 61% of the Targeting of Christian Places of Worship in Syria, 5 September 2019, [url](#), p. 9-13

⁷⁴⁰ Time, Yazidis in Iraq and Syria Fear Fresh Persecution After Turkey's Offensive, 24 October 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁴¹ MRGI, Syria, March 2018, [url](#)

⁷⁴² USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2018, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 15

graves containing bodies of dozens of people, many considered to be Yazidi women, were found in Baghouz, Deir Ez-Zor governorate.⁷⁴³

According to the CoI, after the fall of Baghouz in March 2019, a large number of Yazidi women were found and taken to Al-Hol camp by the SDF, together with ISIL families. Many of these women ‘concealed their ethnic and religious identities fearing retaliation by ISIL supporters and threats that the group might return’.⁷⁴⁴ In April 2019, the Yazidi Supreme Spiritual Council issued a declaration accepting all Yazidi women survivors into their community, but excluding children born to ISIL fighters as a result of rape.⁷⁴⁵

Different sources stated that in Afrin region – Aleppo governorate, the Yazidi minority was targeted by local actors. USDOS’s report cited media sources which stated that FSA forces rounded up Yazidis in the region and forced them to convert to Islam and demolished their places of worship.⁷⁴⁶ The destruction of Yazidi places of worship was corroborated by USCIRF⁷⁴⁷, and by the CoI which added that the Yazidi places of worship in Afrin region were looted and underwent destruction ‘in attacks that appeared to have sectarian undertones’.⁷⁴⁸

In an undated statement published on the website Yazda.org, Yazidi community leaders including politicians, academics, and activists condemned the ‘bad treatment of minorities, including Yazidis’ at the hands of radical groups allied with Turkey. Yazidis alleged that 17 temples and religious sites were destroyed in Afrin and thousands of Yazidis were displaced.⁷⁴⁹ In November 2019, it was reported by local activists in north-east Syria that more than two dozen Yazidi villages were nearly deserted following the Turkish-led incursion that started in October 2019.⁷⁵⁰

With regards to the recent Turkish-led incursion in northeastern Syria, the community leaders stated that more than 50 000 Yazidis used to live in the eastern Euphrates region, and that ‘the current events in northeastern Syria, if not halted, will annihilate Yazidis from their ancestral homeland in Syria, which will affect historical presence of Yazidi in the Middle East, particularly their ancestral homeland in Iraq and Syria’.⁷⁵¹ According to an October 2019 Voice of America article, eight Yazidi villages in north-eastern Syria were deserted on the wake of the Turkish incursion.⁷⁵²

⁷⁴³ Reuters, Mass grave found in last Islamic State bastion: SDF, 28 February 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁴⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 16

⁷⁴⁵ Al Jazeera, Yazidis to accept ISIL rape survivors, but not their children, 29 April 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁴⁶ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2018, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 15

⁷⁴⁷ USCIRF, 2019 Annual Report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, April 2019, [url](#), p. 108

⁷⁴⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/39/65], 9 August 2018, [url](#), p. 7

⁷⁴⁹ Yazda, Statement by Yazidi community Leaders on Turkish Invasion of NE Syria and targeting of Yazidis, n.d., [url](#)

⁷⁵⁰ New Arab (The), ‘Now we await our fate’: Displaced Yazidis fear loss of land in Syria, 1 November 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁵¹ Yazda, Statement by Yazidi community Leaders on Turkish Invasion of NE Syria and targeting of Yazidis, n.d., [url](#)

⁷⁵² Voice of America, Hundreds of Yazidis Displaced Amid Turkey’s Incursion in Northeast Syria, 16 October 2019, [url](#)

11. Palestinians

According to figures provided by United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA) as of January 2018, there were 552 000 registered Palestinian refugees in Syria. They are registered with UNRWA. Of these, an estimated 438 000 remained in the country. The remainder have fled the country. UNRWA provided services in nine official camps plus three unofficial camps.⁷⁵³

11.1 Legal status of the Palestinian refugees in Syria

ACAPS, a non-profit, non-governmental project which aims at providing independent, humanitarian analysis, reported in March 2014 that the legal status of Palestinians in Syria generally falls into two main categories:

- Palestinians who fled to Syria in or before 1956 and their descendants (approximately 85 % of the total), and
- Palestinians refugees who fled to Syria after 1956 and their descendants.⁷⁵⁴

Palestinians who fall into the first category have the same rights as Syrian citizens in terms of residence, freedom of movement, work, trade and access to civil service positions and public services, while preserving their Palestinian nationality. Those who fled to Syria in 1956 can only work in the public sector on short term contracts. Only those who fled in 1948 are required to perform compulsory military service in the Palestine's Liberation Army (PLA), a Palestinian unit within the Syrian Armed Forces. Palestinians cannot vote or hold public office. They are prohibited from owning agricultural land and are restricted to owning one house per person. They are registered with UNRWA. Those of the second category were registered with UNRWA in other countries or the occupied Palestinian Territories and are treated as Arab foreigners. They also have a 10-year renewable residence permit; have to apply for work permits, cannot work in the public sector; can access public health and education services for free, with the exception of university education for which they must pay fees.⁷⁵⁵

Palestinian refugees in Syria have access to social services provided by GoS. UNRWA does not administer or police the refugee camps, as this is the responsibility of the host authorities.⁷⁵⁶

11.2 UNWRA operations and available assistance

In 2018 UNRWA provided emergency cash assistance to 405 644 Palestine refugees and in-kind food assistance to 395 499. Education was provided to more than 50 500 students, while health care was made available through 24 facilities.⁷⁵⁷

Palestinian refugees in Syria in particular were still vulnerable to displacement, loss of property and the destruction of their neighbourhoods.⁷⁵⁸ UNRWA estimated that 90 % of Palestinians in Syria live on less than USD 2 per person, per day.⁷⁵⁹

⁷⁵³ UNRWA, 2018, Where We Work, 2018, [url](#)

⁷⁵⁴ ACAPS, Syria Needs Analysis Project, Palestinians from Syria. Syria Needs Analysis Project, March 2014, [url](#), p. 4

⁷⁵⁵ ACAPS, Syria Needs Analysis Project, Palestinians from Syria. Syria Needs Analysis Project, March 2014, [url](#), pp. 4-5

⁷⁵⁶ UNRWA, Where We Work, 2018, [url](#)

⁷⁵⁷ UN General Assembly, Report of the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. 1 January–31 December 2018, 23 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 13-14

⁷⁵⁸ UNOCHA, 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 1 March 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁷⁵⁹ UN General Assembly, Report of the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. 1 January–31 December 2018, 23 August 2019, [url](#), p. 11

According to UNRWA, around 60 % of Palestinians were displaced at least once since the onset of the conflict. More than 180 000 were estimated to have had their homes severely damaged or destroyed, as was the case with Yarmouk, Dera'a and Ein el Tal camps that were hosting 30 % of the Palestinian population in Syria. In 2018, UNRWA reported that the previously inaccessible areas of Yarmouk, Yalda, Babila and Bayt Saham became accessible, and towards the end of the year, UNRWA was also able to access areas in southern Syria, such as Dera'a camp, and resumed the provision of services to Palestinians.⁷⁶⁰

Earlier figures provided by UNRWA (as of January 2018) revealed that the agency operated 104 schools with a total of 47 585 students; the Damascus Training Centre; 26 primary health centres; five community rehabilitation centres, and 13 women's programme centres.⁷⁶¹

In a November 2019 report, UNRWA stated that it 'continues to face a financial crisis that is affecting its ability to deliver essential services, including humanitarian assistance to Palestine refugees in Syria'. Only 27.3 % of the 2019 financial requirements for Syria were covered, which has resulted in the agency scaling down its operations, especially with regards to providing cash assistance, livelihood, and mental health and psychosocial services.⁷⁶²

11.3 Targeting in relation to participation of the Palestinian community in the armed conflicts

During the initial conflict period, the Palestinian community split between support for the government and support for the rebels. The GoS-affiliated Palestinian armed groups such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) sided with the government forces.⁷⁶³ In Yarmouk, the largest Palestinian camp, the armed Palestinian faction - the Storm Brigades - fought alongside Syrian rebels in the camp against GoS forces.⁷⁶⁴ According to Metwaly Abo Naser, a Palestinian journalist and resident of Yarmouk, in some Palestinian communities people of the middle class, as well as intellectuals, tended to identify themselves with the uprising.⁷⁶⁵

Following fighting between armed groups on both sides in Yarmouk, the Syrian air force attacked the camp in December 2012.⁷⁶⁶ Tom Rollins, a journalist reporting for The New Humanitarian, stated that rebel control and government control alternated during the subsequent years.⁷⁶⁷ UNRWA reported that by 2018, when the government had retaken control of the camp, the vast majority of houses have been affected and all basic infrastructure has been destroyed.⁷⁶⁸ In May 2019, UNRWA issued a statement condemning a rocket attack against a camp for Palestinian refugees near Aleppo which led

⁷⁶⁰ UN General Assembly, Report of the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. 1 January–31 December 2018, 23 August 2019, [url](#), p. 11

⁷⁶¹ UNRWA, Where We Work, 2018, [url](#)

⁷⁶² UNRWA, Syria: UNRWA – Humanitarian Snapshot. November 2019, 27 December 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁶³ Hall, N., 13 March 2014, Palestinian Refugees and the Siege of Yarmouk, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 13 March 2014, [url](#); Meir, D., The blind spot: Palestinian refugees from Syria in Lebanon. Maximilian Felsch; Martin Wahlish. Lebanon and the Arab Uprisings: In the Eye of the Hurricane, Routledge, pp. 104-118, 2016, [url](#), p. 7

⁷⁶⁴ Hall, N., 13 March 2014, Palestinian Refugees and the Siege of Yarmouk, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 13 March 2014, [url](#)

⁷⁶⁵ Abo Naser, M. Syrian voices on the Syrian conflict: The plight of Palestinian refugees in Syria in the camps south of Damascus, NOREF Expert Analysis, January 2017, [url](#), p. 2

⁷⁶⁶ Meier, D., The Blind Spot: Palestinian Refugees from Syria in Lebanon, 6 December 2018 [url](#), p. 6; Reuters, WRAPUP 1-Syrian jets rocket Palestinian camp in Damascus –activists, 16 December 2012, [url](#)

⁷⁶⁷ New Humanitarian (The), Civilians trapped in Yarmouk face "unimaginable" end to siege, 23 April 2018, [url](#)

⁷⁶⁸ UNRWA, Almost all UNRWA installations in Yarmouk and Dera'a camp in Syria severely damaged or destroyed, 1 December 2018, [url](#)

to at least 10 civilians being killed and more than 30 injured. The source did not indicate who was responsible for the attack.⁷⁶⁹

The Action Group for Palestinians of Syria (AGPS), a London based human rights group monitoring and documenting the situation for Palestinian refugees in Syria, reported in 2019 about Palestinians who had been abducted earlier in the conflict by GoS forces and were still unaccounted for.⁷⁷⁰ In November 2019, AGPS reported that it had documented the detention of 1 768 Palestinian refugees, including 108 women and girls, who were secretly held in Syrian government jails, and 327 refugees who had gone missing in the country.⁷⁷¹ The source did not provide information on the reason for their arrest or the period in which it occurred.

AGPS reported in 2019 about torture of Palestinian prisoners in government prisons.⁷⁷² By October 2019, the AGPS had recorded 608 Palestinian victims of torture in GoS prisons.⁷⁷³

In May 2019, Human Rights Watch mentioned 15 Palestinians who were arrested in various towns in Rural Damascus governorate, including Babila, Qudsieh and Yalda, whose residents were primarily Palestinian, after the towns were retaken by government forces. The source noted two among the arrested had signed reconciliation agreements with the government.⁷⁷⁴

There were reports about arrests and detentions of returning Palestinian refugees. The Middle East Monitor reported in December 2018 about returning Palestinian refugees who were arrested by GoS after having returned voluntarily to Damascus. No reason for their arrest was provided.⁷⁷⁵ In the same month, the news outlet Al Modon reported that five Palestinian refugees were arrested after returning to Damascus on a flight from Iran.⁷⁷⁶

In December 2018, the Middle East Monitor cited sources who stated that the GoS had arrested Palestinian refugees who had returned voluntarily from Europe, one of its sources mentioning that ‘the Syrian regime had arrested 13 Palestinian refugees’, five of them who were returning from Europe.⁷⁷⁷

Journalists and researchers Olivia Macharis and Roger Asfar mentioned in an article published by the Arab Reform Initiative, a Paris based think tank, that there is a concern among refugees that security and intelligence in camps were gradually becoming assigned to the PLA. That created fears among men of conscript age of becoming mandatorily conscripted to military service when they return.⁷⁷⁸

In November 2019, AGPS reported that 15 members of the PLA were pronounced dead after they had broken away from their battalion. Several others were tortured to death in GoS jails.⁷⁷⁹ The source did not give any specific information about the context in which the deaths had occurred.

⁷⁶⁹ UNRWA, UNNIRWA Condemns the Killing of 10 Civilians in the Palestine Refugee Camp of Neirab in Aleppo, 16 May 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁷⁰ AGPS, Palestinian Refugee Mohamed Awad Forcibly Disappeared by Syrian Government, 16 November 2019 [url](#); AGPS, Palestinian Family Forcibly Disappeared in Syrian Jails for 6th Year, Action Group for Palestinians of Syria, 17 November 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁷¹ AGPS, Palestinian Refugee Mohamed Awad Forcibly Disappeared by Syrian Government, 16 November 2019 [url](#); AGPS, Palestinian Family Forcibly Disappeared in Syrian Jails for 6th Year, Action Group for Palestinians of Syria, 17 November 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁷² AGPS, Palestinian Refugee Tortured to Death in Syria, Torture Death Toll Hits 608, 5 October 2019 [url](#); AGPS, 8 Palestinians from Syria Pronounced Dead in October, 13 November 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁷³ AGPS, Palestinian Refugee Tortured to Death in Syria, Torture Death Toll Hits 608, 5 October 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁷⁴ HRW, Syria: Detention, Harassment in Retaken Areas, 21 May 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁷⁵ Middle East Monitor, Syria regime arrests returning Palestinian refugees, 18 December 2018, [url](#)

⁷⁷⁶ Al Modon, Palestinians coming back to Damascus taken to Palestine Branch, 20 December 2018, [url](#)

⁷⁷⁷ Middle East Monitor, Syria regime arrests returning Palestinian refugees, 18 December 2018, [url](#)

⁷⁷⁸ Macharis, O. and Asfar, R., Palestinian Refugees of Syria’s Yarmouk Camp: Challenges and Obstacles to Return, Arab Reform Initiative, 17 January 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁷⁹ AGPS, 15 PLA Fighters Pronounced Dead following Break-Away from Pro-Gov’t Forces, 19 November 2019, [url](#)

Macharis & Asfar mentioned widespread fear of becoming arrested by the Syrian authorities, a fear being shared even by Palestinians loyal to GoS. Trust in reconciliation agreements is generally low among Palestinians opposed to the government. General insecurity and disorder in areas controlled by pro-government militias has added to the mistrust.⁷⁸⁰

According to Samar Batrawi, a Palestinian scholar at King's College, London, the People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC), an armed Palestinian faction with close links to the Syrian government, has acquired a role in policing the refugee camps.⁷⁸¹

11.4 Other information on treatment of Palestinians

Refugees have begun to return in a slow flow. UNRWA recorded a threefold increase in returns from Lebanon and Jordan during the first half of 2019 compared to the first half of 2018. Still, the numbers remained small with a total of 1 300 returnees as of June 2019.⁷⁸²

The following sources cited legal and socio-economically related obstacles to returning, as well as entry restrictions. According to Erwin van Veen, a senior research fellow at Clingendael, the Netherlands Institute of International Relations, Law No 10 that was adopted in 2018 requires all Syrians to register their private properties by providing proof of ownership, within a two months period from the law was adopted. Those who do not comply risk that the Syrian state will take possession of their properties.⁷⁸³

Macharis & Asfar mentioned the scale of destruction in Yarmouk having led many to believe that it was the intention of the GoS to prevent former residents from returning and to ultimately dispossess them of their properties.⁷⁸⁴ According to a displaced inhabitant of Yarmouk who spoke to the news commentary Middle East Eye, 'many displaced from the camp had been told that they will lose their homes for good because of Law 10, while others said that 'they believed the law was being used to punish those who had supported the opposition.'⁷⁸⁵ It was not clear whether Law No 10 will be applied in Yarmouk, where as of January 2019 the authorities had only adopted a new urban plan for the camp.⁷⁸⁶

Concerning Yarmouk camp, Macharis and Asfar reported that entry restrictions have been imposed; that one is not allowed to rebuild or resettle there; and that a general lack of livelihood due to few jobs and high living costs is keeping former inhabitants away.⁷⁸⁷ The AGPS group reported in 2019 that civilian Palestinian refugees were denied access to their homes in the camp, while military officers and their families who used to live in the camp were allowed to re-enter and retrieve their homes and properties.⁷⁸⁸ Christopher Kozak stated in a November 2019 interview with EASO that residents are

⁷⁸⁰ Macharis, O. and Asfar, R., Palestinian Refugees of Syria's Yarmouk Camp: Challenges and Obstacles to Return, Arab Reform Initiative, 17 January 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁸¹ Batrawi, S., Palestinians and the Syrian War: Between Neutrality and Dissent, Al-Shabaka – the Palestinian Policy Network, 29 January 2017, [url](#)

⁷⁸² UNRWA, Syria: UNRWA – Progress Highlights. January-June 2019, June 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁸³ Van Veen, Creating a New Syria: Property, Dispossession, and Regime Survival, Syria Comment [blog], 15 April 2018, [url](#)

⁷⁸⁴ Macharis, O. and Asfar, R., Palestinian Refugees of Syria's Yarmouk Camp: Challenges and Obstacles to Return, Arab Reform Initiative, 17 January 2019, [url](#); the Syrian government's controversial programme allowing local authorities to take possession of properties in the areas worst affected by the war'; Middle East Eye, 'No way back': The law that stops displaced Syrians from ever going home, 8 April 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁸⁵ Middle East Eye, 'No way back': The law that stops displaced Syrians from ever going home, 8 April 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁸⁶ Macharis, O. and Asfar, R., Palestinian Refugees of Syria's Yarmouk Camp: Challenges and Obstacles to Return, Arab Reform Initiative, 17 January 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁸⁷ Macharis, O. and Asfar, R., Palestinian Refugees of Syria's Yarmouk Camp: Challenges and Obstacles to Return, Arab Reform Initiative, 17 January 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁸⁸ AGPS, Displaced Families Denied Return to Yarmouk Camp, Gov't Officers Allowed In, 8 July 2019, [url](#)

not allowed to go back to Yarmouk Camp. The area is still a military zone and residents need to apply for a day pass to get back and see their properties.⁷⁸⁹

⁷⁸⁹ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

12. Children

The CoI stated in a report covering the period from September 2011 to the end of October 2019 that ‘children’s right to life has been blatantly denied by all parties to the conflict’, further noting that a very large number of children were killed, maimed and injured.⁷⁹⁰

A June 2019 report by the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly stated that throughout 2018 ‘air strikes, barrel bombs and cluster munitions resulted in 1,854 child casualties’.⁷⁹¹ The actors responsible were according to the UN: the Syrian government forces (148), pro-government forces (96), ISIL (70), FSA-branded groups affiliated with the Olive Branch incursion (54), HTS (25), YPG/YPJ (10), Army of Islam (7), the international coalition against ISIL (4), Ahrar al-Sham (2) and unidentified armed elements (550). Most child casualties occurred in Idlib, Rural Damascus and Aleppo governorates.⁷⁹²

12.1 Child recruitment by government armed forces and other armed groups

The CoI stated in a report covering the period from September 2011 to the end of October 2019 that ‘children, most frequently boys, but also on occasion girls, have been used in hostilities by parties to the conflict for combat roles, to acts as spies, informants, or to serve at checkpoints, in violation of international humanitarian law. Children have been forcibly recruited, enlisted or lured into violence out of economic instability or grief, after witnessing violent acts inflicted on their loved ones by belligerent parties’.⁷⁹³

In a June 2019 report by the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly it was reported that both state forces (including NDF and pro-government militias⁷⁹⁴) and non-state armed groups as responsible for recruiting minors to their forces. During the reporting period January to December 2018, the UN verified a total of 806 children recruited, of which 670 were boys and 136 were girls. 22 % (179) of the total were under 15 years of age. 94 % (754) of the total had been used in combat roles. The non-state groups that the report mentioned were Ahrar al Sham, groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), ISIL, Army of Islam, HTS, YPG, and Nur al-Din al-Zanki. The numbers of children that reportedly have been recruited by these groups are listed below:

- YPG/YPJ (the women’s units of the YPG) (313)
- HTS (187)
- groups self-affiliated with the FSA (170)
- Ahrar al-Sham (34)
- ISIL (30)
- Army of Islam (17)
- Nur al-Din al-Zanki (16)

⁷⁹⁰ UN Human Rights Council, “They have erased the dreams of my children”: children’s rights in the Syrian Arab Republic. Conference Room Paper of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, January 2020, [url](#), p. 7

⁷⁹¹ UN Secretary General, Report by the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly, Children and armed conflict, 20 June 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁷⁹² UN Secretary General, Report by the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly, Children and armed conflict, 20 June 2019, [url](#), p. 27

⁷⁹³ UN Human Rights Council, “They have erased the dreams of my children”: children’s rights in the Syrian Arab Republic. Conference Room Paper of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, January 2020, [url](#), p. 10

⁷⁹⁴ UN Secretary General, Report by the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly, Children and armed conflict, 20 June 2019, [url](#), p. 41

- Syrian Government forces (10)
- unidentified armed elements (29).⁷⁹⁵

The majority of cases the UN had verified were in Idlib, Aleppo and Raqqa, and that at least 25 recorded child casualties resulted from combat.⁷⁹⁶

In 2017, seven groups self-affiliated with the FSA signed the Geneva Call, and NGO initiative to protect children from the effects of armed conflict, intended to prohibit them from recruiting children.⁷⁹⁷

As long as ISIL held territory in Syria, it conducted child recruitment at a wider scale and in a different mode than other armed groups. In a report about ISIL's child recruitment published by King's College, London, analyst Gina Vale noted that during its rule ISIL claimed to have used 1 350 primary and secondary schools for recruitment purposes and subjected over 100 000 male and female students to its ideological curriculum. The analyst also stated that ISIL was conducting kidnappings partly from orphanages, schools and family homes.⁷⁹⁸

The most prevalent actor that Christopher Kozak pointed to as recruiting children had been opposition groups, particularly the SNA, suggesting the explanation that they are often based on a more local level built on a framework that started as village militias. Children were used as anything from supply runners to active combatants in Idlib governorate and northern Aleppo governorate, Kozak said. With the HTS and its affiliates, Kozak said less child recruitment had been seen, although it has been visible in some other affiliated groups like the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) and other ethnic specific Al Qaeda affiliates in north-west Syria where fighting becomes a communal activity. Kozak stressed that this did not mean that the HTS was not using child fighters, he rather expected that they were, but it was less visible than among the SNA and ethnic Al Qaeda affiliates.⁷⁹⁹

Regarding pro-government forces, Kozak did not have any recent information but stated that there has always been a problem with youths, particularly youths close but not quite of eligible age for conscription, who had been conscripted anyway.⁸⁰⁰ While in general sources interviewed by FIS were not aware of child recruitment in the SAA, government-affiliated armed groups are said to have had minors among their ranks, albeit ostensibly on a voluntary basis.⁸⁰¹

Sources interviewed in a 2019 report by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) mentioned that girls were at risk of recruitment to armed groups. The source remarked that this was unlike prior years of reporting by the organisation.⁸⁰² It was noted in the report to the UN Security Council that out of the more than 40 % of the children recruited by the YPG/YPJ, 126 were girls, 20 of whom were below the age of 15 and 119 of whom served in combat roles.⁸⁰³

In June 2019, the SDF signed an action plan with the UN through which it committed itself to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children, and to identify and separate boys and girls it had within its ranks.⁸⁰⁴

⁷⁹⁵ UN Secretary General, Report by the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly, Children and armed conflict, 20 June 2019, [url](#), p. 27

⁷⁹⁶ UN Secretary General, Report by the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly, Children and armed conflict, 20 June 2019, [url](#), pp. 27, 41

⁷⁹⁷ UN Security Council, Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, Conclusions on children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, 18 July 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁷⁹⁸ ICSR, Cubs in the Lion's Den: Indoctrination and Recruitment of Children Within Islamic State Territory, King's College London, 2018, [url](#), pp. 3, 17

⁷⁹⁹ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁸⁰⁰ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁸⁰¹ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 6

⁸⁰² UNFPA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 46

⁸⁰³ UN Secretary General, Report by the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly, Children and armed conflict, 20 June 2019, [url](#), p. 27

⁸⁰⁴ UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 1 July 2019, [url](#)

For detailed information on child recruitment by the SDF/YPG see also Section [4.3 Recruitment of children](#).

12.2 Child labour

According to a study that the International Labour Organization (ILO) published in 2012, children who worked outside of their homes and not resided together with their family became exposed to exploitation by gangs or to joining gangs, to smoking and drug abuse, and to health hazards stemming from handling dangerous equipment. Spending most of their day outside their home many working children returned home alone after dark, exposing them to harassment such as sexual harassment.⁸⁰⁵

In an assessment of communities carried out by the UN and its humanitarian partners in 2019, it was found that 85 % of the assessed communities reported ‘high occurrence’ of child labour that prevented school attendance. The assessment did not specify which communities were assessed nor any further estimate of the extent of the child labour.⁸⁰⁶

The World Food Program (WFP) reported in 2019 that child labour was a major coping strategy among female headed households in conflict affected areas, but did not specify how widespread it was.⁸⁰⁷

The CoI noted in an August 2019 report that child labour was used as a negative coping mechanism to alleviate financial constraints.⁸⁰⁸

UNOCHA stated that 8 % of 2 887 households surveyed in Rukban IDP camp on the border to Jordan indicated that they had resorted to child labour as a coping strategy to meet their basic needs.⁸⁰⁹ A June 2019 report by UNOCHA covering north-west Syria stated that households experiencing multiple displacement became exposed to an increased threat of resorting to child labour.⁸¹⁰

UNOCHA’s rapid needs assessment in July 2019 stated that 51 % of key informants indicated that child labour was occurring in communities across northern Idlib, likely exposing children there to abuse and exploitation. It also stated that boys were at greater risk of becoming subject to labouring than girls.⁸¹¹

12.3 Access to education

The CoI stated that ‘children’s right to education was denied by all parties to the conflict’. Schools were used for military purposes and repeatedly attacked by armed actors, including GoS forces, non-state armed groups and terrorist organisations, which led to scores of child casualties.⁸¹²

Sources from the World Bank interviewed by the International Crisis Group in July 2019 stated that ‘around 40 % of educational facilities have been damaged, destroyed or occupied (used as shelters for the displaced or confiscated by conflict parties)’.⁸¹³ UNOCHA’s 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview

⁸⁰⁵ ILO, National Study on Worst Forms of Child Labour in Syria, March 2012, [url](#), pp. 93, 114-116

⁸⁰⁶ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019. Syrian Arab Republic, 1 March 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁸⁰⁷ FAO, Special Report – FAO/WFP Crop and food security assessment mission to the Syrian Arab Republic, 5 September 2019, [url](#), p. 60

⁸⁰⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁸⁰⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic Rukban Humanitarian Update, 25 September 2019, [url](#)

⁸¹⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic Recent Developments in Northwestern Syria, Situation Report No. 6, 28 June 2019, [url](#), p. 6

⁸¹¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwestern Syria Situation Report No. 8, 26 July 2019, [url](#), pp. 2-3, 7

⁸¹² UN Human Rights Council, “They have erased the dreams of my children”: children’s rights in the Syrian Arab Republic. Conference Room Paper of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, January 2020, [url](#), pp. 7, 13

⁸¹³ International Crisis Group, Ways out of Europe’s Syria Reconstruction Conundrum, 25 November 2019, [url](#), p. 3

assessed that 2.1 million children were out of school. Another 1.3 million children were at risk of dropping out and one in three schools were damaged or destroyed.⁸¹⁴

Attacks on schools were reported in 2019 by the UN Secretary General to have had a devastating effect on the access to education. The report cited a total of 113 attacks on schools in Syria in 2018, a 69 % increase as compared to 2017. Of these attacks, 60 were attributed to the GoS air force, 24 were attributed to government ground forces, 12 to pro-government militias, 2 to ISIL, 2 to YPG/YPJ, one to HTS, and 12 to unidentified elements. 96 child casualties resulted from attacks on schools. Some education personnel were killed, some detained.⁸¹⁵

According to a study published in 2019 by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and WFP, 'many households have reported that children find it difficult to go back to school after years of interruption with households' high need for income'. Many children were not motivated to continue their studies but preferred to stay in work.⁸¹⁶ UNOCHA reported that in Idlib governorate a total of 400 000 students from grades 1 to 12 were affected due to the cancellation of their final exams endue to take place between April and June 2019.⁸¹⁷

As for the country as a whole, the UN claimed that 24 schools were used as ammunition storage, military bases and as detention facilities. 14 of the schools were used by YPG/YPJ, seven by groups self-affiliated with FSA and Turkey's Operation 'Olive Branch' in north-western Syria, two by HTS and one by ISIL. Three schools were attacked following the military use of them.⁸¹⁸ There was no information about the location of the three schools. On 31 August 2019, a school was hit directly and was put out of service in Ma'arrat An Nu'man in Idlib governorate.⁸¹⁹

UNOCHA reported in September 2019 that in north-western Syria alone, 59 individual schools were damaged by the violence since late April 2019, and that less than a half of the 650 000 school aged children in that part of the country could be accommodated in the remaining functioning schools. UNOCHA's report further stated that 150 000 school-aged children in north-western Syria were in immediate need of educational services and that only half of the approximately 1 200 schools in that part of the country were functional.⁸²⁰

Save the Children reported in September 2019 that 87 educational facilities in north-west Syria were damaged or impacted by fighting, 353 out of the 1 193 schools abandoned, while 205 were being used as collective shelters. Parents were pledging teachers to close schools so their children would not be attacked. Save the Children estimated that over 300 000 children, approximately half of the school aged population of Idlib, was impacted.⁸²¹

Around 98 % of communities assessed by UNOCHA in north-western Syria for a July 2019 report stated that IDP children would be facing problems in accessing education, and 97 % of the communities reported the same for children living in northern Idlib.⁸²² In arrival locations, absorption capacity was

⁸¹⁴ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019. Syrian Arab Republic, 1 March 2019, [url](#), p. 7

⁸¹⁵ UN Security Council, Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, Conclusions on children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, 18 July 2019, [url](#), pp. 27-28

⁸¹⁶ FAO, Special Report – FAO/WFP crop and food security assessment mission to the Syrian Arab Republic, 5 September 2019, [url](#), p. 60

⁸¹⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Situation Report 1: Recent Developments in North-western Syria as of 10 May 2019, [url](#), pp. 1-2

⁸¹⁸ UN General Assembly, Report by the Secretary General. Children and armed conflict, 20 June 2019, [url](#), p. 28

⁸¹⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic Recent Developments in Northwestern Syria Situation Report No. 11, 6 September 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁸²⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic Recent Developments in Northwestern Syria Situation Report No. 11, 6 September 2019, [url](#), pp. 2-3

⁸²¹ Save the Children, More than half of children in Idlib, Syria could miss out on school this year, 4 September 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁸²² UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwestern Syria Situation Report No. 8, 26 July 2019, [url](#), p. 3

overstretched for both IDP and host communities.⁸²³ A total of 94 schools were used as shelters by IDPs due to violence in Idlib. Another 47 schools were damaged or otherwise affected as the result of airstrikes and shelling since the beginning of May 2019 in southern Idlib and northern Hama.⁸²⁴

Schools were affected by hostilities in north-east Syria. The UN verified two incidents that took place in October and November 2019 in which schools in Raqqa governorate were damaged by rockets and crossfire, respectively.⁸²⁵ UNICEF reported that a school in north-eastern Syria came under attack in October 2019, during the Turkish-led incursion.⁸²⁶

12.4 Lack of documentation and risk of statelessness

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child remarked in January 2019 that the lack of identity documentation was particularly critical in the areas out of the control of the GoS, where 25 % of adolescents did not have identity cards and a quarter of new-borns had not been registered since the beginning of the conflict. The lack of identity documentation 'equated to a lack of legal status of the child and impeded access to all services – health, education and humanitarian assistance'.⁸²⁷

Sources interviewed by Landinfo in 2017 stated that outside of GoS-controlled areas, civil status offices have either stopped to function or they operate outside the control of the government.⁸²⁸

Christopher Kozak of ISW observed that in recaptured areas the GoS has not given special priority to re-establishing the civil registration system. Kozak noted that the government had opened a civil registry office in Eastern Ghouta within a few months preceding November. What was problematic for the citizens, according to Kozak, was that they still had to go into Damascus to make any registration, and in order to get through the checkpoints they also needed registration documents. Kozak added that he believed that the government had recently opened a courthouse, a branch of the Damascus Court, to process some registration paperwork in Eastern Ghouta. He also remarked that in southern Syria there is a similar absence of the state.

Kozak could not observe if GoS has devoted any special resources to recording births in opposition-held areas or transferring registrations from opposition governance bodies. The government's policy was generally to reject opposition education records and civil registration records. Individuals were thus forced to redo everything through the government. The government has not followed up that rejection with governance efforts to establish offices to process these records. Many individuals from former opposition-held areas are thus left in legal limbo. Their current records are not recognised, but they are unable to get new ones, Kozak stated.⁸²⁹

According to a confidential source consulted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands in 2019, Syrians living in opposition-held areas can obtain birth documents at the central civil registry office in Damascus, but they met various obstacles in attempting to do so. The source mentioned obstacles such as having to cross the front line with the associated risks involved; the risk of being

⁸²³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwestern Syria Situation Report No. 11 – as of 6 September 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁸²⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwestern Syria Situation Report No. 8, 26 July 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁸²⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 6

⁸²⁶ UNICEF, Nearly 70,000 children displaced as violence escalates in northeast Syria, Statement by UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore, 14 October 2019, [url](#)

⁸²⁷ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Committee on the Rights of the Child reviews the situation of Children in Syria, 16 January 2019, [url](#)

⁸²⁸ Norway, Landinfo, Temanotat Syria: Identitetsdokumenter og pass [Report on ID documents and passports], 3 July 2017, pp. 18-19, [url](#)

⁸²⁹ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

arrested by pro-government forces after having entered a government-controlled area; men of conscription age running the specific risk of being arrested at government check points for evading military service, and women risking to become sexually assaulted at checkpoints.

Another confidential source mentioned that Syrians in opposition-held areas may choose to give a third person in GoS-controlled area authorisation to apply and obtain a birth certificate, or use 'intermediaries' to obtain a birth certificate illegally 'by means of bribery and a smuggling network'.⁸³⁰

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) noted that 'although women have the same rights as men to register the births of their children, nationality is only transferred from the father and mothers therefore must struggle to register the births of their infants'.⁸³¹ For children born out of wedlock, to parents in inter-faith marriages and those born to incidents of sexual violence the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child noted that they encountered difficulties in obtaining birth certificates.⁸³²

In a March 2019 report, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has called upon the GoS to amend legislation in order to remedy the obstacles to registering and gaining access to birth registration documents for the profiles mentioned, and to consider recognising documents issued locally by *mukhtars* or sheikhs.⁸³³

⁸³⁰ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Report: Syria Documents, December 2019, [url](#), p. 35

⁸³¹ OECD Development Centre, Social Institutions and Gender Index. Syrian Arab Republic, 2019, [url](#), p. 8

⁸³² UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Committee on the Rights of the Child reviews the situation of Children in Syria, 16 January 2019, [url](#)

⁸³³ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the Syrian Arab Republic, 6 March 2019, [url](#), p. 6

13. LGBTI

13.1 Legal framework

The Syrian legislation makes same-sex activities punishable by law as stipulated in the Penal Code of 1949⁸³⁴ in Book Two under 'morality and public morals'.⁸³⁵ Article 520 states: 'any sexual intercourse against the order of nature can be punished with up to three years of imprisonment' [informal translation].⁸³⁶

Article 517 of the Penal Code states: 'Violation' of public decency in one of the means mentioned in Article 208 is punishable with imprisonment from three months to three years' [informal translation]. Article 208 of the Syrian Penal Code provides a definition for 'public indecencies' as follows [informal translation]:

'Considered as means for publicity:

1. Actions and movements if they took place in a public space (sphere), or a space accessible for the public or visible, or if observed by outsiders/third parties due to the fault of the person carrying them [actions and movements] out.
2. Speech or shouting whether uttered openly or transmitted by mechanical means whereby they [the speech or shouting] are heard by third parties.
3. Writings, paintings, pictures (whether manual or solar [taken by camera], videos, signs, and all kinds of photography if displayed in public or in a space that is accessible for public or visible, or if sold or presented for sale, or if distributed to one person or more'.⁸³⁷

The International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) interprets this text as 'any act carried out in a public or open area where one could possibly see, intentionally or accidentally, the act'.⁸³⁸ The law makes no explicit reference to same-sex marriage.

According to the Rights in Exile Programme, the legal status of same-sex activity between women is 'unclear'.⁸³⁹

In 2018, it was reported that the GoS allowed an intersex person to change the gender and register a new gender status on official documents.⁸⁴⁰

13.2 State protection

Anti-discrimination laws have not been established and hence there is no legal protection of LGBTI people in Syria.

Recent reliable information on the enforcement of laws regarding LGBTI persons is available but limited. According to GlobalGayz.com 'instances of persecution are limited to nonexistent' and 'the law is de-facto suspended.' Yet the same source mentions a leverage for mistreatment by Syrian

⁸³⁴ Syrian Arab Republic, Syrian Penal Code, 1949, [url](#), no English translation available

⁸³⁵ Syrian Arab Republic, Syrian Penal Code, 1949, [url](#). Information on the interpretation of the legal texts can be found in HRW, LGBT Rights, n.d., [url](#)

⁸³⁶ Syrian Arab Republic, Syrian Penal Code, 1949, [url](#); Information on the interpretation of the legal texts can be found in HRW, LGBT Rights, n.d., [url](#); ILGA, State-Sponsored Homophobia, 2019, [url](#), p. 475; HRW, Annexe: Lois interdisant le comportement homosexuel et l'expression du genre, April 2018, [url](#), p. 82

⁸³⁷ Syrian Arab Republic, Syrian Penal Code, 1949, [url](#), no English translation available

⁸³⁸ ILGA, State-Sponsored Homophobia, 2019, [url](#), p. 475

⁸³⁹ Rights in Exile Programme, Syrian Arab Republic LGBTI resources, n.d., [url](#)

⁸⁴⁰ New Arab (The), Syria allows intersex person to register new gender status for first time, 10 February 2018, [url](#)

authorities towards LGBTI persons: '[...] the Syrian authorities can use individuals' sexual orientation to blackmail, harass and eventually abuse members of the LGBT community. Law enforcement officers have zero tolerance toward the LGBT community'.⁸⁴¹

The CoI noted in an August 2019 report that it was conducting an ongoing investigation into rape and sexual violence perpetrated in government-held areas against different profiles, including LGBTI.⁸⁴²

USDOS wrote that there were no reports of prosecutions of same-sexual conduct in 2018. However, in previous years police used legal charges to prosecute LGBTI persons. Furthermore, LGBTI individuals have also been charged on the basis of drug abuse or social value abuse. According to local NGOs cited by USDOS, the GoS and its armed forces have detained, arrested, tortured, and killed individuals under the pretext of accusing them of homosexual activities. There was no information available on the frequency such incidents.⁸⁴³

ILGA described the human rights situation of homosexuals in Syria, stating that the country remained a dangerous place for same-sex orientated people. Targeting by authorities took place before the civil war began in 2011, and during the conflict that ensued. Cases of LGBTI persons who were subjected to rape, beating, detention and torture at government checkpoints due to their sexual orientation occurred during 2011 and 2016.⁸⁴⁴ Denial of equal opportunities to education and employment, as well as societal stigmatisation were also mentioned as problems for LGBTI in a 2016 submission to the 2016 Universal Periodic Review by the NGO-umbrella Alliance for Writing and Advocating Syrian UPR Report.⁸⁴⁵

In a 2014 report, the CoI reported that 'men were tortured and raped on the grounds of their sexual orientation at government checkpoints in Damascus'.⁸⁴⁶

A 2014 report by All Survivors Project stated that:

'UN investigators and human rights organisations have documented serious human rights violations against LGBT+ persons that are specifically related to the conflict, including cases of summary execution, arbitrary detention, torture, rape and other forms of sexual violence, as well as harassment, discrimination and exploitation of men and women because of their sexual orientation and gender identity, both by Syrian government security forces and non-state armed groups'.⁸⁴⁷

13.3 Treatment by non-state armed groups

Sources reported that the ISIL and al-Nusra [HTS] abducted, tortured and killed 'persons assumed or perceived as gay'.⁸⁴⁸ USDOS wrote in its 2018 report that 'the terrorist groups ISIS and HTS regularly detained, tortured and killed LGBTI individuals in the territories they controlled'.⁸⁴⁹ The Independent reported in 2017 on mistreatment and discrimination of LGBTI people and stating that 'ISIS has

⁸⁴¹ GlobalGAYZ.com, Syria, Middle East, n.d., [url](#)

⁸⁴² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 17

⁸⁴³ USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 66

⁸⁴⁴ ILGA, State-Sponsored Homophobia, 2019, [url](#), p. 475

⁸⁴⁵ Alliance for Writing and Advocating Syrian Universal Periodic Review Report, PHRO Joint Submission, 2016, [url](#), p. 5

⁸⁴⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/25/65, 12 February 2014, [url](#), p. 12

⁸⁴⁷ All Survivors Project, "Destroy me from within", 6 September 2018, [url](#), pp. 21-22; HRW, The Double Threat for Gay Men in Syria, April 2014, [url](#)

⁸⁴⁸ ILGA, State-Sponsored Homophobia, 2019, [url](#), p. 476; The Sydney Morning Herald, 'It can't get any worse than being gay in Syria today', 15 October 2015, [url](#); Counter Extremism Project, ISIS Persecution of Gay People, 17 May 2017, [url](#), p. 8

⁸⁴⁹ USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 67

brutally persecuted LGBT people for several years and considers being gay to be a crime punishable by death'.⁸⁵⁰

A Turkish lawyer working on LGBTI rights interviewed for a 2018 report by All Survivors Project, stated that in Syria LGTI persons are the 'target of every group'. The report mentions the vulnerability of LGBTI persons to blackmailing, including for sex. The source mentioned incidents of sexual violence against a boy and a transgender women, perpetrated by ISIL and anti-GoS armed groups.⁸⁵¹ Several articles and reports noted the mistreatment LGBTI persons by ISIL between 2014 and 2017.⁸⁵²

The Rights in Exile Programme quoted the Syrian editor of GayMiddleEast.com to have said in June 2011: '[...] we still are afraid to be stopped by secret police and be humiliated'. The source further stated: 'It has been very dangerous to form any kind of gathering in Syria since the spark of the protests [...] Some pro-regime LGBT people have been threatening anti-regime gay people to expose them to authorities and deliver their names to the secret police. They have been using online gay dating sites to contact people and threaten them'.⁸⁵³

13.4 Societal discrimination

In interviews with Human Rights Watch conducted in October-November 2018, Syrian transgender persons claimed that they experienced threats, harassment and violence at the hands of family members because of their gender identity.⁸⁵⁴ A Syrian transgender refugee in Berlin reflected on the treatment of transgender people inside Syria stating that 'in society, not only in Syria but in the Arab world generally, one does not look kindly on homosexuals or transgender people'.⁸⁵⁵

In 2011, a homosexual author published an account on the website PinkNews explaining the type of discrimination LGTBI people could possibly face in Syria:

'The plight of LGBT people in Syria starts with law criminalising homosexuality and goes through the religious and social homophobia and beyond. I know gay men who have been shot and tortured, while humiliation includes being tied down to be urinated on by family members. Videos from police humiliations of gay men are passed around as jokes on mobile phones, offensive words for "gay" and "lesbian" are still used widely even among the most open-minded people, homophobic jokes never fail to amuse people and everyone damns and curses homosexuals whenever they are mentioned'.⁸⁵⁶

A homosexual interviewed in 2019 in northern Syria, stated that he fled to Idlib after he was forced into marriage by his family.⁸⁵⁷ LGBTI persons were reported to be victims of 'honour' killings.⁸⁵⁸

Lesbianism is 'less acknowledged' than sexual activity between men. This might be due to women's general 'restricted' status within the Syrian society, 'regardless of their sexuality'.⁸⁵⁹ A Syrian lesbian

⁸⁵⁰ Independent (The), 'The Queer Insurrection': Coalition forces fighting Isis in Syria form first LGBT unit, 25 July 2017, [url](#)

⁸⁵¹ All Survivors Project, "Destroy me from within", 6 September 2018, [url](#), pp. 21-22

⁸⁵² AFP, ISIS stones 2 'gay men' to death in Syria: observer, 25 November 2014, [url](#); Advocate, Reports: ISIS Executes Two Gay Men In First Antigay Attacks, 30 November 2014, [url](#); Human Dignity Trust, Syria, n.d., [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#), p.12, BuzzFeed News, Two Gay Men Who Fled ISIS Just Made U.N. History, 24 August 2015, [url](#); Iraqi News, ISIS executes 4 for homosexuality and sodomy in Mosul, 21 August 2016, [url](#); Counter Extremism Project, ISIS Persecution of Gay people, May 2017, [url](#)

⁸⁵³ Rights in Exile Programme, Syrian Arab Republic LGBTI Resources, n.d., [url](#)

⁸⁵⁴ HRW, Don't Punish me for Who I am, 3 September 2019, [url](#), pp. 9-11

⁸⁵⁵ AFP, I will be a true women, says transgender Syrian Katia after finding safe haven in Berlin, 29 July 2018, [url](#)

⁸⁵⁶ Pink News, Comment: What life is really like for gay Syrians, 16 June 2011, [url](#)

⁸⁵⁷ Raseef22, Sick or Bewitched: the Life of Three Homosexuals in Idlib, Syria, 19 August 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁵⁸ HRGJ Clinic, City University of New York School of Law, 26th Session of the UPR Working Group of the Human Rights Council, Human Rights Violations Against Women and Girls in Syria, 25 July 2016, [url](#), p. 3

⁸⁵⁹ Rights in Exile Programme, Syrian Arab Republic LGBTI Resources, n.d., [url](#)

stated in 2011 for a PinkNews article that ‘no matter how you think it is hard for gays, it is even harder for lesbians, be sure of it’.⁸⁶⁰ Deutsche Welle (DW) noted in 2012, quoting a Lebanese gay singer in Syria: ‘Hassino says that while gay men in Syria face harassment, lesbians face even more difficulties.’ The singer referred to lesbians being forced into heterosexual marriages.⁸⁶¹

13.5 Organisations

In their 2018 report, USDOS noted that no knowledge of the existence of any specific LGBTI organisations was available. However, several online communities seem to exist ‘including an online LGBTI-orientated magazine’.⁸⁶² Furthermore, Facebook sites connected to LGBTI issues exist.⁸⁶³

⁸⁶⁰ Pink News, Comment: What life is really like for gay Syrians, 16 June 2011, [url](#)

⁸⁶¹ DW, Gays join the Syrian uprising, 7 September 2012, [url](#)

⁸⁶² USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 66

⁸⁶³ See for example the Facebook pages [url](#), accessed 18 November 2019

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Christopher Kozak is the Editor and Senior Analyst at the Institute for the Study of War where he focuses on Syria with an emphasis on the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and its foreign supporters, including Russia and Iran. Kozak is the author of *An Army in All Corners: Assad's Campaign Strategy in Syria* and has published numerous articles on the Syrian Civil War. He has also been invited to provide briefings to political leaders, military officers and intelligence officials from the U.S. and its foreign allies. He studied Arabic at the University of Amman in Jordan and received a B.S. in Political Science and International Studies (Global Security) from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2014.

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Annex II: Terms of Reference

The report should aim to cover the situation of targeted individuals in Syria including, aiming to cover the following research topics:

- ☐ Targeting of individuals and treatment by main actors
 - a. Who is targeted, by which actor, how, what is their treatment, why does targeting occur, when has targeting happened
 - b. Possibility to access redress and protection and/or avoid or escape targeting

Research should aim to consider the main profiles:

- ☐ Persons perceived to be opposing the government
- ☐ Persons fearing recruitment by the government armed forces and/or repercussions as military draft evaders and deserters from the armed forces
- ☐ Persons perceived to be opposing the SDF/YPG
- ☐ Persons fearing (forced) recruitment by Kurdish forces in areas under their influence
- ☐ Persons perceived to be supporting the government and/or opposing anti-government armed groups
- ☐ Members of and persons perceived to be collaborating with SDF/YPG
- ☐ Journalists and other media professionals and bloggers
- ☐ Human rights activists
- ☐ Doctors and other medical professionals
- ☐ Members of specific ethnic and religious groups
- ☐ Palestinians
- ☐ Children
- ☐ LGBTI persons



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