



Home Office

Country Policy and Information Note

Syria: Security situation

Version 1.0

June 2022

Preface

Purpose

This note provides country of origin information (COI) and analysis of COI for use by Home Office decision makers handling particular types of protection and human rights claims (as set out in the [Introduction](#) section). It is not intended to be an exhaustive survey of a particular subject or theme.

It is split into 2 parts: (1) an assessment of COI and other evidence; and (2) COI. These are explained in more detail below.

Assessment

This section analyses the evidence relevant to this note - that is information in the COI section; refugee/human rights laws and policies; and applicable caselaw - by describing this and its inter-relationships, and provides an assessment of, in general, whether one or more of the following applies:

- a person is reasonably likely to face a real risk of persecution or serious harm
- that the general humanitarian situation is so severe that there are substantial grounds for believing that there is a real risk of serious harm because conditions amount to inhuman or degrading treatment as within [paragraphs 339C and 339CA\(iii\) of the Immigration Rules](#) / Article 3 of the [European Convention on Human Rights \(ECHR\)](#)
- that the security situation is such that there are substantial grounds for believing there is a real risk of serious harm because there exists a serious and individual threat to a civilian's life or person by reason of indiscriminate violence in a situation of international or internal armed conflict as within [paragraphs 339C and 339CA\(iv\) of the Immigration Rules](#)
- a person is able to obtain protection from the state (or quasi state bodies)
- a person is reasonably able to relocate within a country or territory
- a claim is likely to justify granting asylum, humanitarian protection or other form of leave, and
- if a claim is refused, it is likely or unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under [section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002](#).

Decision makers **must**, however, still consider all claims on an individual basis, taking into account each case's specific facts.

Country of origin information

The country information in this note has been carefully selected in accordance with the general principles of COI research as set out in the [Common EU \[European Union\] Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information \(COI\)](#), April 2008, and the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation's (ACCORD), [Researching Country Origin Information – Training Manual](#), 2013. Namely, taking into account the COI's relevance, reliability, accuracy, balance, currency, transparency and traceability.

The structure and content of the country information section follows a [terms of reference](#) which sets out the general and specific topics relevant to this note.

All information included in the note was published or made publicly available on or before the 'cut-off' date(s) in the country information section. Any event taking place or report/article published after these date(s) is not included.

All information is publicly accessible or can be made publicly available. Sources and the information they provide are carefully considered before inclusion. Factors relevant to the assessment of the reliability of sources and information include:

- the motivation, purpose, knowledge and experience of the source
- how the information was obtained, including specific methodologies used
- the currency and detail of information
- whether the COI is consistent with and/or corroborated by other sources.

Multiple sourcing is used to ensure that the information is accurate and balanced, which is compared and contrasted where appropriate so that a comprehensive and up-to-date picture is provided of the issues relevant to this note at the time of publication.

The inclusion of a source is not, however, an endorsement of it or any view(s) expressed.

Each piece of information is referenced in a footnote. Full details of all sources cited and consulted in compiling the note are listed alphabetically in the bibliography.

Feedback

Our goal is to provide accurate, reliable and up-to-date COI and clear guidance. We welcome feedback on how to improve our products. If you would like to comment on this note, please email the [Country Policy and Information Team](#).

Independent Advisory Group on Country Information

The [Independent Advisory Group on Country Information](#) (IAGCI) was set up in March 2009 by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration to support him in reviewing the efficiency, effectiveness and consistency of approach of COI produced by the Home Office.

The IAGCI welcomes feedback on the Home Office's COI material. It is not the function of the IAGCI to endorse any Home Office material, procedures or policy. The IAGCI may be contacted at:

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Information about the IAGCI's work and a list of the documents which have been reviewed by the IAGCI can be found on the Independent Chief Inspector's pages of the [gov.uk website](#).

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Assessment

Updated: 12 April 2022

1. Introduction

1.1 Basis of claim

- 1.1.1 That the security situation in Syria is such that there are substantial grounds for believing there is a real risk of serious harm because there exists a serious and individual threat to a civilian's life or person by reason of indiscriminate violence in a situation of international or internal armed conflict, as defined in paragraphs 339C and 339CA(iv) of the Immigration Rules.

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2. Consideration of issues

2.1 Credibility

- 2.1.1 For information on assessing credibility, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).
- 2.1.2 Decision makers must also check if there has been a previous application for a UK visa or another form of leave. Asylum applications matched to visas should be investigated prior to the asylum interview (see the [Asylum Instruction on Visa Matches, Asylum Claims from UK Visa Applicants](#)).
- 2.1.3 In cases where there are doubts surrounding a person's claimed place of origin, decision makers should also consider the need to conduct language analysis testing (see the [Asylum Instruction on Language Analysis](#)).

Official – sensitive: Start of section

2.1.4

- 3 The information in this section has been removed as it is restricted for internal Home Office use.

Official – sensitive: End of section

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2.2 Exclusion

- 2.2.1 All sides in the conflict have been responsible for serious human rights abuses (see [Protagonists](#) and [Nature and level of violence](#)). Decision makers must consider whether there are serious reasons for considering whether one (or more) of the exclusion clauses is applicable. Each case must be considered on its individual facts and merits.
- 2.2.2 If the person is excluded from the Refugee Convention, they will also be excluded from a grant of humanitarian protection (which has a wider range of exclusions than refugee status).

- 2.2.3 For further guidance on the exclusion clauses, see the Asylum Instruction on [Exclusion under Articles 1F and 33\(2\) of the Refugee Convention](#), [Humanitarian Protection](#) and the instruction on [Restricted Leave](#).

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Official – sensitive: End of section

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2.3 Convention reason(s)

- 2.3.1 A severe humanitarian situation and/or a state of civil instability and/or where law and order has broken down, which might exist in some places outside of government control, do not of themselves give rise to a well-founded fear of persecution for a Refugee Convention reason.
- 2.3.2 In the absence of a link to one of the 5 Refugee Convention grounds necessary to be recognised as a refugee, the question to address is whether the person will face a real risk of serious harm in order to qualify for Humanitarian Protection (HP).
- 2.3.3 However, **before considering whether a person requires protection because of the general humanitarian and/or security situation, decision makers must consider if the person faces a reasonable degree of likelihood of persecution for a Refugee Convention reason.** Where the person qualifies for protection under the Refugee Convention, decision makers do not need to consider if there are substantial grounds for believing the person faces a real risk of serious harm and a grant of HP. Decision makers must consult the [Country Policy and Information Note \(CPIN\) on Syria: Returnees](#) prior to making any decisions regarding HP.
- 2.3.4 For further guidance on the 5 Refugee Convention grounds see the Asylum Instruction, [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).
- 2.3.5 For further guidance on Humanitarian Protection see the Asylum Instruction, [Humanitarian Protection](#).

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2.4 Risk

a. General risk on return

- 2.4.1 In the Country Guidance case of [KB \(Failed asylum seekers and forced returnees\) Syria CG \[2012\] UKUT 426 \(IAC\) \(20 December 2012\)](#), heard 6-7 March 2012, 7 August 2012 and promulgated on 20 December 2012, the Upper Tribunal (UT) found that:
- ‘... in the context of the extremely high level of human rights abuses currently occurring in Syria, a regime which appears increasingly concerned to crush any sign of resistance, it is likely that a failed asylum seeker or forced returnee would, in general, on arrival face a real risk of arrest and detention and of serious mistreatment during that detention as a result of

imputed political opinion. That is sufficient to qualify for refugee protection. The position might be otherwise in the case of someone who, notwithstanding a failed claim for asylum, would still be perceived on return to Syria as a supporter of the Assad regime' (paragraph 32).

- 2.4.2 Based on the available country evidence, there are not very strong grounds supported by cogent evidence to depart from the findings in KB. As such, it is considered likely that most forced returnees would, in general, on arrival face a real risk of arrest and detention and of serious mistreatment during that detention that would qualify them for refugee protection. For more information see the [Country Policy and Information Note Syria: Returnees](#).

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b. Security situation

- 2.4.3 There continues to be an armed conflict in Syria with the involvement of multiple international, state and non-state actors. However, overall levels of violence have decreased in recent years following the Government of Syria re-taking control of most of the country. The available evidence indicates that the levels of violence in Idlib, Aleppo, Ar Raqqa, Al Hasakah, Deir-Ez-Zor, Hama and Dar'a governorates are such that a person returning to one of these areas would be at real risk of serious harm by reason of indiscriminate violence.
- 2.4.4 Paragraphs 339C and 339CA(iv) of the Immigration Rules - which set out that a real risk of serious harm as a serious and individual threat by reason of indiscriminate violence in a situation of international or internal armed conflict - **only** apply to civilians who must be non-combatants. This could include former combatants who have genuinely and permanently renounced armed activity.
- 2.4.5 Even where there is not in general a real risk of serious harm by reason of indiscriminate violence in a situation of armed conflict, decision makers must consider whether there are particular factors relevant to the person's circumstances which might nevertheless place them at risk. The more a person is able to show that they are specifically affected by factors particular to their personal circumstances, the lower the level of indiscriminate violence required for them to be at a real risk of serious harm.
- 2.4.6 Therefore, a person may still face a real risk of serious harm even where generally there is not such a risk if they are able to show that there are specific reasons over and above simply being a civilian for being affected by the indiscriminate violence.
- 2.4.7 In September 2021 the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights published its first official death toll for the Syrian conflict since 2014. The UN stated that it had compiled a list of 350,209 individuals who had been killed between March 2011 and March 2021. This figure was published alongside a caveat that the total is a minimum verifiable number and is certainly an under-count of the actual number of killings (see [Overall conflict statistics](#)).
- 2.4.8 Since the conflict in Syria began in 2011, a number of different armed groups have taken part in hostilities both for and against the State's armed forces.

Throughout more than a decade of hostilities, government forces (see [Pro-government forces](#)) have besieged opposition-held areas, blocked humanitarian aid, shelled areas controlled by armed opposition, or where the opposition are present, and inflicted heavy loss of life and destruction of property. There have been reports of pro-government forces carrying out indiscriminate airstrikes which repeatedly struck civilian sites, including hospitals, markets, schools, and farms, many of which were included in UN deconfliction lists. The use of chemical weapons by the regime forces has also been reported (see [Timeline](#) and [Nature and level of violence](#)).

- 2.4.9 There have also been reports of non-state armed opposition groups continually systematically targeting civilians, journalists and health service providers, including through killings, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, torture and other ill-treatment. Deaths of civilians have been attributed to various different groups including Haya Tharir al-Sham (see [Haya Tharir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#)), Daesh (see [Daesh](#)) and [Syrian Democratic Forces \(SDF\)](#) (see [Nature and level of violence](#)).
- 2.4.10 The Syrian army has regained control of virtually all of the country (see [Timeline](#) and [Control of Territory](#)). Following major aerial and ground offensives carried out by regime and pro-regime forces initiated in December 2019 to recapture areas of northwest Syria, a ceasefire was brokered between Syrian forces supported by Russia and Turkish-backed rebels in March 2020. Following the ceasefire, hostilities between regime forces and opposition groups dropped significantly, resulting in a two-fold decrease in reported civilian fatalities. However, sporadic clashes and daily shelling barrages by the regime continued in northwest Syria until the end of the 2020 and into 2021 (see [Nature and level of violence](#)).
- 2.4.11 Throughout 2021 there were continued reports of violence across Syria, with levels of violence gradually increasing as the year went on and civilians continued to suffer the direct and indirect consequences of the armed conflict (see [Main incidents of violence between 2020 and 2021](#)).
- 2.4.12 Idlib remained the epicentre of violence with the highest number of security incidents in 2021. Other governorates in the north-west and north-east of Syria including Aleppo, Deir-ez-Zor, Al Hasakah, Ar Raqqa and Hama also experienced some of the highest numbers of security events in 2021, along with Dara'a governorate in the south (see [Security events in each governorate in 2021](#)).
- 2.4.13 When comparing the numbers of security events (for definitions of the various security events see [Security events in each governorate in 2021](#)) and fatalities in each governorate in 2021 to those that took place in 2020, most governorates experienced a decline. In 2021 Damascus, Deir-ez-Zor, Homs, Latakia and Tartous were the only governorates that experienced a slight increase in number of fatalities (both civilian and combatants) compared to 2020, with Ar Raqqa, Deir-ez-Zor, Hama, Homs, Quneitra and Tartous experiencing a slight increase in security events (see [2020 and 2021 comparison](#)). Available evidence indicates that there was a decrease in the overall numbers of civilian deaths in 2021 compared to 2020, with 1,271 civilian deaths and 1,980 civilian deaths respectively (see [Main incidents of](#)

[violence between 2020 and 2021](#) and [Fatalities in each governorate in 2021](#)).

- 2.4.14 For guidance on considering serious harm where there is a situation of indiscriminate violence in an armed conflict, including consideration of enhanced risk factors, see the Asylum Instruction, [Humanitarian Protection](#).
- 2.4.15 For further guidance on assessing risk, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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2.5 Certification

- 2.5.1 Where a claim is refused, it is unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.
- 2.5.2 For further guidance on certification, see [Certification of Protection and Human Rights claims under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 \(clearly unfounded claims\)](#).

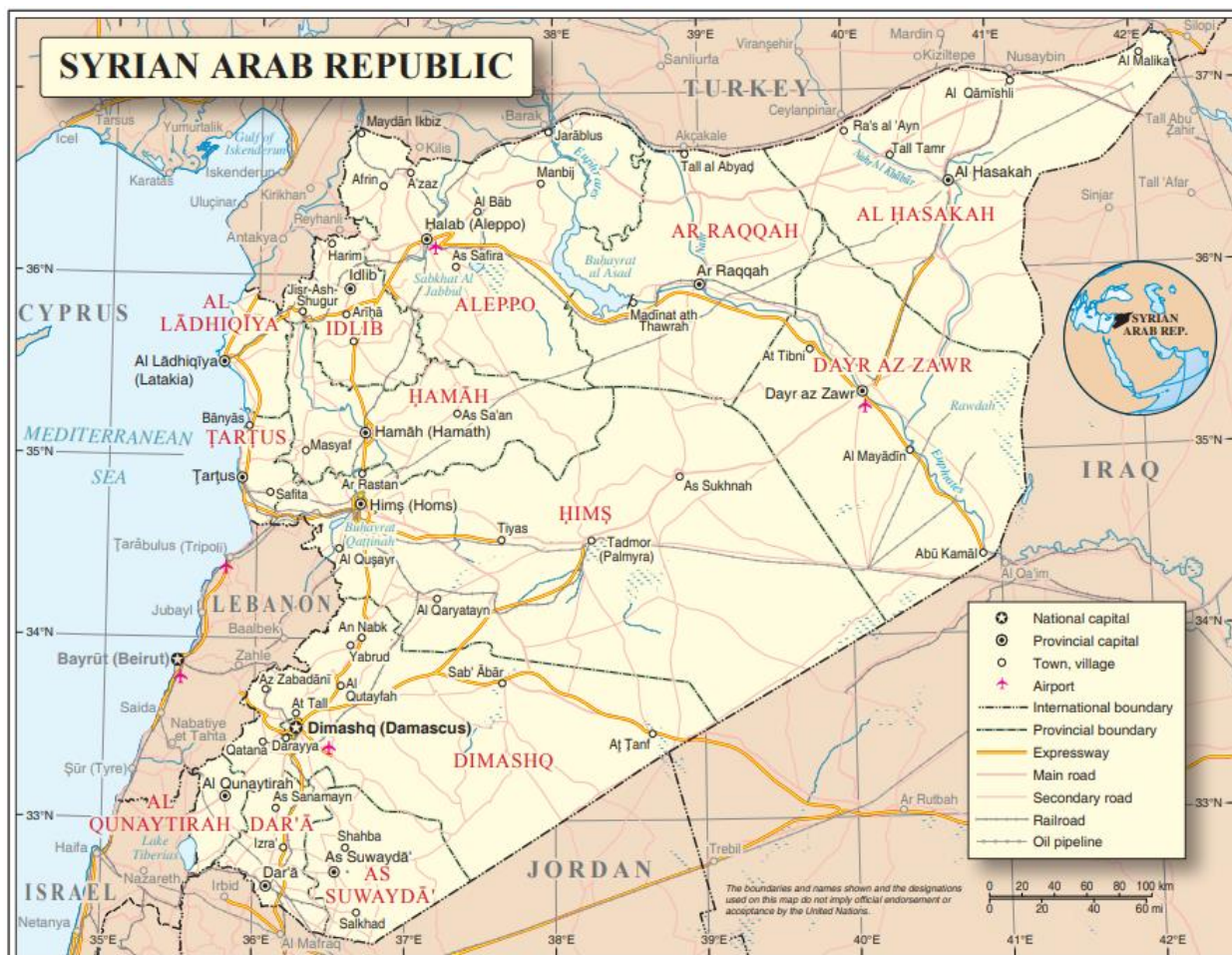
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Country information

Section 3 updated: 12 April 2022

3. Background

3.1 Map



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3.2 Demography

3.2.1 Estimates of Syria's population vary according to different sources. The United Nations Population Fund estimated that Syria had a population of 18.3 million in June 2021². However, according to an estimate published by the CIA World Factbook, as of July 2021 Syria had a population of 20,384,316, with 56.1% of the total population living in urban areas³.

3.2.2 In June 2020 WorldPop published the following map showing the population density in Syria⁴:

¹ United Nations, 'Map of Syria', April 2012

² UN Population Fund, 'World Population Dashboard Syrian Arab Republic', no date

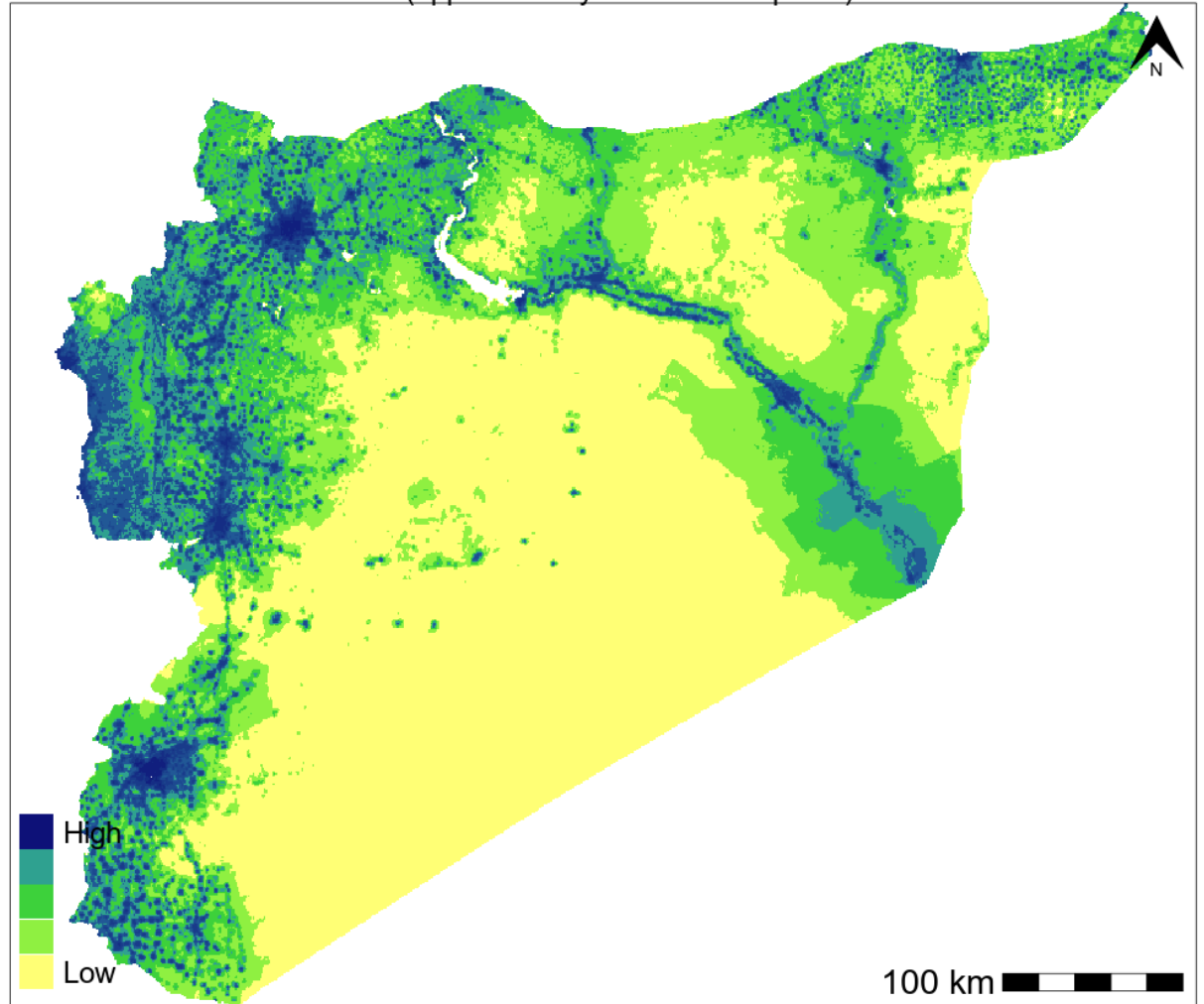
³ CIA World Factbook, 'Syria – People and Society', last updated 14 December 2021

⁴ WorldPop, 'Syrian Arab Republic – Population Density', 22 June 2020

Syria

Population Density 2020 UN adjusted

Estimated population density per grid-cell (People/Km²) at a resolution of 30 arc seconds (approximately 1km at the equator)



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3.3 Circumstances that led to war

3.3.1 In March 2021 the BBC published an article entitled 'Why has the Syrian war lasted 10 years?' which stated:

'Even before the conflict began, many Syrians were complaining about high unemployment, corruption and a lack of political freedom under President Bashar al-Assad, who succeeded his father, Hafez, after he died in 2000.

'In March 2011, pro-democracy demonstrations erupted in the southern city of Deraa, inspired by uprisings in neighbouring countries against repressive rulers.

'When the Syrian government used deadly force to crush the dissent, protests demanding the president's resignation erupted nationwide.

'The unrest spread and the crackdown intensified. Opposition supporters took up arms, first to defend themselves and later to rid their areas of

security forces. Mr Assad vowed to crush what he called "foreign-backed terrorism".

'The violence rapidly escalated and the country descended into civil war.'⁵

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3.4 Timeline

- 3.4.1 The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) (which describes itself as 'an independent, nonpartisan membership organization, think tank, and publisher'⁶ published an article in March 2021 entitled 'Syria's Civil War: The Descent into Horror'. Below are extracts from the article giving a broad outline of the conflict in Syria as it unfolded and what the situation on the ground was at the time of writing:

'The Arab Spring began in December 2010 with the self-immolation of a Tunisian fruit vendor decrying corruption. His act prompted protests in Tunisia, and then across the Middle East and North Africa, which forced longtime strongmen in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen to step down. Inspired by these previously unthinkable events, fifteen boys in the southwestern city of Deraa, Syria, spray-painted on a school wall: "The people want the fall of the regime." They were arrested and tortured. Demonstrators who rallied behind them clashed with police, and protests spread. Many protesters were calling for something more modest than regime change: the release of political prisoners, an end to the half-century-old state of emergency, greater freedoms, and an end to corruption... Assad responded to protesters immediately, offering just token reforms while directing security services to put down the protests with force.

'Anti-regime protests soon spread from Deraa to major cities such as Damascus, Hama, and Homs. Events in Deraa offered a preview of what was to come elsewhere: The Syrian army fired on unarmed protesters and carried out mass arrests, both targeting dissidents and indiscriminately sweeping up men and boys, human rights monitors reported. Torture and extrajudicial executions were frequently reported at detention centers. Then, in late April 2011, the Syrian army brought in tanks, laying siege to Deraa. The civilian death toll mounted and residents were cut off from food, water, medicine, telephones, and electricity for eleven days. Amid international condemnation, the regime offered some concessions, but it also repeated the Deraa response in other places where there were protests, at far greater length and cost, leading some regime opponents to take up arms.

'... In July 2011, defectors from Assad's army announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and soon after they began to receive shelter in Turkey. Yet the FSA, outgunned by the regime, struggled to bring its loose coalition under centralized command and control. FSA militias often didn't coordinate their operations and sometimes had competing interests, reflecting their varied regional backers. With resources scarce, they preyed at times on the very populations they were charged with protecting.'⁷

⁵ BBC, '[Why has the Syrian war lasted 10 years?](#)', 12 March 2021

⁶ CFR, '[About CFR](#)', no date

⁷ CFR, '[Syria's Civil War: The Descent Into Horror](#)', 17 March 2021

3.4.2 The same source further stated:

‘Both Assad’s forces and rebel groups have regularly targeted civilians in areas outside of their control. The deaths of some 1,400 civilians from chemical weapons deployed by the Assad regime in the summer of 2013 mobilized world powers to dismantle the regime’s chemical arsenal. However, in the years since, the Syrian government has employed devastating conventional arms that have also caused massive civilian casualties.

‘The regime has made regular use of sieges and aerial bombardment. These collective-punishment tactics serve dual purposes, analysts say: they raise the costs of resistance to civilians so that they will pressure rebels to acquiesce, and they prevent local committees from offering a viable alternative to the regime’s governance. In 2018, the UN humanitarian agency said more than one million people lived in areas that were besieged or otherwise beyond the reach of aid.

‘Despite a UN Security Council resolution in 2014 aimed at securing humanitarian aid routes, aid became politicized as Assad would grant UN convoys permission to distribute food and medicine in government-held areas while denying them access to rebel-held areas, and rights advocates charged the regime with targeting medical facilities and personnel.’⁸

3.4.3 The CFR report continued:

‘The regime captured the last rebel-held enclave of eastern Aleppo in December 2016 after a prolonged siege and bombardment. The city, Syria’s economic powerhouse, had been contested since 2012, and its capture marked a stark reversal of fortune for the opposition; in 2013, rebels had nearly encircled the regime-controlled western part of the city. But the campaign also demonstrated how dependent Assad has become on his foreign backers—both the Russian air force and Shiite militias—as his own forces have weakened.

‘Scores of civilians were massacred in the battle’s last days in what a UN spokesperson called “a complete meltdown of humanity.” With their defeat in Aleppo, rebels were isolated to northern Idlib province, parts of the south, and small enclaves around Damascus and Homs.

‘... The civil war entered a new stage in October 2019 after U.S. President Donald J. Trump removed the roughly one thousand U.S. troops supporting Kurdish fighters on the Syria-Turkey border. The surprise move cleared the way for Turkey’s Erdogan to launch a military operation there. Aiming to push Kurdish forces away from the border, Turkish troops and their Syrian rebel allies seized towns and villages, causing hundreds of thousands of people to flee. The SDF [Syrian Democratic Forces] turned to the Syrian government for help, allowing regime soldiers to re-enter areas that had been held by the Kurds for years. Russian troops also entered the region to support the Syrian government.

‘... With the assistance of their foreign backers, Assad’s forces besieged and bombarded the rebels’ final redoubts in Syria’s northwest in late 2019,

⁸ CFR, ‘[Syria’s Civil War: The Descent Into Horror](#)’, 17 March 2021

imperiling hundreds of thousands of civilians. By December, the regime and its allies advanced into Idlib, where Russia-backed forces launched a devastating air campaign and clashes resumed between the regime and Turkish forces seeking to protect their opposition posts in the area.

‘A cease-fire agreement signed by Ankara and Moscow in January [2020] quickly collapsed as regime forces captured cities along the strategically significant M5 highway, which connects Damascus and Aleppo. Hostilities between the regime and the Turks intensified in February 2020, when Syrian government forces killed Turkish troops in direct combat for the first time, spurring Turkey to retaliate with strikes against dozens of regime targets. The fighting endangered Idlib’s population, which ballooned to three million as government authorities offered rebel fighters and civilians the choice of surrendering—risking conscription or arrest—or being bused north to the province. The heightened violence resulted in the war’s largest mass displacement to date, with some nine hundred thousand people forced from their homes. A March 2020 cease-fire agreement between Moscow and Ankara has largely quelled the fighting, despite violations on both sides.’⁹

3.4.4 The same source concluded:

‘A decade after the uprising that sparked the war, Syria is still mired in low-level conflict, political instability, and economic turmoil. The 2020 cease-fire has stemmed violence in the Turkey-controlled northwest, while the regime controls most of the rest of the country with help from Russia and Iran. At the same time, Israel has increasingly bombed targets in Syria said to belong to Iran-linked militias, including Hezbollah. A U.S. air strike targeted an Iraq-based militia in Syria just weeks after the inauguration of President Joe Biden in 2021.

‘Though the violence has waned, civilians are now suffering an economic crisis. More than 80 percent of the population lives in poverty. Syrians have been the main victims of international sanctions, including the U.S. Caesar Act, which is meant to pressure the regime to reform. Though having little apparent effect on Assad, the sanctions have discouraged states such as the United Arab Emirates from normalizing relations with Syria.’¹⁰

3.4.5 For timelines of events Syria in general and the conflict, see the [BBC’s Syria profile timeline](#)¹¹, [CNN’s Syrian Civil War Fast Facts timeline](#)¹² and the Chronology section of the European Asylum Support Office’s (EASO) July 2021 report entitled ‘[Syria: Security situation](#)’¹³.

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⁹ CFR, ‘[Syria’s Civil War: The Descent Into Horror](#)’, 17 March 2021

¹⁰ CFR, ‘[Syria’s Civil War: The Descent Into Horror](#)’, 17 March 2021

¹¹ BBC, ‘[Syria profile -Timeline](#)’, 14 January 2019

¹² CNN, ‘[Syrian Civil War Fast Facts](#)’, updated 8 April 2021

¹³ EASO, ‘[Syria: Security situation](#)’, (page 292), July 2021

4. Protagonists

4.1 Pro-government forces

a. Syrian forces

4.1.1 In July 2021 EASO published a report, citing various sources, entitled 'Syria: Security Situation' which stated:

'The Syrian Armed Forces consist of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), the navy, the air force, the intelligence services and the National Defense Forces militia. Bashar al Assad acts as the commander in chief of the SAA and the armed forces. Operational control of the forces was maintained by the Chief of Staff of the Syrian Armed Forces.

'As of 2020, the Syrian Armed Forces were estimated to have 169 000 military personnel of which 130,000 were serving in the SAA. The US Department of Intelligence estimated in a report covering the period between July and September 2020, that the SAA had between 4,000 and 10,000 troops deployed in north-east Syria, between the cities of Manbij (Aleppo governorate) and Tal Tamr (Hasaka governorate).

'The SAA comprises of five main corps (the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th Corps), each consisting of divisions and led by a major general. The 4th and 5th Corps were created under Russian initiative after September 2015. The two corps operated either under joint Russian-Syrian command (4th Corps) or explicit Russian command (5th Corps).

'Apart from the five main corps, the SAA also has several semi-independent units: the Republican Guard, the Special Forces and the 4th Armoured Division, which also fall under the command of the Chief of Staff. The SAA is said to rely often on key "praetorian units" such as the Republican Guard, the 4th Armoured Division and the Special Forces for offensive operations. These units are reportedly mainly composed of Alawites loyal to the GoS [Government of Syria] and reported to have receive preferential access to modern weapons.

'The 4th Division is described to be made up of "elite" forces although in practice it is "a collection of loosely affiliated units", reportedly under the command of the president's brother - Maher Assad.'¹⁴

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b. Pro-government militias

4.1.2 In December 2019 EASO published a report, citing various sources, entitled 'Syria: Actors' which stated:

'After the beginning of the civil war in 2011, the Syrian government organized a network of auxiliary pro-government militias to supplement the army's combat capabilities and structural deficiencies. The use of militias in Syria is legally possible under Article 10 of the Military Service law, which

¹⁴ EASO, '[Syria: Security situation](#)', (page 19), July 2021

permits the use of “auxiliary forces” and “other forces that are necessitated by circumstances” to fight alongside the SAA.

‘The pro-government militias were at first organised as “popular committees” from local communities controlled or loyal to the regime to defend their towns and neighborhoods against opposition forces, and comprised mainly of Shia and Alawite individuals. Additionally, the regime also relied on a network of criminal gangs of Alawites linked with the Assad family... who were mobilised and armed to suppress the early protests.

‘... By 2012, the government took steps to consolidate these militias under its control and incorporated them under an umbrella network set up with Iran’s assistance called the National Defense Forces (NDF)... The NDF were reported to be “quite inclusive of all the groups that are willing to fight on the side of Syrian government”, for instance incorporating in their ranks Sunnis from Damascus and Aleppo.

‘... Estimations of NDF’s fighting strength vary with sources indicating that during their peak in 2014-2015 they had between 80,000 to 100,000 fighters, while figures from 2017 assess their capacity to be more than 100,000 soldiers. At least one battalion of about 1,000 – 1,500 women was reported to serve in the NDF, mainly in non-combat positions.’¹⁵

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c. Hezbollah

4.1.3 In March 2017 CFR published an article entitled ‘Who’s Who in Syria’s Civil War’ which stated:

‘The Lebanese Shia movement was established during the country’s civil war and expanded its support by putting up a guerrilla resistance to Israel in subsequent years. Its involvement in Syria’s civil war, though, has implicated the group in Assad’s killing of civilians and political repression, eroding its popularity in the Arab world. In Syria, it has galvanized a mostly Sunni opposition that now sees Hezbollah as a sectarian partisan and a beachhead of Iranian domination of the country.

‘... Hezbollah has sent military advisors, and eventually, its elite forces and ground troops to fight in Syria. Its forces in Syria numbered between four thousand and eight thousand at the start of 2016, says IISS, and, with Syria’s infantry weakened, they have been vital to rolling back opposition forces and holding territory cleared by Russian air strikes.

‘... Like its Syrian and Iranian allies, it has suffered from heavy battlefield losses, and estimates of fatalities range upwards from a thousand... Hezbollah militants have primarily fought Sunni opposition forces, particularly along the southwestern border Syria shares with Lebanon.’¹⁶

4.1.4 EASO stated in December 2019 that:

‘Hezbollah fighters assisted the Syrian government in military operations in many areas of the country since 2012, although they confirmed their presence only in 2013. They were involved in defending or recapturing of

¹⁵ EASO, ‘[Syria: Actors](#)’, (page 33-34), December 2019

¹⁶ CFR, ‘[Who’s Who in Syria’s Civil War](#)’, last updated 28 April 2017

Druze, Shia, Alawite, Sunni, and Christian villages around the Syrian city al-Qusayr, as well as several Shia dominated suburbs of Damascus like Sayyida Zeinab.

'As of June 2018, the number of Hezbollah fighters in Syria was estimated to be between 7,000 and 10,000, the majority of which were reported to be deployed along the Lebanese-Syrian border in areas inhabited by Shias and near their headquarters in Lebanon. According to Christopher Kozak of ISW [Institute for the Study of War], Lebanese Hezbollah was the primary actor securing the Syrian-Lebanese Border. Presence of Hezbollah fighters in other areas of the country, including around the cities of Homs and Damascus and in Deir Ez-Zor governorate has also been reported.'¹⁷

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d. Foreign Shia militias

4.1.5 The April 2017 report published by the CFR stated:

'Iranian military advisors and Hezbollah militants have been reinforced by other Shia militants, primarily from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan. Some of the Iraqi militias are offshoots of the Popular Mobilization Fronts fighting to retake Iraqi territory captured by the Islamic State. The Afghan fighters are largely refugees who have long resided in Iran and were recruited by Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps with offers of citizenship or payoffs.

'Their original aim was to defend Shia holy sites that they believe would be wiped out if Sunni militants toppled Assad's government. Foremost among them is the tomb of Sayyida Zainab, the prophet Mohammed's granddaughter, in a southern Damascus suburb. But as pro-Assad Syrian forces have been depleted by defections and casualties, these foreigners have come to a broader defense of the Assad regime, ranging across Syria's frontlines against opposition groups.

'Their ranks have been estimated to be as high as twenty-five thousand. They have proven vital to the regime's ground fighting, particularly in the battle for Aleppo. They have primarily clashed with Sunni-led opposition forces, particularly over the contested, populous western spine of the country.'¹⁸

4.1.6 EASO stated in December 2019:

'Apart from the Syrian pro-government militias, Shia foreign fighters were mobilised by Iran and sent to fight in Syria on the side of the Assad government. The most prominent groups included the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade, the Pakistani Zeinabiyoun Brigade, as well as various Iraqi Shia militias that are members of the Popular Mobilization Forces, and fighters from Yemen. Estimation[s] regarding the strength of these militias vary considerably with some sources stating that the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade and the Pakistani Zeinabiyoun Brigade together account for 15,000 fighters, while others put the total number of Shia foreign

¹⁷ EASO, '[Syria: Actors](#)', (page 34), December 2019

¹⁸ CFR, '[Who's Who in Syria's Civil War](#)', last updated 28 April 2017

fighters in Syria from Afghanistan, Yemen and Iraq to be between 8,000 and 12,000.

‘During the first half of 2019, Iraqi Shia militias were reported to be present primarily in the eastern parts of Syria and take part in cross-border operations against ISIL [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – also known as Daesh] on the western bank of the Euphrates River. Iraqi Shia militias were also located in around the Al Tanf Garrison, near the Jordanian border area occupied by US forces.

‘Sources published in 2018 reported that Iran has established the Local Defense Forces (LDF) which include local militias that operated outside of official military structures and were responsible for recruiting 90,000 local Syrian fighters since 2017. In April 2017, the LDF were formally integrated in the Syrian Armed Forces, although sources noted that they still reported to Iran, which continued to support them.

‘Palestinian militias also supported the government military in the conflict. The most prominent of these militias are Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC) which existed since before the uprising, the SAA-affiliated Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA) and the Liwa al-Quds (the Quds Brigade). Liwa al-Quds is regarded as the largest Palestinian pro-government militia with an estimated 3,500 to 5,000 fighters.’¹⁹

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e. Iran

4.1.7 The April 2017 report published by the CFR stated:

‘Syria is Iran’s main ally in the Arab world, and Tehran entered the conflict fearing that any successor to the Assad regime led by the country’s Sunni majority would align with its rival Saudi Arabia. As the civil war has dragged on, its fears have shifted to the threat of anarchy in Syria, which would foster conditions in which Sunni jihadi groups could thrive. It has focused most of its efforts in the country’s west, where opposition groups most directly threatened the regime.

‘... Iran has helped keep the Assad regime economically afloat even while it was bearing the weight of international sanctions for its nuclear program. Early on it dispatched military advisors, and later, members of its elite Quds Force and Revolutionary Guard soldiers, their first major deployment abroad. They numbered up to two thousand at the start of 2016, according to IISS. Like Hezbollah, Iran had concealed the depth of its military involvement until mounting funerals made it apparent to the public. It is reported to have suffered several hundred casualties.’²⁰

4.1.8 In December 2019 EASO stated:

‘Since 2012, Iran has supplied Assad’s troops with IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] advisors, a network of Shia foreign fighters from the Lebanese Hezbollah and various militias from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and

¹⁹ EASO, ‘[Syria: Actors](#)’, (page 35-36), December 2019

²⁰ CFR, ‘[Who’s Who in Syria’s Civil War](#)’, last updated 28 April 2017

Iraq. Iran has also played an important role in the foundation of the Syrian pro-government militias such as the National Defense Forces (NDF), which were formed under IRGC supervision.

‘... US Ambassador James Jeffrey, the Special Representative for Syrian Engagement and Special Envoy for the Global Coalition Against Daesh assessed in a May 2019 statement that Iran retained thousands of IRGC-QF [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds Force] advisors in Syria, which provide leadership for over 10,000 Iranian backed proxies from third countries. The US Congress-appointed Syria Study Group noted in a September 2019 report that the Iranian military presence in Syria was at its height in 2015 and has since decreased gradually.

‘According to the Israeli chief of staff Gadi Ezenkot, 3000 members of the IRGC were deployed to Syria by 2016 and Iran was “building a force of up to 100,000 Shia fighters [sic] from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq”.

‘... Apart from providing the Syrian government with troops and training, Iran has also established military command centres and deployed advanced weapons systems in Syria, including long-range missiles, drones, radar systems and air defense capabilities.’²¹

4.1.9 The July 2021 EASO report stated:

‘As of March 2020, Iran presence in Syria consisted of an estimated 3,000 IRGC military advisors and between 30,000 to 50,000 affiliated foreign militias. In 2020, Iranian presence and influence was reported throughout Syria, with a higher concentration in Damascus, Aleppo, Deir Ez-Zor, Homs and Quneitra governorates. Iranian-backed forces are fighting on behalf of the GoS against anti-government groups and ISIL.’²²

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f. Russia

4.1.10 The April 2017 report published by the CFR stated:

‘Moscow’s ties to Syria long predate the civil war, and it provided the Assad regime with a diplomatic shield at the United Nations after the start of the uprising. Then, in December 2015, it intervened militarily, focusing on supporting Assad’s campaign in the west and north, particularly in its bid to recapture rebel-held eastern Aleppo.

‘... Russia has deployed fighter jets and attack helicopters in population centers, providing government-aligned ground forces close air support to retake territory.

‘Activists and monitoring groups have accused Russia of bombarding such population centers as east Aleppo as part of a scorched-earth strategy meant to deplete rebels and encourage civilians to evacuate or capitulate. Allegations include the use of bunker-buster bombs, which wreak particular

²¹ EASO, ‘[Syria: Actors](#)’, (page 4-5), December 2019

²² EASO, ‘[Syria: Security situation](#)’, (page 15-16), July 2021

destruction on shelters and medical facilities built underground to withstand bombardment.²³

4.1.11 The EASO report published in July 2021 stated:

‘Russia intervened militarily in the Syrian conflict in September 2015, in support of the Syrian government and is credited with changing the tides of war in Assad’s favour. Russia’s military presence was focused mainly on an aerial campaign with a naval component. Ground forces consisted “primarily of special forces, which focused on training, advising, and assistant partner forces and conducting special reconnaissance missions”. Estimates from March 2020 put the number of Russian troops in Syria at 5,000.’²⁴

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4.2 Forces opposed to the government

g. Free Syrian Army (FSA)

4.2.1 The April 2017 report published by the CFR stated:

‘The FSA was the main group to emerge when the regime first cracked down on protestors. Though it was led by defected army officers and comprised many former Syrian army conscripts, its name was something of a misnomer: With just scarce resources, its leadership could never centralize command and control over the many militias that had affiliated with it, and many of those groups began operating as criminal outfits.

‘... The FSA received light arms, and later, artillery, including antiaircraft equipment, from its regional backers. It also received some nonlethal aid from the United States, but Washington has often been reluctant to arm even the groups it has vetted out of fear that heavy weaponry might fall into the hands of Islamist and jihadi groups.’²⁵

4.2.2 In October 2019, the Turkish state news agency Anadolu stated:

‘The FSA formed a legitimate military backbone of the opposition with the Syrian flag and was positioned as the military wing of the Syrian Provisional Government established in March 2013.

‘The FSA became active in most of the country until 2015 and fought on the fronts of Aleppo-Idlib, Raqqqa-Deyrizor-Haseke, Hama-Latakia, Homs, and Damascus-Dera-Kuneytra-Suveyda.

‘The support of the Russian and Iranian-backed foreign terrorist groups to the Bashar Assad regime caused the FSA to lose strength on all fronts in 2016.’²⁶

4.2.3 The same source explained that on 30 December 2017, 30 groups that were affiliated to the Free Syrian Army united under the Syrian National Army (see [SNA](#))²⁷.

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²³ CFR, ‘[Who’s Who in Syria’s Civil War](#)’, last updated 28 April 2017

²⁴ EASO, ‘[Syria: Security situation](#)’, (page 15), July 2021

²⁵ CFR, ‘[Who’s Who in Syria’s Civil War](#)’, last updated 28 April 2017

²⁶ Anadolu Agency, ‘[Free Syrian Army transforms into Syrian National Army](#)’, 9 October 2019

²⁷ Anadolu Agency, ‘[Free Syrian Army transforms into Syrian National Army](#)’, 9 October 2019

h. National Liberation Front (NLF)

4.2.4 In February 2020 the BBC stated that the National Liberation Front is 'a Turkish-backed alliance that includes hardline Islamist groups like Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham, as well as several groups fighting under the banner of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) - a force considered more "moderate" by Western powers.'²⁸

4.2.5 In December 2019 EASO stated that:

'The NLF was formed in 2018 by rebel armed groups in the Idlib area. The group uses the brand of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) – the umbrella armed group formed by the anti-government opposition in 2011 and... is made up of moderate but also Islamist factions. These factions include:

- Feilaq al-Sham, considered the main actor in the NLF and Turkey's closest rebel partner. According to a Syrian Muslim Brotherhood official interviewed by the International Crisis Group, Feilaq al-Sham was founded by members of the Muslim Brotherhood but it takes its own decisions. It is present in the Idlib area and especially in Turkey-controlled areas of Aleppo governorate. The group maintains working relations with HTS [[Hayat Tharir al-Sham](#)]. Its leader, Fadlallah al-Hajji, is also the commander of the NLF.
- Ahrar al-Sham: is a Salafi armed group that controls local communities in southern Idlib and northern Hama countryside. An HTS rival, the group lost ground to HTS following clashes in the beginning of 2019. The group was reportedly concentrated in Jabal al Zawiyah; the Jabal al-Arbaeen area, including Ariha; and around Maaret al-Nouman.
- The Free Idlib Army: an alliance of formerly Western-supported factions that has a long history of using the FS brand.
- Jaish al-Ahrar: an Ahrar al-Sham splinter ground.
- Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki: an Islamist faction that is based near Aleppo and has repeatedly changed sides between rival insurgent groups. Clashes with HTS in January 2019 significantly impacted its capacity and territorial control. In March 2019, the group dissolved and remaining fighters joining factions of the SNA.

'Several sources indicate that Turkey provides weapons and salaries to NLF, although the support received is not considered to be substantial by its fighters. Following clashes with HTS that took place in the beginning of 2019, NLF lost control over territory in Idlib and subsequently ceded the civil administration and surrounding areas in Idlib to HTS following an agreement between the groups.'²⁹

4.2.6 The BBC further stated that 'In October [2019] NLF merged with other rebel groups in northern Syria and rebranded itself to become part of the Syrian National Army (SNA) under the command of the Syrian Interim Government's (SIG) Ministry of Defence.'³⁰

²⁸ BBC, '[Syria: Who's in control of Idlib?](#)', 18 February 2020

²⁹ EASO, '[Syria: Actors](#)', (page 54-55), December 2019

³⁰ BBC, '[Syria: Who's in control of Idlib?](#)', 18 February 2020

i. **Syrian National Army (SNA)**

4.2.7 In July 2021 EASO stated:

‘In northern Aleppo governorate and areas of Raqqa and Hasaka governorates, anti-GoS armed groups are incorporated under the Syrian National Army (SNA), “a collection of Turkish-backed armed opposition groups”. As of December 2020, the SNA together with Turkish armed forces was reported to be in control of Operation Euphrates Shield (area between Azaz, Al-Bab, and Jarablus) and Operation Olive Branch (Afrin district) areas in northern Aleppo governorate, and in the Operation Peace Spring area between Tall Abyad (Raqqa governorate) and Ras al Ain (Hasaka governorate).

‘The factions that comprise the SNA are hostile towards the GoS presence in south Aleppo governorate and SDF forces controlling areas in the province, but follow Turkey’s order in conducting military operations against either. According to a January 2021 report by Syrian researcher Khayrallah al-Hilu, the SNA has not fought against the GoS in any of the three areas under its control. It has engaged in military operations led by Turkey against the SDF or outside of Syria.

‘The SNA reportedly has between 30104 to 40105 distinct armed groups in its composition... In October 2019, the merger between the SNA and the National Liberation Front (NLF) - a Turkey-backed alliance of opposition-armed groups that is present in the Idlib area, under the Syrian National Army banner was announced by the so-called Syrian Interim Government.

‘While nominally the SNA is a unified structure that sits under the formal supervision of the so-called Syrian Interim Government’s Ministry of Defence, the constituent groups “each answer directly to Turkey and maintain its pre-National Army form”. Several sources assessed that the SNA does not function as a unified military structure, with each faction acting largely independent from another.

‘... The total strength of the SNA was estimated by Syria expert Charles Lister in a Middle East Institute article to be around 35,000 fighters whereas the US Defense Intelligence Agency assessed the Turkish-backed armed groups consists of between 22,000 and 50,000 fighters.’³¹

j. **Hayat Tharir al-Sham (HTS)**

4.2.8 In July 2021 EASO stated:

‘Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham or the Organization for the Liberation of the Levant (HTS) is described as the most important and powerful actor in the Idlib area. The Center for Strategic and International Studies 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. The US , UN, EU and Turkey have designated HTS as a terrorist organisation affiliated with Al Qaeda. HTS has publicly distanced itself from

³¹ EASO, ‘[Syria: Security situation](#)’, (page 20-22), July 2021

Al Qaeda in 2017, claiming it is an independent entity. In 2020, HTS has clashed with Al Qaeda-aligned factions operating in Idlib, significantly weakening their position.

'HTS is comprised of several armed factions, including Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (also known as Jabhat al-Nusrah and previously as the Al-Nusrah Front), Ansar al-Sham and Ajnad al-Sham, among others. Depending on the source, HTS's strength is evaluated to be between 7,000 and 10,000 fighters.

'TS has created several civilian bodies in the territory under its control, including a governance body responsible for civilian functions – the Syrian Salvation Government, a court system that applies Sharia law and an extensive prison system. The Syrian Salvation Government is reportedly significantly under-resourced, relying on 7,000 civil servants to administer a population of approximately 3.2 million. Third parties have supplemented certain public services, such as international and local NGOs in healthcare, volunteers in education and tribes in administering justice.

'HTS has cooperated with factions of the National Liberation Front (NLF) as part of a joint military operations room (al-Fath al-Mubeen). It has banned the formation of alternative military operations by other factions operating in the Idlib area without its permission. It has also cooperated with Turkey during the GoS offensive on Idlib in 2019 and early 2020 and in its aftermath. HTS has largely accepted the March 2020 ceasefire of hostilities in the Idlib area brokered by Turkey and Russia and has been active in precluding other hard-line anti-GoS factions in the area from violating it.

'The Col [the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic] assessed that between July 2019 and January 2020, the GoS offensive had eroded the military and political control of HTS. Increased Turkish presence in Idlib and high-ranking defections from the group have further weakened HTS' position. Despite these setbacks, HTS has managed to remain the dominant armed group in the area.'³²

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k. Daesh

4.2.9 Daesh is also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Islamic State (IS).

4.2.10 In July 2021 EASO stated:

'ISIL began capturing territory in Syria in 2013 which attracted an international US-led coalition military response. Turkey has conducted ground operations against ISIL since 2016. By August 2017, the US-led coalition has conducted over 11,000 airstrikes in Syria against ISIL targets. GoS forces also fought against ISIL, reclaiming territories such as Palmyra, while Russia claimed air strikes on ISIL targets. ISIL lost territorial control in Syria in March 2019, and has since operated as a covert network.

'Syria and Iraq represent the "core area for ISIL", which ISIL operate as a single front. Former Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS

³² EASO, '[Syria: Security situation](#)', (page 25-26), July 2021

James Jeffrey assessed in December 2020 that ISIL activity in Syria is focused on GoS-held areas in the Badia desert (Syrian Central Desert) south of the Euphrates and east of Palmyra, where it manages to “intermittently hold some terrain”. The same source further noted that ISIL was also maintaining a low-level insurgency along the Euphrates river in north-east Syria. The UN Security Council noted in a February 2021 report that ISIL uses the areas of the Syrian desert in Deir Ez-Zor governorate as a safe haven and base for launching attacks against GoS and SDF forces.

‘...A March 2021 analysis by the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) wrote that ISIL controls several small swaths of territory in the mountainous areas of the Syrian Central Desert (Badia) from where it launches attacks on GoS forces, as detailed below:

- north-east of Rahjan, towards Ithriya (Hama governorate);
- Jabal Haiyan and Jabal Abu Rujmain areas around Palmyra (Homs governorate);
- east of Resafa, overlooking Tabqa Air Base (Raqqa governorate);
- Jabal Bishri, in the area between Resafa, Shoula and Sukhna (Homs and Deir Ez-Zor governorates); ‘
- In the area between Shoula and Faydat (Deir Ez-Zor governorate).’³³

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I. Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

4.2.11 In December 2019 EASO, citing various sources, stated:

‘The Syrian Democratic Forces (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. The SDF is dominated by the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) who helped establish the SDF in October 2015, provides its core fighting forces and largely ensures its leadership. According to International Crisis Group, the SDF “generally accepts that the YPG is its core fighting force, which maintains command and control”.

‘The Kurdish People’s Protection Units were established in 2012 as the military wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) – a Syrian branch of the PKK [Kurdistan Workers’ Party]. They are divided into two groups: the People’s Protection Units – Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) – and the Women’s Protection Units – Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê (YPJ). [...] The stated goal of the YPG and YPJ is to “protect the Kurdish people and their cultural, political, and social existence”.’³⁴

4.2.12 EASO further stated that:

‘The SDF is led by a General Commander who is allegedly elected by the Military Council, which plays the role of the highest military authority of the SDF and is made up of representatives from each military group in the SDF. [...] According to information provided by the Combined Joint Task Force -

³³ EASO, ‘[Syria: Security situation](#)’, (page 28-29), July 2021

³⁴ EASO, ‘[Syria: Actors](#)’, (page 45), December 2019

Operation Inherent Resolve, the SDF is a “broad spectrum security apparatus that conducts counterinsurgency operations, [local] patrols, checkpoint operations, detention operations, and clearance patrols”.

‘[...] Various sources estimate SDF’s strength to be around 60,000 fighters. Despite YPG’s media claims that its forces comprise of around 50,000 fighters, Omran Center for Strategic Studies estimated it to be more between 20,000 and 30,000 fighters.’³⁵

- 4.2.13 In a report entitled ‘Syria: Targeting of individuals’ published in March 2020, EASO, citing various sources, stated:

‘SDF was neither in alliance with the Syrian opposition nor the government, but it was nevertheless largely dependent on the GoS [Government of Syria], which funded certain state institutions in the area and paid salaries to state employees. 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. 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.’³⁶

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m. Turkey

- 4.2.14 In July 2021 EASO stated:

‘Turkey has been involved in Syria’s conflict since 2011, supporting opposition groups attempting to remove the Assad government from power, such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA)-branded factions and Islamist groups. Turkey’s main objective in Syria has been to prevent the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) from “establishing an autonomous area along Syria’s northern border with Turkey”. The US Congressional Research Service (US CRS) stated that Turkey “maintains military forces in northern Syria as part of a broader campaign targeting Kurdish fighters”. As of March 2020, Turkey fielded between 3,000 to 4,000 troops in Syria, although the number constantly fluctuates. In 2020 and early 2021, it maintained military outposts and troops in Idlib governorate, northern Aleppo governorate and in the area between Tal Abyad and Ras Al-Ain. In 2020, Turkey engaged in military confrontations with GoS forces in north-east and north-west Syria, as well as with Kurdish forces.’³⁷

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³⁵ EASO, ‘[Syria: Actors](#)’, (page 45-46), December 2019

³⁶ EASO, ‘[Syria: Targeting of Individuals](#)’, (page 39), 10 March 2020

³⁷ EASO, ‘[Syria: Security situation](#)’, (page 16), July 2021

5. Nature and level of violence

5.1 Overall conflict statistics

5.1.1 On 24 September 2021, at the 48th session of the Human Rights Council, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet³⁸, gave an oral update on the extent of conflict-related deaths in Syria. Before September 2021, the last official death toll (191,369) issued by the UN was in 2014, when the situation in Syria grew more complex and dangerous, affecting the UNs capacity to maintain the required standards of quality and verification³⁹.

5.1.2 On 24 September 2021 Michelle Bachelet stated:

‘Before outlining the figures that result from this work, I would like to emphasize that we followed a strict methodology. Our numbers include only those people identifiable by full name, with an established date of death, and who died in an identified governorate. Any information that did not include these three elements was excluded, and exhaustive review was carried out to prevent duplicate records.

‘On this basis, we have compiled a list of 350,209 identified individuals killed in the conflict in Syria between March 2011 to March 2021.

‘Over one in every 13 was a woman – 26,727 women in all. Almost one in every 13 was a child: 27,126 children, to be exact.

‘The greatest number of documented killings was recorded in the Governorate of Aleppo, with 51,731 named individuals killed. Other locations with very heavy death tolls were Rural Damascus, with 47,483 deaths; Homs, with 40,986 deaths; Idlib, with 33,271 deaths; Hama, 31,993 deaths; and Tartus, which lost 31,369 people.

‘...We assess this figure of 350,209 as statistically sound, based as it is on rigorous work. But it is not – and should not be seen as – a complete number of conflict-related killings in Syria during this period. It indicates a minimum verifiable number, and is certainly an under-count of the actual number of killings.

‘The records that we have received with only partial information – and which were therefore excluded from our analysis – indicate the existence of a wider number of killings that as yet have not been fully documented. Tragically, there are also many other victims who left behind no witnesses or documentation as to their deaths, and whose stories we have not yet been able to uncover.’⁴⁰

5.1.3 The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), which describes itself as ‘an independent and impartial UK-based human rights organisation’⁴¹ has been monitoring the death toll throughout the conflict. On 1 June 2021 the SOHR published an article which stated that over 606,000 people have been

³⁸ UN OHCHR, ‘[Michelle Bachelet Jeria](#)’, no date

³⁹ UN OHCHR, ‘[Oral update on the extent of conflict-related deaths...](#)’, 24 September 2021

⁴⁰ UN OHCHR, ‘[Oral update on the extent of conflict-related deaths...](#)’, 24 September 2021

⁴¹ SOHR, ‘[About us](#)’, no date

killed across Syria since the beginning of the conflict⁴². Information regarding SOHR methodology can be found on the organisation's [About us webpage](#).

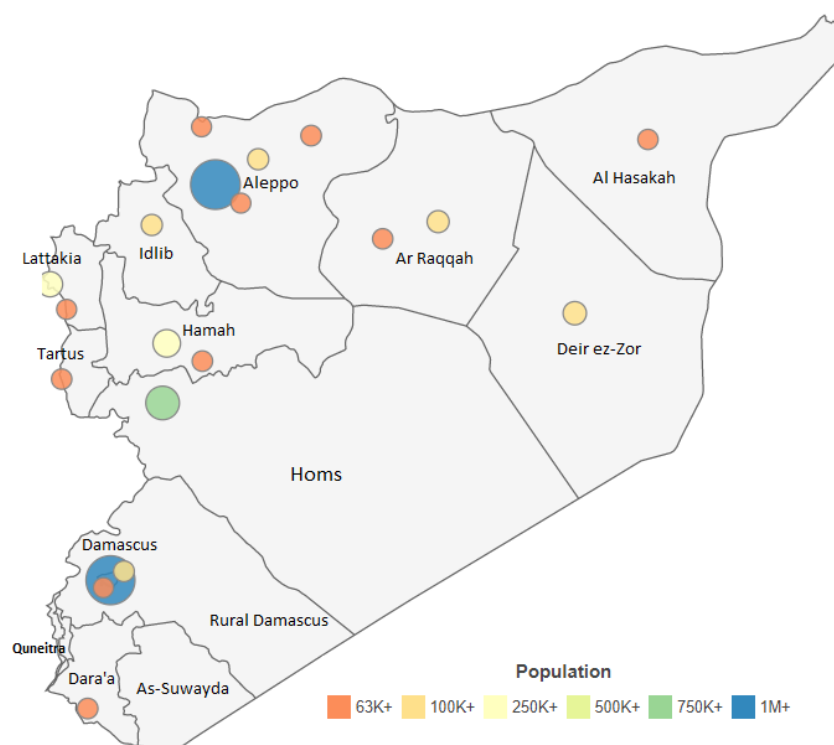
5.1.4 Another organisation, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) which describes itself as 'an independent human rights organization' that 'monitors and documents human rights violations in Syria'⁴³ stated that as of 14 June 2021, 228,099 civilians had been killed since March 2011, with 87.77% being killed at the hands of the Syrian Regime forces and Iranian militias⁴⁴. For methodology information see the SNHR Working Methodology document on 'About SNHR' section on the [SNHR website](#).

5.1.5 As shown above the death toll of the Syrian conflict ranges from between 200,000 to 600,000 people, with the higher end of the scale accounting for between 2% and 3% of Syria's current population (based on the two estimates found in [Demography](#)). Different sources report in different ways the number of fatalities caused by the conflict. Some sources distinguish between the number of civilians and combatants killed whereas others do not, while others focus only on battle-related deaths. It should be noted that variations in figures could be due to the complex nature of the conflict and different organisations' inability to access, verify and document data.

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5.2 Map of Syrian governorates with populations

5.2.1 The below map showing the population density of each of Syria's governorates was published by WorldPopulation Review⁴⁵. The name of each governorate was added to the map by CPIT.



⁴² SOHR, '[Over 606,000 people killed across Syria...](#)', 1 June 2021

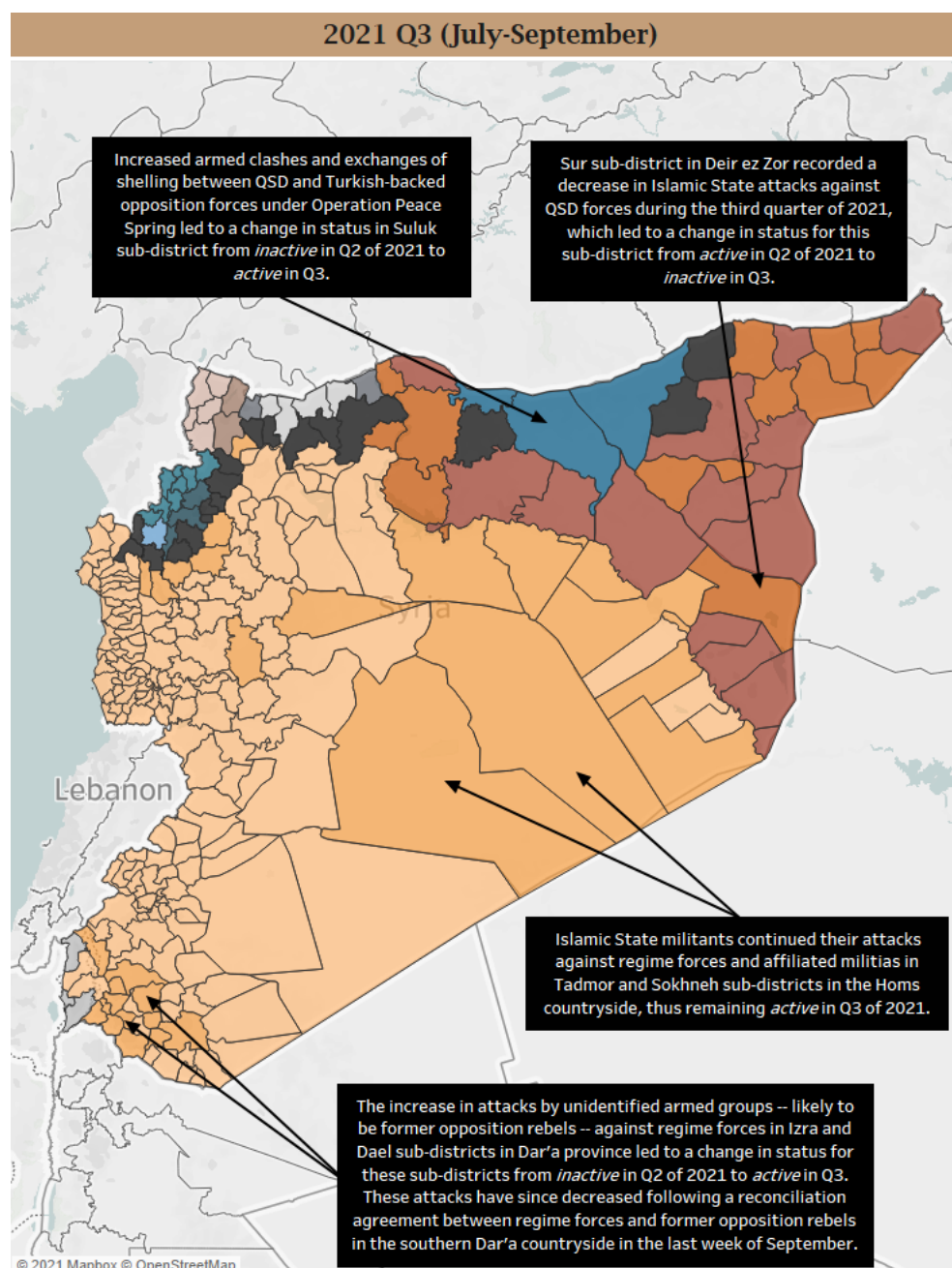
⁴³ SNHR, '[About us](#)', no date

⁴⁴ SNHR, '[Civilian Death Toll](#)', 14 June 2021

⁴⁵ World Population Review, '[Syria Population Density Map](#)', no date

5.3 Control of territory

- 5.3.1 On 14 October 2021 the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project's (ACLED) ('a disaggregated data collection, analysis, and crisis mapping project'⁴⁶) published the below infographic (the most up to date infographic available at the time of writing) that indicates who is in control of territory across the country and highlights the key developments in the conflict between the second and third quarter of 2021: (Note: the infographic refers to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as the QSD).



⁴⁶ ACLED, '[About ACLED](#)', no date

■ Contested	■ Operation Euphrates Shield	■ Operation Peace Spring	■ Regime
■ HTS: Hayat Tahrir al Sham	■ Operation Euphrates Shield (Inactive)	■ Opposition Rebels	■ Regime (Inactive)
■ HTS: Hayat Tahrir al Sham (Inactive)	■ Operation Olive Branch	■ QSD	
■ Military Forces of Israel (2009-) (Inactive)	■ Operation Olive Branch (Inactive)	■ QSD (Inactive)	

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5.4 Main incidents of violence between 2020 and 2021

a. 2020

5.4.1 The March 2021 United States Department of State (USSD) report for Human Rights Practices in Syria, covering events in 2020 stated:

‘Regime and proregime forces continued major aerial and ground offensives initiated in 2019 to recapture areas of northwest Syria, killing thousands of civilians and forcing nearly one million persons to flee before the brokering of a ceasefire in March [2020], which largely held through the remainder of the year. The assault, involving the use of heavy weapons, devastated the civilian infrastructure in the affected areas and exacerbated an already dire humanitarian situation. Syrian and Russian airstrikes repeatedly struck civilian sites, including hospitals, markets, schools, settlements for internally displaced persons, and farms, many of which were included in UN deconfliction lists... The UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria found it probable that the regime, its Russian allies, and other proregime forces committed attacks “marked by war crimes” that “may amount to crimes against humanity” during these attacks.

‘...Regime-linked paramilitary groups reportedly engaged in frequent violations and abuses, including massacres; indiscriminate killings; kidnapping of civilians; extreme physical abuse, including sexual violence; and unlawful detentions. Regime-aligned militias, including Hizballah, repeatedly launched attacks that killed and injured civilians.

‘Russian forces were implicated in the deaths of civilians resulting from airstrikes characterized by the UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria as indiscriminate and resulting in the widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, particularly during support of the regime’s military campaign in northwest Syria. These airstrikes destroyed hospitals, shelters, markets, homes, and other integral civilian facilities, damaging medical supplies and equipment and shutting down vital health-care networks, and followed a well documented pattern of attacks with serious and deleterious humanitarian and civilian impact.’⁴⁸

5.4.2 The same source further stated that:

‘Armed terrorist groups, such as al-Qa’ida-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), committed a wide range of abuses, including unlawful killings and kidnappings, unlawful detention, extreme physical abuse, deaths of civilians during attacks described by the UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria as indiscriminate, and forced evacuations from homes based on sectarian identity. Despite the territorial defeat of ISIS in 2019, the group continued to carry out unlawful killings, bombings, and kidnappings, sometimes targeting

⁴⁷ ACLED, ‘[The state of Syria: Q2 2021 – Q3 2021](#)’, 14 October 2021

⁴⁸ USSD, ‘[Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2020 - Syria](#)’, (Exec Sum), 31 March 2021

civilians. The Carnegie Corporation assessed that ISIS benefited from a security vacuum left by the various military forces reducing activity due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

‘Turkish-supported Syrian armed opposition groups in northern Syria committed human rights abuses, reportedly targeting Kurdish and Yezidi residents and other civilians, including the arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance of civilians, torture, sexual violence, forced evacuations from homes, looting and seizure of private property, transfer of detained civilians across the border into Turkey, the cutting of water to civilian populations, recruitment of child soldiers, and the looting and desecration of religious shrines.

‘Elements of the Syrian Democratic Forces, a coalition of Syrian Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, and other minority groups that included members of the Kurdish People’s Protection Units, reportedly engaged in human rights abuses, including arbitrary detentions, acts of corruption, and restrictions on freedom of assembly.’⁴⁹

5.4.3 In May 2021 ACLED published a report, citing various sources, entitled ‘Syria: 10 years on’ which stated:

‘ACLED data show that while conflict levels in northwest Syria plummeted when compared to those in 2019, the Idlib enclave remained one of the most unstable regions in the country in 2020. Nearly a third of all organized political violence events recorded in the country in 2020 occurred in Idlib. Meanwhile, discontent in the southern provinces, notably in Dar’a, remained a source of violence in the south. The Islamic State (IS) remained active in central and eastern Syria throughout the year, carrying out attacks in urban hubs, as well as in the Syrian desert. Lastly, Israel expanded the scope of its airstrikes in Syria in 2020 in response to Iranian entrenchment in the southern and central provinces.

‘The year 2020 began with a military campaign by regime and allied forces against the last stronghold of the opposition and Islamist factions in northwest Syria. The offensive, initially launched in mid-December 2019, resulted in significant regime advancements and the displacement of nearly one million civilians... The escalation of fighting in northwest Syria brought about a confrontation between Russian-backed regime forces and Turkish troops — the most significant confrontation since Turkey’s direct military intervention in Syria in 2016. The deadly round of hostilities was triggered by an airstrike that targeted a Turkish position in Idlib’s Balyun area, killing 33 Turkish soldiers. Turkey responded by launching a counter-offensive aimed at reversing regime advances. Turkey’s use of drones caused significant losses to the regime and allied militia fighters. Shortly after, a ceasefire agreement was signed between Turkey and Russia on 5 March 2020.

‘The ceasefire agreement and subsequent decline in hostilities contributed to a decrease in civilian fatalities in 2020. ACLED records a two-fold decrease in reported fatalities from violence targeting civilians across Syria in 2020, at

⁴⁹ USSD, ‘[Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2020 - Syria](#)’, (Exec Sum), 31 March 2021

over 1,980 fatalities for the year. This can largely be attributed to a reduction in fatalities in northwest Syria.’⁵⁰

5.4.4 The same source further stated:

‘While hostilities between regime forces and opposition groups in northwest Syria have significantly dropped since March 2020, sporadic clashes and daily shelling barrages by the regime continued until the end of the year and into 2021. Attacks by regime forces and loyal militias against rebel factions and Islamist factions like Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) increased again in mid-2020, coinciding with the resumption of Russian airstrikes in Idlib. These actions breached the ceasefire agreement intended to prevent further regime advancement in northwest Syria.’⁵¹

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b. Dec 2020 – Jan 2021

5.4.5 On 18 February 2021 the UN SC published a report on the political, humanitarian and security related developments in Syria between December 2020 and January 2021. The report stated:

‘In the north-west, the ceasefire in the Idlib de-escalation area was interspersed with air strikes, artillery shelling and occasional raids across contact lines. Mutual shelling was concentrated in locations south of the M4 highway, with some shelling directed at areas situated north of the highway. Raids and ground-based clashes remained local, limited and intermittent. Aerial bombardment predominantly focused on locations south of the M4 highway, with some reportedly taking place north of the highway within southern Idlib. Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, which has been designated a terrorist group by the Security Council, reportedly further consolidated its power inside the Idlib de-escalation area, while also experiencing some pushback from local groups. The contact lines in Tall Rif’at, Bab and Manbij saw increased artillery shelling and small arms fire, as well as attacks against oil refineries and storage facilities.

‘... Civilians were killed and injured as a result of ground-based strikes in southern Idlib and western Hama and armed clashes between and within various armed groups in the north-west, northern and eastern parts of the country. Armed clashes in Ayn Isa, Raqqah Governorate, resulted in the death, injury and displacement of civilians in that area. The majority of civilian casualties, however, were a result of attacks carried out by improvised explosive devices, including vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices, by unidentified perpetrators and also as a result of explosive remnants of war, including unexploded ordnance. Many of the improvised explosive device attacks were carried out in densely populated areas, including residential areas and local markets.

‘... The situation in the south-west part of the country remained tense, as assassinations and assassination attempts continued against fighters reconciled from former armed opposition groups as well as government security forces and officials. At least 10 civilians and fighters reconciled from former

⁵⁰ ACLED, ‘[Syria: 10 years on](#)’, (page 1-2), 14 May 2021

⁵¹ ACLED, ‘[Syria: 10 years on](#)’, (page 3), 14 May 2021

armed opposition groups were killed by unidentified perpetrators. Two heads of government-led local councils were killed in drive-by shootings by unidentified perpetrators.

'Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as Daesh) continued to carry out attacks in several areas, claiming responsibility for the killing of the head of a local council and her deputy, both of whom were linked to local authorities in the north-east. ISIL claimed responsibility for two attacks in the central part of the country: the first targeted Syrian Arab Army buses and the second targeted fuel transportation trucks... Targeted assassinations and attacks by unknown perpetrators against local tribal leaders and notables continued to be reported, most recently in Dayr al-Zawr

'... OHCHR verified at least 45 incidents in which at least 67 civilians, including 6 women and 17 children, were killed and at least 74 civilians, including 11 women and 35 children, were injured as a result of ongoing hostilities across the Syrian Arab Republic, including through ground-based strikes, improvised explosive devices, explosive remnants of war, armed clashes and targeted killings at the hands of various parties to the conflict or by unidentified perpetrators. At least 22 civilian deaths (36 per cent) were attributed to what appeared to be indiscriminate attacks with improvised explosive devices by unidentified perpetrators in busy markets and residential areas.'⁵²

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c. Feb 2021 – March 2021

- 5.4.6 On 22 April 2021 the UN SC published a report on the political, humanitarian and security related developments in Syria between February 2021 and March 2021. The report stated:

'In the north-west, the Idlib de-escalation area saw an escalation of hostilities, with at least 30 communities affected by artillery shelling and air strikes on 21 and 22 March. On 21 March, the Atarib Surgical Hospital in western Aleppo, which had received United Nations support, was hit by artillery fire, forcing its full evacuation and closure. Seven patients and visitors were killed in the attack, including two children. A total of 5 medical staff were among at least 12 civilians injured, some of them critically.

'... On the same day, multiple air-to-surface missiles impacted the road leading to the Bab al-Hawa border crossing in northern Idlib, an area hosting a high density of displaced persons camps and settlements, as well as offices and warehouses of humanitarian organizations. One of the missiles struck a lot where trucks used for transporting humanitarian supplies were parked, leaving 4 trucks destroyed and 60 more damaged. The air strikes started a fire in a nearby warehouse of a non-governmental organization (NGO) where food and other humanitarian supplies were stored, destroying a quarter of its stocks, amounting to aid for some 25,000 people.

'... Following these incidents, mortar and rocket strikes were reported in neighbourhoods of Aleppo city, killing at least 2 civilians and injuring 17, and on military bases of the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic. During the

⁵² UN SC, '[Implementation of Security Council resolutions ...](#)', (page 3, 5-6), 18 February 2021

periods prior to and following this escalation, the overall level of violence remained relatively low, albeit with regular artillery shelling and occasional cross-line raids and skirmishes between parties, mostly south of the M4 highway. Aerial bombardment took place on areas both south and north of the M4 highway. Air strikes in Idlib Governorate were reported.

‘... In northern Aleppo, mutual shelling and small arms fire and raids intensified across lines of contact in Bab. In Bab and Jarabulus, aerial and missile attacks against oil refineries and storage facilities intensified, while high levels of improvised explosive device and vehicle-borne improvised explosive device attacks continued to be reported in these areas. Mutual shelling and limited ground-based clashes continued along contact lines in Afrin, I’zaz, Tall Rif’at and Manbij in Aleppo Governorate, around Ayn Isa in Raqqah Governorate, and around Abu Rasin and Tall Tamr in Hasakah Governorate. There was some de-escalation of tensions between the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and de facto authorities in the north-east. Following an agreement, a limited number of detainees were released and mutual restrictions on access and humanitarian assistance were lifted in Qamishli and Aleppo city. However, the security posture of both parties remained heightened, with sporadic confrontations and mutual detentions during the period after the agreement was reached.

‘... Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) continued to launch ambush attacks and assassination attempts on government forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces in areas across Dayr al-Zawr, Hasakah and eastern rural Homs Governorates.

‘... OHCHR verified at least 177 incidents in which at least 171 civilians, including 23 women and 32 children, were killed and at least 257 civilians, including 26 women and 78 children, were injured as a result of hostilities across the country. These included incidents of ground-based strikes, improvised explosive devices, explosive remnants of war, armed clashes and targeted killings at the hands of various parties to the conflict or by unidentified perpetrators. Explosions of explosive remnants of war, including landmines and unexploded ordnance, were the primary cause of verified civilian deaths (39 per cent).’⁵³

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d. April 2021 – May 2021

- 5.4.7 On 17 June 2021 the UN SC published a report on the political, humanitarian and security related developments in Syria between April 2021 and May 2021. The report stated:

‘The overall level of violence in the Idlib de-escalation area remained relatively low, albeit with daily mutual artillery shelling and clashes between pro-government forces and non-State armed groups. Most of those incidents were concentrated on both sides of the front lines near the M4 and M5 highways. An increase in shelling was recorded in late April and early May, following a reported raid by Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, which has been designated a terrorist group by the Security Council, on a position held by

⁵³ UN SC, [‘Implementation of Security Council resolutions ...’](#), (page 2-3, 5), 22 April 2021

government forces. Aerial bombardments took place in rural Idlib and Hama, including on alleged locations of groups designated as terrorist groups by the Security Council. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham continued its security campaign against rival groups. Daily shelling, renewed air strikes, infighting between non-State armed groups and the prevalence of explosive hazards in residential areas and public spaces continued to endanger civilians.

'In northern Aleppo Governorate, low-level mutual shelling and occasional skirmishes between non-State armed opposition groups and pro-government forces continued across front lines near Bab. Mutual shelling and skirmishes intensified along contact lines in Afrin, I'zaz and Tall Rif'at in Aleppo Governorate, with reports of civilian casualties.

'... Multiple parties suffered attacks by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) cells. Reports indicate that there were dozens of casualties in areas across eastern rural Homs, Hama, Raqqah and Dayr al-Zawr Governorates. ISIL elements reportedly kidnapped a large number of civilians and military personnel from rural Hama.

'... The situation in the south-west of the Syrian Arab Republic remained tense, with ongoing attacks and assassinations against civilians, government forces and fighters reconciled from former armed opposition groups. All actors maintained a heightened security posture, with tensions increasing across Dar'a Governorate. In Suwayda' Governorate, kidnappings and armed disputes flared up, only some of which were resolved by local leaders.

'...OHCHR verified 186 incidents, in which at least 150 civilians, including 15 women and 36 children, were killed and at least 154 civilians, including 17 women and 57 children, were injured as a result of hostilities across the country. These included incidents involving ground-based strikes, improvised explosive devices, explosive remnants of war, armed clashes and targeted killings at the hands of various parties to the conflict or by unidentified perpetrators. The majority of civilian deaths (51 per cent) were documented in government-controlled areas and were caused by attacks with improvised explosive devices and by explosions of remnants of war, as well as targeted killings.'⁵⁴

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e. June 2021 – July 2021

- 5.4.8 On 13 August 2021 the UN SC published a report on the political, humanitarian and security related developments in Syria between June 2021 and July 2021. The report stated:

'In the Idlib de-escalation area in the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic, there was an increase in violence during the reporting period. Aerial bombardments took place in rural Idlib, Ladhikiyah and Hama, mostly south of the M4 highway, reportedly striking military sites, including those of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, which has been designated a terrorist group by the Security Council, and damaging civilian infrastructure. There was also an increase in mutual shelling and limited clashes across contact lines in the Idlib de-

⁵⁴ UN SC, '[Implementation of Security Council resolutions ...](#)', (page 2-3, 6), 17 June 2021

escalation area. There were reports that on 15 July eight civilians were killed and five injured when southern Idlib was shelled. The United Nations documented more than 20 civilian deaths, including 13 children, in the north-west between 1 June and 19 July. More than 20,000 people were displaced in June owing to the escalation of the conflict in the north-west, which was the largest displacement in the area since the ceasefire of March 2020.

‘There was sustained escalation during the reporting period in terms of mutual shelling, occasional skirmishes and raids across and along contact lines in northern Aleppo Governorate. On 12 June, there was an attack on the Shifa’ hospital in the city of Afrin. Civilians, including medical personnel, were killed and injured, and parts of the hospital were destroyed. Attacks involving improvised explosive devices also continued, with unclaimed vehicle -borne improvised explosive device attacks in Jarabulus, I’zaz and Afrin resulting in the killing of civilians. Incidents of violent infighting among non-State armed groups continued in the areas of Bab and Afrin. In the first incident since March, civilian objects in the city of Aleppo were targeted with rockets.

‘... The situation in the south-west of the Syrian Arab Republic grew increasingly tense, with ongoing attacks and killings against both government forces and former armed opposition forces. Since 24 June, tension has principally been centred around the Dar’a al-Balad district of the city of Dar’a, where there were reports of a build-up of government forces around the district controlled by former members of non-State armed opposition groups. Clashes in the Dar’a Al-Balad neighbourhood on 28 July resulted in civilian casualties. Eight civilians, including one woman and four children, were killed and six civilians, including two children, were injured. On 28 July, shelling reportedly hit Dar’a national hospital, causing damage to the water tank and rendering the dialysis unit inoperable. Some 10,500 people had reportedly been displaced owing to hostilities by 29 July.

‘...Da’esh, which has been designated a terrorist group by the Security Council, continued to launch attacks in areas across Dayr al-Zawr, Hasakah and eastern rural Homs. There were reports of military casualties, as well as the destruction of energy infrastructure due to Da’esh attacks.

‘... From 1 June to 26 July, OHCHR documented 191 incidents in which at least 153 civilians, including 24 women and 49 children, were killed as a result of hostilities. In addition, at least 286 civilians, including 49 women and 74 children, were injured as a result of hostilities across the country. The hostilities included air strikes, ground-based strikes and attacks carried out with improvised explosive devices and explosive remnants of war, as well as armed clashes and targeted killings at the hands of various parties to the conflict or by unidentified perpetrators.’⁵⁵

- 5.4.9 In August 2021 the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) published the report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic which looked at incidents between 1 July 2020 and 30 June 2021. The report stated that:

⁵⁵ UN SC, [‘Implementation of Security Council resolutions ...’](#), (page 2-4, 6), 18 August 2021

‘The Commission has reasonable grounds to believe that pro-government forces have violated the international humanitarian law principle of distinction in launching indiscriminate attacks damaging civilian infrastructure, including hospitals and schools, and impeding access to objects indispensable to the survival of the population, such as fuel and humanitarian supplies, including through the use of cluster munitions. Furthermore, the indiscriminate attacks resulting in death or injury to civilians... may amount to war crimes. Moreover... the Commission has reasonable grounds to believe...that pro-government forces may have committed the war crime of directing an attack against a medical facility.’⁵⁶

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f. August 2021 – September 2021

- 5.4.10 On 21 October 2021 the UN SC published a report on the political, humanitarian and security related developments in Syria between August 2021 and September 2021. The report stated:

‘Violence further intensified in the Idlib de-escalation area in the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic, coinciding with a significant surge in COVID-19 cases. Airstrikes and mutual shelling continued to kill and injure civilians, including women and children. Aerial bombardments intensified mostly south of the M4 highway, damaging civilian infrastructure almost daily. Airstrikes also reportedly impacted on the outskirts of an internally displaced persons camp in Ma’arratmisrin in early September. Mutual shelling and clashes between armed opposition groups and government and pro-government forces across contact lines in the Idlib de-escalation area continued.

‘Mutual shelling, airstrikes, occasional skirmishes and raids across contact lines intensified in the northern part of Aleppo Governorate, including airstrikes in the southern countryside of Afrin district. For the first time since the ceasefire in March 2020, violence affected Bab town and surrounding areas. On 5 and 6 August, shelling injured at least 24 civilians and caused structural damage to civilian homes. Improvised explosive device attacks also continued, and unclaimed vehicle -borne improvised explosive device attacks in Bab and Afrin killed civilians.

‘... In the southern part of the Syrian Arab Republic, heavy shelling and intensified ground clashes across parts of Dar’a Governorate in August, in particular in the Dar’a al-Balad neighbourhood, displaced over 38,000 people, including almost 15,000 women and more than 20,000 children... In early September, following the negotiation of a new agreement between parties, the security situation in Dar’a al-Balad stabilized. Several security incidents continued to be reported across the south-west, however, including exchanges of fire, ambushes and targeted killings.

‘...Da’esh, which has been designated as a terrorist group by the Security Council, continued to launch attacks in areas across Dayr al-Zawr, Hasakah and eastern rural Homs.

‘...From 1 August to 26 September, OHCHR documented 206 incidents in which at least 126 civilians, including 17 women and 44 children, were killed

⁵⁶ UNHRC, ‘[Report of the Independent International Commission...](#)’, (page 11), 13 August 2021

as a result of hostilities. In addition, at least 197 civilians, including 24 women and 74 children, were injured. Hostilities included airstrikes, ground-based strikes and attacks carried out by improvised explosive devices and explosive remnants of war, as well as armed clashes and targeted killings at the hands of various parties to the conflict or by unidentified perpetrators.

‘... Military activity and violence perpetrated by parties to the conflict continued to have a severe impact on civilians and civilian objects across the Syrian Arab Republic. Civilians continued to be killed and injured by intermittent shelling and airstrikes in the Idlib de-escalation area and in surrounding areas, as well as by fighting between and within various armed groups in the northern and eastern parts of the country. Many of these attacks appeared to be targeting civilians or were carried out near locations of civilian character.’⁵⁷

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g. October 2021 – November 2021

- 5.4.11 On 15 December 2021 the UN SC published a report on the political, humanitarian and security related developments in Syria between October 2021 and November 2021. The report stated:

‘Hostilities continued in the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic, while COVID-19 cases remained high. Airstrikes and intermittent shelling killed and injured civilians, including women and children in the Idlib de-escalation area and surrounding areas. On 20 October, shelling in Ariha town, Idlib Governorate, killed 13 civilians, including 2 women and 1 girl, and injured 21 civilians, including schoolchildren.

‘Mutual shelling and clashes between armed opposition groups and government and pro-government forces across contact lines in the Idlib de-escalation area continued, especially south of the M4 highway in Idlib Governorate, Tall Rif’at in Aleppo Governorate, Ayn Isa in Raqqah Governorate and Tall Tamr in Hasakah Governorate.

‘...Da’esh, which has been designated as a terrorist group by the Security Council, continued to launch attacks in areas across Dayr al-Zawr, Hasakah and eastern rural Homs.

‘...From 1 October to 20 November, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) documented 78 incidents, in which at least 97 civilians, including 7 women and 27 children, were killed as a result of hostilities. In addition, at least 127 civilians, including 14 women and 37 children, were injured. Hostilities included airstrikes, ground-based strikes, attacks carried out by improvised explosive devices, explosive remnants of war, and armed clashes and targeted killings.’⁵⁸

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h. December 2021 – January 2022

⁵⁷ UN SC, [‘Implementation of Security Council resolutions ...’](#), (page 3-4, 6), 21 August 2021

⁵⁸ UN SC, [‘Implementation of Security Council resolutions ...’](#), (page 2-4, 6), 15 December 2021

- 5.4.12 On 9 December 2021 ACLED published a regional overview of the Middle East looking at events between 27 November 2021 and 3 December 2021 which stated the following regarding Syria:

‘In Syria, an unidentified armed group detonated a vehicle-borne IED in Menbij city in the Aleppo countryside last week, killing four civilians and wounding three members of the Turkey-backed National Police Force. Elsewhere, a Turkish drone strike targeted a Syrian Democratic Forces (QSD) position in the Al Baida area in the Al Hasakeh countryside, leading to an unknown number of QSD fatalities. In southern Syria, regime forces shelled Nawa in the Dar’a countryside with rockets, as students left schools and employees left their workplaces. The shelling barrage killed three civilians, including a teacher, and wounded several other civilians.’⁵⁹

- 5.4.13 On 13 January 2022 ACLED published a regional overview of the Middle East looking at events between 11 December 2021 and 7 January 2022 which stated the following regarding Syria:

‘In northwest Syria, Russian airstrikes impacted areas in southern and western Idlib, as well as the western Aleppo countryside, in late December and early January. A Russian airstrike on a makeshift IDP camp in Jisr Ash-Shugur area in western Idlib resulted in the deaths of 12 civilians, including three displaced children. Meanwhile, in northeast Syria, Turkish troops and the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (JWS) increased their attacks against the Syrian Democratic Forces (QSD) along existing fronts in the Ras Al Ain area of Al Hasakeh province over the past month. Clashes and exchanges of shelling barrages led to the displacement of civilians from Abu Rasin area toward safer areas in Al Hasakeh city. In the Syrian desert, the Islamic State (IS) increased attacks against regime and pro-regime militia forces across the last three weeks in the Homs, Ar-Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor provinces, resulting in dozens of fatalities. Four Russian soldiers were also killed in a major IS attack against a regime and Russian convoy near Al Qusaybah fields in Deir ez-Zor.

‘In southern Syria, unidentified gunmen continued to target civilians and regime military and security personnel across Dar’a province. Civilians were targeted in just over half of the 41 political violence incidents recorded over the past month across Dar’a, resulting in at least 19 civilian fatalities. Meanwhile, in As-Sweida city, clashes took place between regime forces and local gunmen near police headquarters in late December, resulting in the deaths of a local militia commander and a regime soldier. This comes after regime forces had arrested a man the day prior, causing unrest in the city. Separately, Israeli forces shelled a regime-controlled radar station south of Shahba town in As-Sweida countryside, killing a regime soldier and injuring others.’⁶⁰

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⁵⁹ ACLED, ‘[Regional Overview – Middle East \(27 November – 3 December 2021\)](#)’, 9 December 2021

⁶⁰ ACLED, ‘[Regional Overview – Middle East \(11 December 2021 – 7 January 2022\)](#)’, 13 Jan 2022

5.5 Security events and fatalities

a. Security events in each governorate in 2021

- 5.5.1 The below table was compiled by CPIT and shows the number of security events that took place in Syria across 2021. The below map was published by WorldPopulation Review with the numbers being added by CPIT to indicate the what rank each governorate is in terms of numbers of security events that took place across 2021 (1 = highest number of security events, 14 = lowest number of security events).
- 5.5.2 The table was produced using information obtained from ACLED's data export tool. Security events include battles, explosions/remote violence, protests, riots, violence against civilians and strategic developments. ALCED provided the following definitions for each of the different security events:
- 'Battles'** are violent clashes between at least two armed groups. Battle types are distinguished by whether control of a location is unchanged as a consequence of the event; whether a non-state group has assumed control of a location, or whether a government has resumed control of that location.
- 'Explosions/Remote violence'** refers to events where an explosion, bomb or other explosive device was used to engage in conflict. They include one-sided violent events in which the tool for engaging in conflict creates asymmetry by taking away the ability of the target to engage or defend themselves and their location.
- 'Strategic developments'** include incidences of looting, peace-talks, high profile arrests, non-violent transfers of territory, recruitment into non-state groups etc.
- 'Protests'** are non-violent demonstrations, involving typically unorganized action by members of society
- 'Riots'** are a violent demonstration, often involving a spontaneous action by unorganized, unaffiliated members of society.
- 'Violence against civilians'** involves violent attacks on unarmed civilians.⁶¹
- 5.5.3 For definitions of the different sub-events associated with each security events see the document entitled '[Event Definitions](#)'.

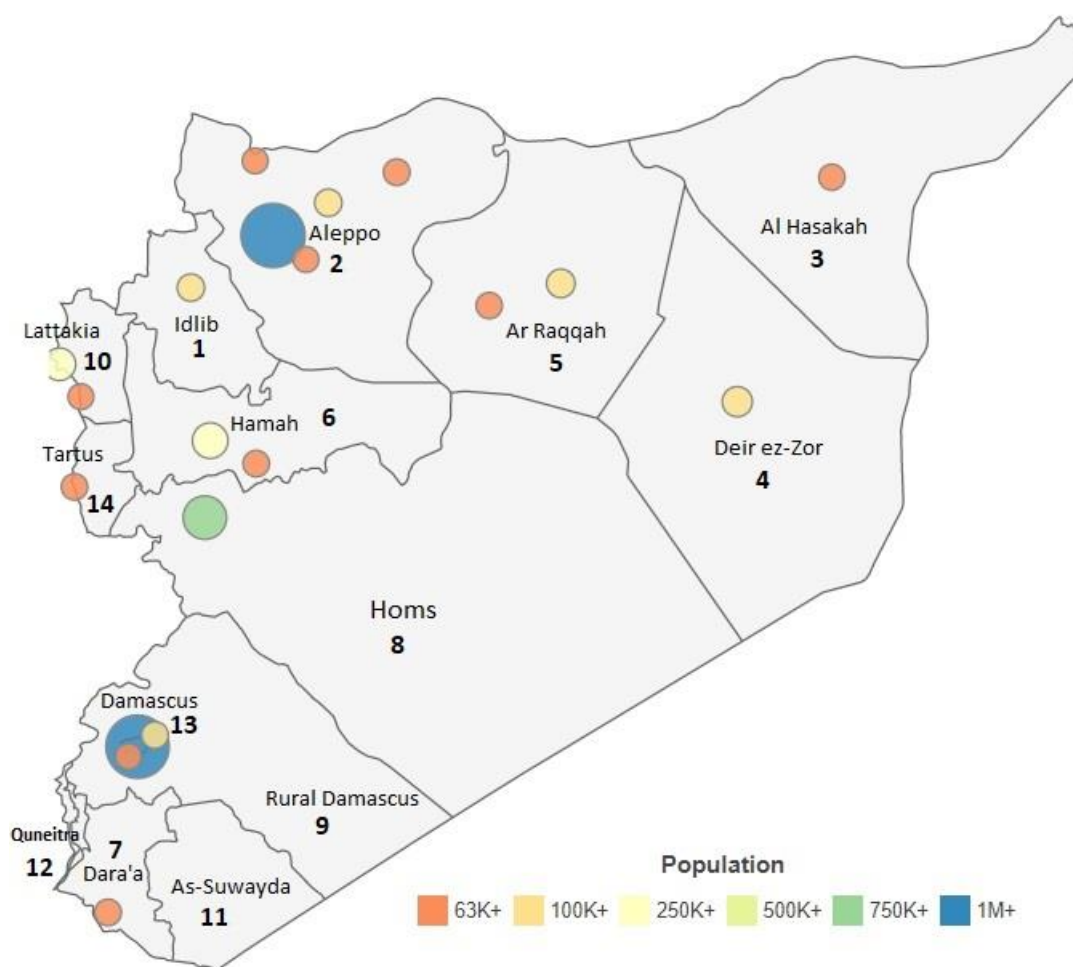
Security events throughout 2021 in each of Syria's governorates

Province	Jan – Mar 2021	Apr – Jun 2021	Jul – Sep 2021	Oct – Dec 2021	2021 Total
Al Hasakah	425	272	396	438	1,531
Aleppo	476	478	587	421	1,962
Ar Raqqa	353	291	265	303	1,212
As Suwayda	22	19	13	25	79
Damascus	7	3	8	8	26
Dar'a	184	250	310	150	894

⁶¹ ACLED, '[Event Definitions](#)', (page 1-4), no date

Deir ez-Zor	416	299	257	315	1,287
Hamah	242	247	256	164	909
Homs	56	59	39	54	208
Idlib	723	564	451	429	2,167
Latakia	28	46	39	24	137
Quneitra	22	29	7	8	66
Rural Damascus	46	39	37	36	158
Tartus	0	3	1	1	5
Total number of security events in 2021					10,641

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⁶² ACLED, 'Data Export Tool - Syria: 1 January 2021 – 31 December 2021', 11 January 2022

⁶³ World Population Review, 'Syria Population Density Map', no date

b. Security events with at least 1 fatality in 2021

- 5.5.4 The below table was compiled by CPIT using information obtained from ACLED's data export tool and shows the number of security events which resulted in at least one fatality in Syria across 2021. (Note: fatalities include both civilians and combatants).

Security events resulting in at least 1 fatality across Syria's governorates in 2021

Province	Jan – Mar 2021	Apr – Jun 2021	Jul – Sep 2021	Oct – Dec 2021	2021 Total
Al Hasakah	95	88	83	79	345
Aleppo	89	91	63	60	303
Ar Raqqa	85	72	69	70	296
As Suwayda	14	7	6	10	37
Damascus	4	2	5	3	14
Dar'a	92	93	105	85	375
Deir ez-Zor	169	93	108	99	469
Hamah	58	29	27	26	140
Homs	31	27	26	30	114
Idlib	88	78	69	66	301
Lattakia	8	8	7	7	30
Quneitra	12	12	4	3	31
Rural Damascus	27	32	26	25	110
Tartus	0	2	1	1	4
Total number of security events with fatalities in 2021					2,659

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c. Fatalities in each governorate in 2021

- 5.5.5 The below table was compiled by CPIT using information obtained from ACLED's data export tool and shows the number of fatalities in each of Syria's governorates across 2021. (Note: fatalities include both civilians and combatants).

Numbers of fatalities across Syria's governorates in 2021

Province	Jan – Mar 2021	Apr – Jun 2021	Jul – Sep 2021	Oct – Dec 2021	2021 Total
Al Hasakah	148	148	189	136	621

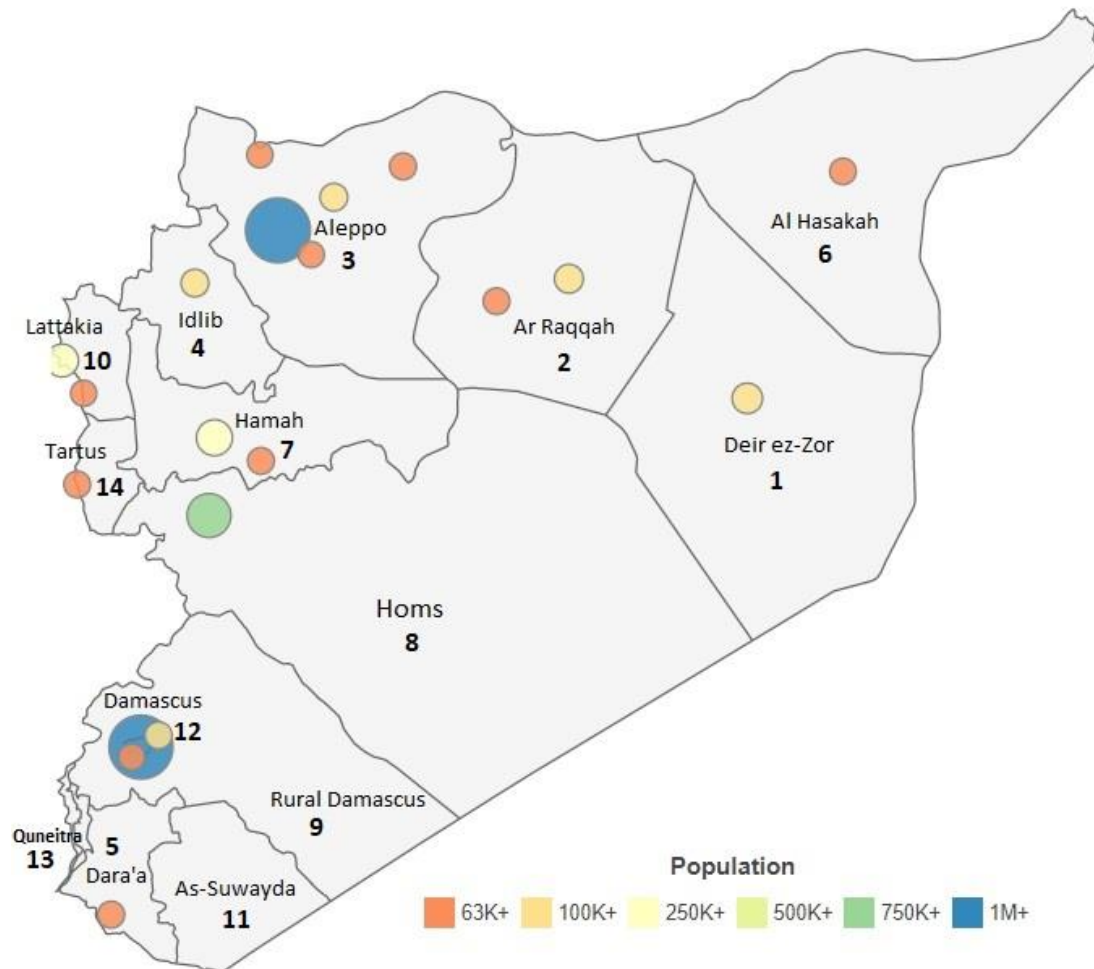
⁶⁴ ACLED, '[Data Export Tool - Syria: 1 January 2021 – 31 December 2021](#)', 11 January 2022

Aleppo	177	189	208	116	690
Ar Raqqa	250	148	173	209	780
As Suwayda	16	8	6	13	43
Damascus	10	2	14	15	41
Dar'a	164	132	235	118	649
Deir ez-Zor	472	171	234	250	1,127
Hamah	276	102	101	65	544
Homs	115	97	90	100	402
Idlib	205	162	203	120	690
Lattakia	18	23	8	21	70
Quneitra	14	16	6	3	39
Rural Damascus	33	40	32	32	137
Tartus	0	4	3	1	8
Total Fatalities in 2021					5841

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- 5.5.6 The below map was published by WorldPopulation Review with the numbers being added by CPIT to indicate the what rank each governorate is in terms of fatalities across 2021 (1 = highest number of fatalities, 14 = lowest number of fatalities).

⁶⁵ ACLED, '[Data Export Tool - Syria: 1 January 2021 – 31 December 2021](#)', 11 January 2022



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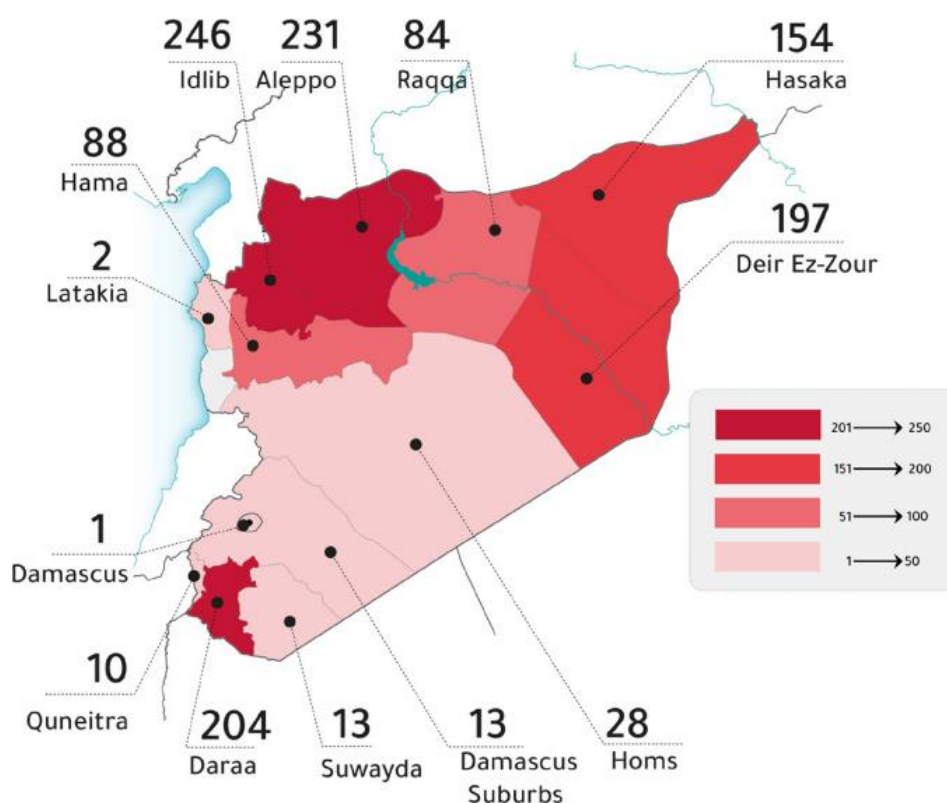
5.5.7 On 1 January 2022 SNHR published a report which looked at the number of civilian deaths across 2021 and what party was responsible for them. The report stated:

‘The killing of civilians in Syria has continued for the eleventh consecutive year, having gone on since the outbreak of the popular uprising for democracy in Syria in March 2011, resulting in casualty numbers that are among the largest worldwide, demonstrating the instability of the situation in Syria and underlining the fact that it is still the most dangerous country in the world for civilians and remains an exceptionally insecure and dangerous place wholly unsuitable for the return of refugees. Although we noticed that 2021 saw a decline in the rates of killings of civilians compared to previous years... SNHR documented the killing of more than 1,200 Syrian civilians in 2021, including 229 children.’⁶⁷

5.5.8 The same source produced the below image showing the number of civilian deaths in each governorate in 2021

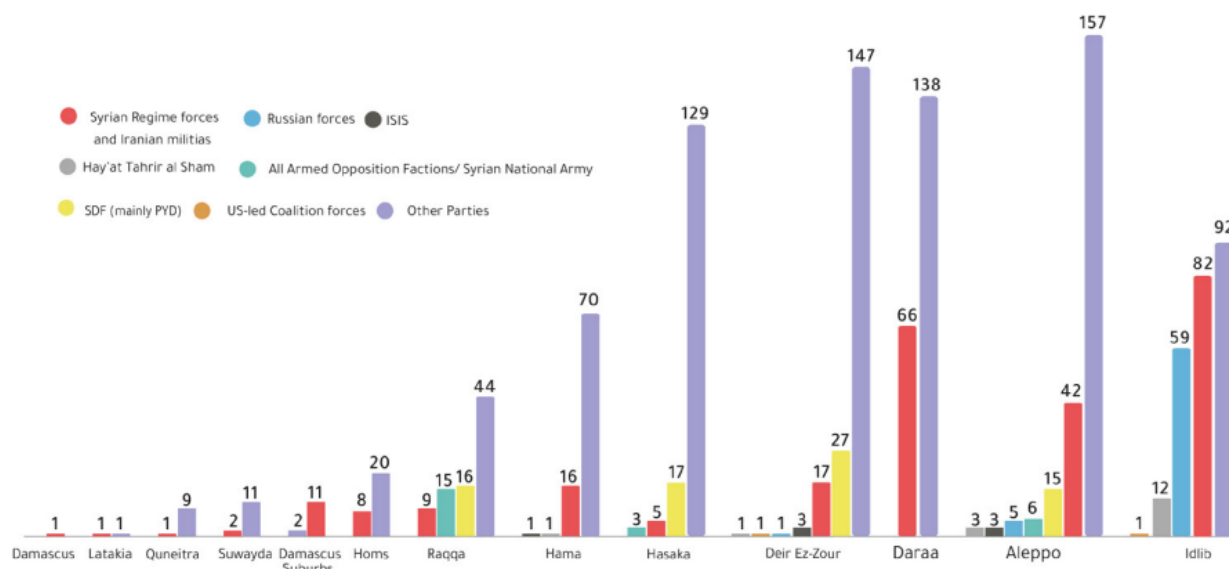
⁶⁶ World Population Review, ‘[Syria Population Density Map](#)’, no date

⁶⁷ SNHR, ‘[1,271 civilians, including 299 children... killed in Syria in 2021](#)’, (page 5), 1 January 2022



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5.5.9 The same source further produced the following graph indicating what party was responsible for civilian deaths in each governorate (Note: See the image in paragraph 5.5.8 for what actors make up 'other parties') and stated:

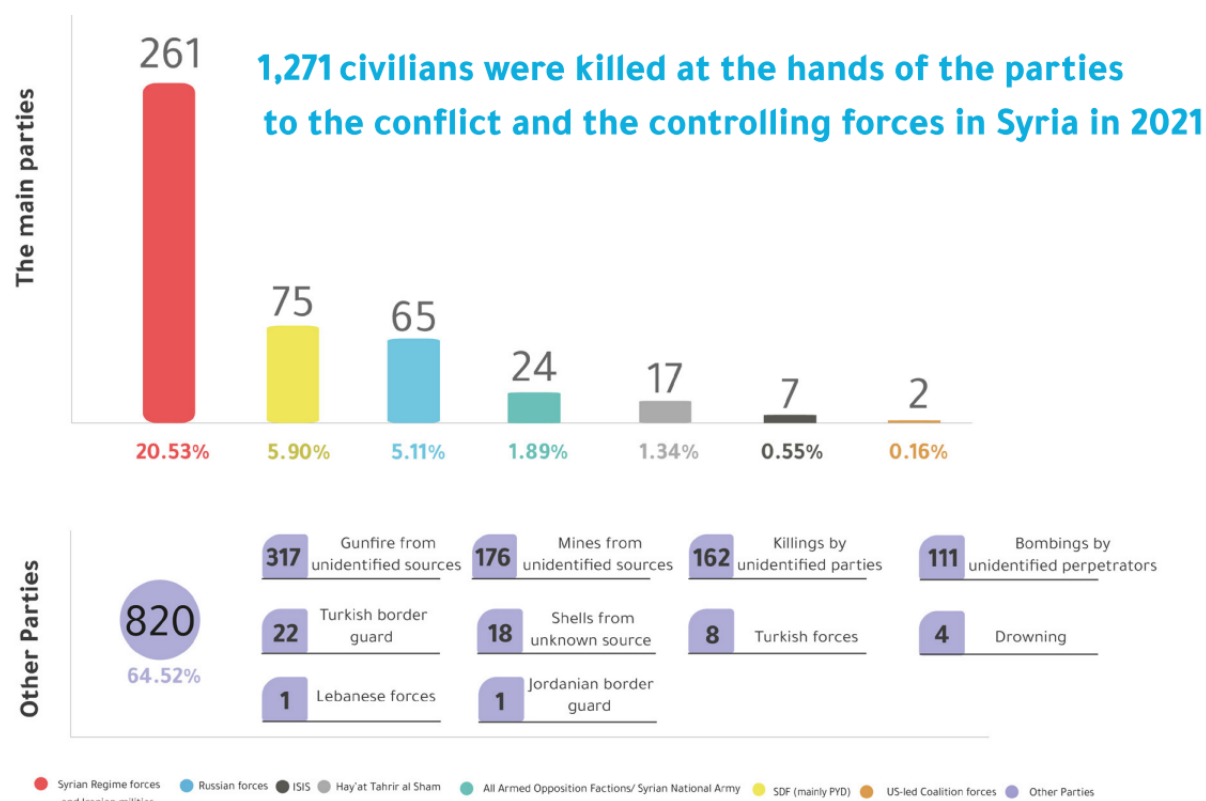


'Idlib governorate saw the largest death toll compared to other Syrian governorates, accounting for 19.35% of the total death toll since the beginning of 2021, with 58% of the victims in Idlib governorate killed at the hands of the Syrian-Russian alliance forces. Aleppo governorate came

⁶⁸ SNHR, '[1,271 civilians, including 299 children... killed in Syria in 2021](#)', (page 11), 1 January 2022

second with approximately 18% [of the civilian death toll in 2021], followed by Daraa with 16.5%, Deir Ez-Zour with 15.5%, then Hasaka with 12.12%.⁶⁹

- 5.5.10 The same source additionally produced the below image indicating how many civilian casualties each party were responsible for in 2021:



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- 5.5.11 In addition to the above, SOHR published a report on 23 December 2021 which stated that 3,746 people were killed in Syria during 2021, of which 1,505 were civilians⁷¹. The discrepancies between ACLED, SNHR and SOHR highlight the difficulties with obtaining reliable and consistent information regarding the conflict.

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d. 2020 and 2021 comparison

- 5.5.12 The below table shows the number of security events and fatalities (Note: fatalities include both civilians and combatants) across Syria in 2020 and 2021 and was produced using ACLED's data export tool (see [Number of security events in each governorate in 2021](#) for definitions of each of the different security events) (Note: an arrow facing up or down next to each 2021 figure indicates whether or not the numbers have increased or decreased compared to 2020):

Table comparing security events and fatalities across Syria in 2020 and 2021

⁶⁹ SNHR, '[1,271 civilians, including 299 children... killed in Syria in 2021](#)', (page 5), 1 January 2022

⁷⁰ SNHR, '[1,271 civilians, including 299 children... killed in Syria in 2021](#)', (page 8), 1 January 2022

⁷¹ SOHR, '[3,746 Syrians were killed including civilians, during 2021](#)', 23 December 2021

Al Hasakeh		
	Security Events 2020	1,587
	Fatalities 2020	720
	Security Events 2021	1,531 ↓
	Fatalities 2021	621 ↓
Aleppo		
	Security Events 2020	2,209
	Fatalities 2020	1,213
	Security Events 2021	1,962 ↓
	Fatalities 2021	690 ↓
Ar Raqqa		
	Security Events 2020	1,120
	Fatalities 2020	875
	Security Events 2021	1,212 ↑
	Fatalities 2021	780 ↓
As Sweida		
	Security Events 2020	134
	Fatalities 2020	107
	Security Events 2021	79 ↓
	Fatalities 2021	43 ↓
Damascus		
	Security Events 2020	44
	Fatalities 2020	37
	Security Events 2021	26 ↓
	Fatalities 2021	41 ↑
Dara		
	Security Events 2020	906
	Fatalities 2020	666
	Security Events 2021	894 ↓
	Fatalities 2021	649 ↓
Deir ez-Zor		
	Security Events 2020	1,217
	Fatalities 2020	1,093
	Security Events 2021	1,287 ↑

	Fatalities 2021	1,127 ↑
Hama		
	Security Events 2020	736
	Fatalities 2020	662
	Security Events 2021	909 ↑
	Fatalities 2021	544 ↓
Homs		
	Security Events 2020	121
	Fatalities 2020	358
	Security Events 2021	208 ↑
	Fatalities 2021	402 ↑
Idlib		
	Security Events 2020	3,874
	Fatalities 2020	2,115
	Security Events 2021	2,167 ↓
	Fatalities 2021	690 ↓
Lattakia		
	Security Events 2020	195
	Fatalities 2020	58
	Security Events 2021	137 ↓
	Fatalities 2021	70 ↑
Quneitra		
	Security Events 2020	56
	Fatalities 2020	53
	Security Events 2021	66 ↑
	Fatalities 2021	39 ↓
Rural Damascus		
	Security Events 2020	216
	Fatalities 2020	253
	Security Events 2021	158 ↓
	Fatalities 2021	137 ↓
Tartous		
	Security Events 2020	2
	Fatalities 2020	1

	Security Events 2021	5 ↑
	Fatalities 2021	8 ↑

⁷²

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⁷² ACLED, '[Data Export Tool - Syria: 1 January 2020 – 31 December 2021](#)', 14 January 2022

Terms of Reference

A 'Terms of Reference' (ToR) is a broad outline of what the CPIN seeks to cover. They form the basis for the [country information section](#). The Home Office's Country Policy and Information Team uses some standardised ToR, depending on the subject, and these are then adapted depending on the country concerned.

For this particular CPIN, the following topics were identified prior to drafting as relevant and on which research was undertaken:

- Maps and Demography
- Timeline
- Actors
- Nature and level of violence

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Version control

Clearance

Below is information on when this note was cleared:

- version **1.0**
- valid from **16 June 2022**

Official – sensitive: Start of section

The information in this section has been removed as it is restricted for internal Home Office use.

Official – sensitive: End of section

Changes from last version of this note

First version of a discrete CPIN focussing on the security situation.

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