

Syria: Humanitarian situation; Questions related to military service, especially in the Syrian Arab Army (SAA)

Documentation of the COI Webinar with Fabrice Balanche und Muhsen Al-Mustafa on 24 October 2024

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The information in this document is based on presentations by Fabrice Balanche and Muhsen Al-Mustafa during the COI webinar on 24 October 2024, reflecting developments up until then. This documentation was compiled by ACCORD and approved by Fabrice Balanche and Muhsen Al-Mustafa. It does not aim to be a comprehensive treatment of the aspects or events in the subject area, nor does it provide an opinion on the merits of any specific application for asylum or other international protection. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of ACCORD. However, ACCORD is responsible for the form and style of the report.

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Short biography of speakers

Fabrice Balanche is assistant professor of geography at the University of Lyon Two and, since 2018, a Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He has made numerous research visits to Syria since the 1990s – and has also lived there for some time, gaining extensive expertise on the economy, geopolitics and developments in the region. In addition to his academic work, he has also worked for international organisations in Syria, including a study for the Mines Advisory Group (MAG) in Northeast Syria in 2022. He recently published a book "The Lessons of the Syrian Crisis", which sheds light on the internal causes of the conflict in Syria and the impact of the involvement of external powers.

Muhsen Al-Mustafa is research assistant at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies, a Turkey-based think tank that researches developments in the Syrian conflict and whose publications are often cited in COI products. Muhsen has also previously worked for other think tanks such as the Carnegie Middle East Center and the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), where he published on security, military and governance issues. He is particularly interested in the military apparatus of the Syrian army and has published several papers on military service, amendments to the military service law, amnesties and the like. As this is a topic of great interest to asylum authorities in Austria, he has helped us on many occasions with valuable information on these issues.

1 Preliminary note

Please be aware that the webinar occurred prior to the renewed hostilities in the Aleppo region in late November 2024 and the subsequent fall of the Assad regime on December 8, 2024. Consequently, the information presented in this report reflects developments only up to 24 October 2024.

Since then, the new transitional government led by HTS has requested that former soldiers and military officers surrender their identification documents, weapons, and vehicles. The new rulers have announced that they are planning to actively pursue senior officials implicated in crimes, while offering amnesty to rank-and-file conscripted soldiers (NYT, December 18, 2024).¹

2 Humanitarian situation in different parts of the country, situation of returnees (presentation by Fabrice Balanche)

The geopolitical situation and the general humanitarian situation

To begin, I will address the geopolitical landscape, as it is crucial for understanding the current humanitarian situation and anticipating future developments. Notably, Syria is facing significant challenges due to the ongoing conflict involving Israel and Hezbollah. A few days ago, after the terrorist attacks in Ankara, Turkish airstrikes targeted northeast Syria the same night. This could signal a new offensive against the Kurds by Turkey. Syria, like the entire Levant, has become what we call a buffer zone, like the Gulf of Aden or the Caucasus, because it is situated between foreign powers seeking control of the region. Syria and the Levant are central to the emerging global crisis involving NATO and the Eurasian axis, which includes Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran. These powers are engaged in a struggle for global influence and control. This conflict is thus outside the control of the Syrian people, who find themselves caught in this renewed confrontation between Western powers and the Eurasian axis. The conflict involving Israel, Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran constitutes a battlefield in this larger war influenced by foreign actors, making it difficult to resolve. This war between Israel and Hezbollah and Iran, as shown on this map (see Annex I, p. 2), is seen as a struggle between the West and the Iranian axis, sometimes called the Shia Crescent. In this Iranian axis, Syria is the weak piece due to its Sunni majority, while the Iranian axis or the Shia Crescent is predominantly Shia. Most of the Syrian population, however, does not want to be on the side of Iran. This contributed to the popular uprising in 2011-2012. Another reason was the will of Saudi Arabia and of the West to break the Iranian axis. One of the aims of the current conflict between Israel and Hezbollah and Iran, is probably the attempt to disrupt this axis once more.

One of these consequences could be the return of the civil war in Syria, because foreign actors could have an interest to pay rebels/militia in Syria to once more attempt a regime change.

¹ NYT – New York Times: [Al-Assad's Soldiers Hope for Amnesty. First, They Have to Take a Number](#), 18 December 2024

Syria has been a frozen conflict since 2020. We might have the impression that peace is back, but this is not the reality. It was just a break between two war times. I think now we are coming back to a very violent situation in Syria, mainly because Israel wants to disrupt Iran's weapon supply routes to Hezbollah from Iraq and from Iran by striking Syrian targets. Yesterday evening they struck Damascus, they also struck Homs because they think that there are Iranian weapons in these areas. Foreign actors could even go further by encouraging the former rebels to take up arms and try to challenge the regime, because renewed civil war could also divert Hezbollah and Iran from threatening Israel. Of course, this is speculation for now, but this geopolitical context is crucial for understanding Syria's humanitarian situation in Syria.

For now, the war in Lebanon has pushed about 421,000 people into Syria, with 70% being Syrian and 30% Lebanese. Most have settled in regime-controlled areas, as Syrians without political issues can return. However, people who originally fled to Lebanon from Qusayr or Baba Amer in Homs cannot return to Syria because they are on the red list. They originate from areas that supported the opposition and it is impossible for them to return due to fear of collective punishment. Women and children typically return, as they do not have problems with military service, with the Mukhabarat system, or with the police. Men try to stay in Lebanon because it is quite risky for them to return. They hope to find a job in Lebanon to provide for their family in Syria. This influx of refugees poses serious humanitarian problems in Syria and the war in Lebanon will deprive many Syrians of their income and further exacerbates poverty in Syria. Israel is unlikely to cease strikes on Hezbollah, potentially prolonging the war for at least three more months and risking spillover into Syria, worsening the humanitarian crisis.

The humanitarian situation in Syria is dire, particularly with food insecurity. On this map (see Annex I, p. 6), you can see that Syria's situation is comparable to countries in West Africa and Afghanistan, according to the FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations]. It ranks sixth globally regarding food insecurity. In 2023, around 12 million people in Syria, or two-thirds of the resident population, faced food insecurity. In Syria there is a population of about 20 million people, and there are 8 million refugees abroad. Of those in Syria, 12 million live in the regime-controlled area, about 5 million live in Northwest Syria under the control of HTS and the Turkish proxies, and about 3 million in the self-administration area, under Kurdish control. Food insecurity has increased by 50% since 2019 – despite no major military offensives. We might have expected that food insecurity will decrease because normality is coming back and people could come back to work. However, the contrary is the case, because in a situation of frozen conflict, there is less money coming from abroad because there is less conflict. The reduction in foreign funds from countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, previously used to support opposition groups, has severely impacted the economy. Additionally, due to the ongoing frozen conflict, there is little investment in reconstruction because of instability concerns. This lack of investment leads to an economic downturn, further degrading food security in the region.

Areas under government control

First, I will address the situation in the regime-controlled areas. Second, I will discuss Northern Syria, specifically Idlib and the pro-Turkish rebels in the northeast. Third, I will focus on the refugee issue. As you can see on this map (see Annex I, p. 9), humanitarian support is divided

into three areas. In the Northwest, aid is provided from Turkey through transnational and cross-border assistance, with permission renewed every six months. In northeast Syria, the support comes from Damascus with the regime's approval. However, most supplies to this region originate from Iraq, passing over a bridge across the Tigris River at Faysh Khabour, near the Turkish border. For areas under regime control, supplies can be sourced via seaports or border crossings to receive international assistance.

Syria, as you can see on this map (see Annex I, p. 10), is divided into three main zones. The regime area experiences severe repression with the Mukhabarat (secret service) tracking opponents. Protests are mostly limited to demonstrate against living conditions, as in Suwayda, or people who try to avoid military service, as in Deraa.

The population generally endures repression, seeking security and a decent life amidst severe shortages. Electricity is available only 2 hours a day, and private neighbourhood generators are costly, and only a minority can afford it. There are long queues for gasoline, bread, and other essentials, with low-paying jobs averaging \$20 to \$30 a month. Civil servants earn about \$10 to \$15 monthly, while, according to my friend in Syria, a family of five needs over \$150 to \$200 to live due to high costs. Each time I visit Syria, I see that food prices are very high. Only people with family outside Syria – in Europe, in Turkey – who can send them money, can live decently. For other people, it is very, very difficult. Young people are driven to leave Syria for economic opportunities to help their family back home to survive because there are no resources inside Syria for them. If you go to Erbil, you will see, for instance, most of the staff in restaurants and hotels are Syrian Kurds and Arabs. From Erbil, they try to move on to the rest of Iraq or to the Gulf or they try to reach Europe.

Assad operates under the patronage of both Russia and Iran. The operational capacity of the Syrian army is limited, with the exception of elite units such as the Fourth Division led by Maher Al-Assad, which can oppress the population in Daraa, for instance. However, without the support of approximately 50,000 Shia militias, Hezbollah, and Iraqi or Iranian Pasdaran forces, Assad is unable to launch significant offensives against either the rebels or the Syrian Democratic Forces. Additionally, such operations require backing from the Russian air force. Despite these limitations, the Syrian army retains the capability to suppress the population, particularly in regions like South Syria and Daraa, where cities maintain some degree of autonomy (see Annex I, p. 11). In 2019, a negotiated agreement between the rebels and the Syrian regime enabled the regime's return to the area. Subsequently, Maher Al-Assad and the Fourth Division regained control of many cities, though exceptions include Tafas and parts of Daraa Al-Balad. In towns like Tafas, Syrian army and police forces are prohibited from entering, preventing the conscription of young men into military service. Conversely, other locations such as Daraa al-Balad were recaptured by the army in the summer of 2021, resulting in the transfer of remaining rebels to Idlib.

In southern Syria, assassinations are rising with various militias controlling different areas. For example, the Russian-backed Sunni militia, Fifth Corps, controls Busra Al-Sham, preventing Hezbollah and the Syrian army from taking over. The example of Daraa province shows that outside Damascus, outside the main city, the situation in the regime area is very complicated,

very unstable. There is no security, one needs to be protected by their tribe, by their militia, and there are fights between tribes, militias, and the Syrian army. This instability forces the population to concentrate in cities, where it is relatively safer. In Suwayda, Druze militias, loyal to the regime, control the area. Demonstrations there are driven more by living conditions than political reasons. The area is under the control of Druze militia, quite loyal to the regime, sharing power with the regime. They will not join an uprising against the regime, as they are tired of the uprising and do not want to join the Sunni opposition. During the civil war, the Druze mobilised to protect the Jebel Druze. They did not join the opposition but instead engaged in conflict with the Sunni rebels from Daraa.

In Syria, remittances from emigrants are a primary income source due to sanctions. The frozen conflict deters reinvestment and hinders electricity and industry recovery in a divided country, limiting investments mainly to real estate. In agriculture, there is no way to invest. It is too complicated to invest in the production. The economic situation is not better in North-East Syria and Northwest Syria. However, the regime-controlled areas, being considered the legitimate government of Syria by the international community and the UN, have the advantage that official documents such as education diploma are recognized internationally. This offers some stability for people's education credentials, if you have a university degree, your degree has validity abroad. Conversely, diplomas from rebel or Syrian Democratic Forces controlled areas hold no value, prompting students to follow the official Syrian curriculum even in private schools and then study at universities in regime areas to ensure their degrees are internationally valid. Even university diplomas in Idlib or Qamishli have no value, as these areas do not have any international legitimacy. This helps the regime to attract people and show that they are the legitimate government of Syria because it is recognized by the international community.

Northern Syria

Northern Syria, as you can see on the map, is highly fragmented (see Annex I, p. 10). There is Idlib, Afrin, Jarabulus and Azaz under the Turkish proxies, as well as Tell Abyad and Ras Al-Ayn coloured in green, and the self-administration coloured in blue. Idlib, with 2.5 to 3 million people, most of them IDPs from Homs, from Damascus, from the whole area retaken by the regime who sent the rebels and their families to Idlib, has a huge concentration of opposition people. It is controlled by Mr. Jolani, chief of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. He was a former Al-Qaida fighter in Iraq, who returned to Syria in 2011 with his friend Al-Baghdadi, the chief of Daesh/ISIS. At the beginning, Al-Nusra and Daesh were one and the same before they split. This area of 3,000 square kilometres is likened to the Islamic Emirate of Daesh in Raqqa, but with fewer public executions and a more flexible Sharia law. Jolani avoids provoking the West to prevent international retaliation. He survived because he is protected by the Turkish troops and because the international community provides him with food and humanitarian help to feed the population. He is clever enough to stay quiet and keep a low profile. But inside Idlib, there is a rule of Islamic totalitarianism like it was in Raqqa at the time of Daesh. The region experiences daily strikes from the Syrian regime and Russia due to fears of an offensive against Aleppo by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. There are about 50,000 fighters in this area and Jolani is bored in Idlib, he wants to expand his territory. If the regime is weak, he will try to launch an offensive. So, it is not a peaceful area. I call this area a new Gaza strip with 3,000 km² (Gaza itself is just

360 km²) (see Annex I, p. 12). If the regime were to launch an offensive to retake the main road between Latakia and Aleppo, the highway, and retake Idlib, there will be a concentration of the population of 3 million people close to the Turkish border wall, as it is already the case – as you can see on this picture – it would be like Gaza (see Annex I, p. 13). Turkey's fear of another refugee wave has led to a fortified wall from the Mediterranean Sea to the Tigris and military deployment. Any Syrian offensive would need a Turkish-Russian agreement, as reintegrating Idlib's anti-regime Sunni population is undesirable for Assad's regime. On the other hand, Turkey does not want 3 million new refugees in Turkey. This is the life insurance for Al-Jolani and for Idlib, a concentration of population that nobody wants.

Turkey controls parts of Northwest Syria through proxies like the Syrian National Army (SNA), with specific areas managed by different Turkish officials: Antakya's Vali oversees Afrin, Gaziantep's Vali manages Jarabulus, and Urfa's Vali handles Tell Abyad and Ras Al-Ayn. About 1.5 to 2 million people live here. Afrin, once mostly Kurdish, saw most Kurds leave for Shahba or northeastern Syria after Turkey's 2018 takeover. The area is under the control of the different rebel militia who fight each other for the control of checkpoints, and control of the border. They stole the houses of the Kurds, and there is ethnic cleansing because the Kurdish population that stayed is harassed by the militia. Turkey wanted to create a security belt in the north of Syria, from Idlib to the Tigris, to be protected against what they call “the Kurdish terrorists”. But this security belt results in ethnic cleansing. They try to expel the Kurdish population from the area settle Arab and Turkmen population instead, who are considered to be pro-Turkey. This has already happened in Afrin, where the houses of the Kurds were given to Arab IDPs, in Ras Al-Ayn, where Kurds were replaced by families of the Turkish proxies who took over the area. Erdoğan pretended that he wanted to resettle the Syrian refugees in Turkey into this area. But as these refugees have no interest to come to Afrin or Tell Abyad, because it is a poor area without perspectives or jobs. The refugees who are in Turkey prefer to stay in Turkey or move to Europe to living in this small security belt in the north of Syria.

It appears that Erdogan may intend to use the internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Idlib to populate certain areas instead of the Kurdish population. For instance, individuals living in tents with their families in Atmeh might prefer to relocate to a house with land in Tell Abyad or Ras Al-Ayn offered by the Turkish army, rather than staying in poor conditions in Idlib.

Turkey could be aiming to establish a controlled region in the north of Syria, similar to their actions in Cyprus. This potential "Republic of Northern Syria" under Turkish control would prevent Kurds and the Syrian regime from returning to the area. This is a factor contributing to the stalled negotiations between Turkey and the Syrian regime, as Assad is aware of Erdogan's intentions and does not want to discuss the partition of Syria.

Northeastern Syria

The northeastern region of Syria, currently controlled by Kurdish forces, has a population of approximately 3 million people, among which 1 million are Kurds. The map (see Annex I, p. 14) illustrates the Syrian population distribution before the war, with the Kurdish population highlighted in pink, the Arab population in green, and mixed areas in pink-green. Notably, regions such as Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zor, and southern Hasaka, though not predominantly Kurdish, fall under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) due to Kurdish influence. This

presence in Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor was largely driven by the International Coalition and the United States, mandating Kurdish participation in the fight against Daesh in exchange for support for their autonomy ambitions. Currently, control over the area of Deir Ez-Zor has shifted, with various local tribes now fighting each other in the south of Al-Shaddadi, where many Daesh cells are present. Conversely, Raqqa City maintains relative security as it serves as the official capital of northeastern Syria, supported by a significant security presence. For instance, Tishrin, Mansoura, and Al-Karama remain poorly controlled by the SDF, with strong Arab opposition against the Kurds. The notion of an Arab-Kurd Federation is a myth, a smokescreen, it is not working. The Kurds dominate the area, while Arabs dream about revenge, and in Deir Ez-Zor, they have already taken their revenge because the Kurds are not able to control Deir Ez-Zor anymore. They just control the oil fields and they share the oil with the Arab tribes who are smuggling the oil into regime territory and elsewhere. This area is very weak, as connectivity with the outside world is limited to a small bridge at Faysh Khabour (see Annex I, pp. 15-16). You can see the Iraqi side of the Tigris, with the border and the crossing to northeast Syria. When you have a huge flow in winter, sometimes the bridge is broken. The situation is very bad in this area that used to be the breadbasket of Syria. Now, wheat has to be imported six months after the harvest because of the insufficient production. There is lack of water and phosphate and the market is unstable. During my November 2023 visit, I could see that living conditions had declined since 2018, when the conflict against Daesh ended. Moreover, drought forces many to rely on gardens and use animal excrement for cooking fuel due to gas shortages.

Raqqa has not yet been rebuilt. Residents are making efforts to rebuild their houses to have shelter. They receive electricity for approximately four to five hours per day, which is slightly more than what is available on the regime side, but it requires the use of generators. The electricity supply does not come from a power station, as it was destroyed in a Turkish strike. Additionally, the dam no longer provides electricity because its turbines are out of order. Electricity in Eastern Syria is primarily generated by public generators powered by oil, with around 80% of Syrian oil located in northeastern Syria. The administration can produce electricity from approximately, but only between 4 pm and 10 pm in the city. In rural areas, electricity is available only for about 2-3 hours daily. Western NGOs and the European Union provide significant support to this region, which is under the control of pro-western factions, facilitating the delivery of aid. However, NGOs face challenges in operating outside the main cities and Kurdish areas. For instance, in the town of Kassra in Deir Ez-Zor which has a hospital supported by Western donors, there are no expatriates because it's too dangerous to stay. Visits occur only during the day as it is unsafe to remain overnight; even the SDF stay in their barracks at night for security reasons. This situation poses challenges for overseeing humanitarian aid, including issues related to corruption.

In this photo from my visit to Raqqa last year (see Annex I, p. 17), women are wearing the niqab (face veil) out of fear of Daesh returning or attacking them during nighttime. The economic situation and Arab-Kurd rivalry cause tension. Many Arabs do not accept the Kurdish rule, some expressed their view that life was better under Daesh, due to the Arabs ruling and the better economic situation. Many people have expressed a sense of nostalgia for Daesh. The persistence of the Daesh ideology in the region remains a significant issue.

The most troubling area in northeastern Syria, or even in the entire country, are the IDP camps. This photo is from Sahlat Al-Banat, near Raqqa, it is probably the worst place I have ever seen in this area, where 40,000 people live in dire conditions. These camps house those who fled from the regime's side, but also others from northeast Syria who cannot return to their villages due to family vengeance. This also deters many Syrians abroad or displaced internally from returning home, as tribal vengeance means even innocent men of a tribe can be killed if someone from their tribe committed a crime. Many people, whose cousin or related tribe member had killed somebody, are forced to stay in these IDP camps under very dire conditions. They work, for example, sorting through rubbish dumps. This makes it easy for Daesh to recruit people who are frustrated.

Refugees and returnees

The primary challenge to the return of refugees is the economic situation, as many Syrians residing in various regions are attempting to leave the country. Additionally, the issue of private vengeance remains a significant barrier to their return. Despite these challenges, there have been instances of low-income worker families returning to Syria from Lebanon. Due to the economic crisis and ongoing conflict in Lebanon, employment opportunities have diminished, prompting men to send their families back to Syria where the cost of living is lower. However, these men remain in Lebanon to earn income, as job prospects in Syria are scarce. Therefore the return of refugees to Syria is limited to women and children.

Turkey has started to send mostly single male refugees back northwestern Syria. There are no mass returns to Syria because Syrian refugees in Turkey do not want to return to that part of the country. The Syrian regime also discourages the return of refugees, as they fear it would threaten their security. Assad's victory involved ethnic and political cleansing, targeting mostly Sunni Arab working-class individuals from suburbs or poor rural areas, a population that supported the insurrection. The regime's support base consists mainly of minorities like the Alawites.

Moreover, the regime is rebuilding its social base by redistributing properties and land of absent people. Therefore, Syrians who received these lands are unlikely to want refugees to return, as they don't want to give back the houses and lands. If a person returns to reclaim their property, the new owner can report them to the Mukhabarat, accusing them of opposition ties, which could lead to imprisonment or death, even if the person was innocent. This is a strategy of the regime: A few years ago, a law required people to prove ownership within a month, later extended to a year, or forfeit their property to the state. Many refugees sold their land for very little to avoid losing it, effectively being expropriated legally, voluntarily. This loss leaves them with no hope or reason to return.

To conclude, the population is increasingly frustrated by the restrictions imposed by the regime. Although there are frequent riots in Suwayda, these are insufficient to incite a widespread uprising against the regime. The regime maintains its control with support from the Alawite community and 50,000 Shia militia from Iraq, Hezbollah, and Iran.

In northeastern Syria, the situation is very fragile as Turkey will never accept a Kurdish state. It may just be a matter of time, Turkey may act once the US withdraws from northeastern Syria, potentially next year if they have to pull out of Iraq, and consequently can no longer support their troops in Syria. Erdoğan is increasing pressure by targeting infrastructure, such as electric and water facilities. In Hasaka city, with about half a million residents, water used to come from Ras Al-Ayn. The Turks cut off this supply, so now wells are needed, but the groundwater is salty and undrinkable. Water must be trucked in, funded by EU humanitarian aid. Germany attempted to transport water from the Euphrates through the Siwar Canal. However, this effort is encountering difficulties because the Khabour River is dry, and Arab villages along the Siwar Canal are drawing water from it. If the Kurds attempt to safeguard the canal to ensure water reaches Hasaka, there could be an uprising among the Arab population between the Euphrates and Hasaka. The humanitarian situation is very difficult. In the event of a Turkish offensive in the area or an Arab uprising, or both, the self-administration could collapse, potentially leading to significant Kurdish migration. This migration might first move towards Iraq and then Europe, leveraging existing migration networks. The hope for remaining in Syria appears diminished for many. Northwest Syria has a population of 5 million people.

They don't want to return under the control of the regime and Turkey doesn't want a new wave of refugees. The political situation remains unstable due to ongoing rebel group rivalries. Although there seems to be an impression of peace in Syria without major offensives, it's mainly because local and international actors are exhausted or preoccupied—Russia, for instance, is focused on Ukraine, the US doesn't want to invest more in the area.

The situation in Syria remains unresolved, with the potential for conflict to resume easily. The ongoing hostilities between Israel, Hezbollah, and Iran may impact Syria's stability. Syria is caught in a conflict trap. It experiences a temporary peace due to war fatigue, but the underlying causes of the conflict persist, making it vulnerable to renewed fighting. Additionally, large-scale reconstruction in Syria is unlikely because it aligns with Iranian-Russian interests, leading to lacking financial support from Western countries. Conferences for Syrian reconstruction will not be held in Paris or New York. Financial backing from Iran, Russia, or China for Syria's reconstruction also appears improbable. Even if peace is achieved, recovery will be slow, leaving Syria in a prolonged crisis. Climate change further complicates the situation, as the Middle East faces increased environmental challenges. Without state support, individuals struggle to adapt and may be forced to migrate from areas rendered uninhabitable. This factor adds to the geopolitical complexity in the region, including in Syria where no help can be expected from a failed state.

Q&A

In light of the reported talks between Assad and Erdoğan, how stable is AANES or are its days numbered? Do you believe that Assad's support for the Kurds against the attacks from Turkey will remain?

Fabrice Balanche: Assad has limited power in Syria, largely controlled by Russia and Iran. Russia wants Assad to engage with Erdoğan to ensure Turkey's positive neutrality in the Ukrainian conflict, possibly offering Syrian territories like Kobane in return. Since 2016, Russia and Turkey have had an agreement where Turkey supports Russia in exchange for action against Kurdish forces in Syria. Due to this agreement, Russia regained control of Aleppo, Idlib, and other northern Syrian regions, while Erdoğan received Afrin, Tell Abyad, and Ras Al-Ayn. The next target is Southern Idlib's highway between Latakia and Aleppo, potentially against Kobane, allowing Turkey to connect Jarabulus and Tell Abyad for easier northern colonization. Assad's condemnation of Turkey for occupying land is a smokescreen hiding an agreement between Russia and Turkey. Turkey aims to create a security belt in the north and expel the Kurds. In exchange, if the Kurdish administration falls, Assad could regain control of Deir ez-Zor, aiding the Syrian regime's survival due to access to petrol. This benefits Iran by expanding its corridor to supply Hezbollah with weapons by taking the other side of the Euphrates. The future for Kurds in Syria looks bleak, as Assad views them as American-aligned traitors and there are no negotiations between the Kurds and the regime. Last year, I met Ilham Ahmad, the co-president of northeast Syria, and she confirmed there have been no talks. This leaves the Kurds in a precarious position, with low chances for keeping their statelet.

A court decision states that re-entry to Syria requires a status settlement to obtain security clearance. This can be denied for reasons such as having imprisoned family members, supporting the opposition, or coming from former opposition areas. This settlement is necessary for those who left illegally, refused military service, or sought asylum abroad. If agreed to, individuals are reportedly removed from the wanted list. Do you know about this procedure?

Fabrice Balanche: In Syria, even before the war, administrative procedures were complex, but everything was possible with money. Currently, with civil servants earning \$10 to \$15 a month, it is challenging for them to sustain themselves. Therefore, individuals responsible for security clearances may create a problem for the applicant and request additional payments, ranging from \$1,000 to \$2,000, to resolve the issues for them. While known opposition members are generally not permitted to return to Syria, for most Syrian citizens, navigating these procedures typically involves financial transactions.

Once you have obtained the clearance or the status settlement, can you be sure that you are then not still wanted for the issue that you were settling? Is the issue then actually resolved?

Fabrice Balanche: In Syria, you are never sure. Personal protection is essential, you need the backing of your tribe or someone in the army or secret service to help if problems arise at the local level. Even with clearance and bribes paid, checkpoints can still result in jail attempts for more bribes. In such cases, you call your patron to negotiate your release. But if you have the

clearance, they don't try to cause a problem because if it becomes known that even with a clearance you cannot be sure, nobody will pay for the clearance. The regime uses clearance to raise funds. Similarly, military service can be avoided by paying \$5,000 to \$8,000. However, if it becomes known that people are still drafted after paying, no one abroad will pay the fees and bribes for clearance. Authorities may try to create problems to extract more bribes. For instance, a friend of mine spent 24 hours in jail over such an issue but resolved it by contacting someone in the army.

Do you have any information on the situation of religious minorities, for example, Christians in government-held areas and in Kurdish areas? And what is their situation in areas under HTS control, if there are any, or in the Turkish-controlled areas?

Fabrice Balanche: In areas under HTS control, there are very few Christians left, around 20 in Idlib, there are some old people in Yacoubiya, a small village in the north of Idlib. HTS leader Jolani tries to show to the world that he protects Christians to portray tolerance. In Kurdish-controlled areas, Christians face no issues and are well-protected because the Kurdish administration wants to show that they are tolerant, thus maintaining Western support. A few years ago, a problem arose with a Christian school that refused to follow the Kurdish curriculum and the administration threatened to close the private school. However, today even the Kurds do not follow the Kurdish curriculum, but the Syrian curriculum for better educational prospects. Kurds are becoming more pragmatic and moving away from strict ideologies. In regime-controlled areas, Christians also face no problems. However, the Christian population in Syria has drastically decreased from one million in 2011 to about 200,000 due to economic hardship and violence, with mostly the elderly remaining.

What is your impression of the humanitarian and the security situation in Damascus City?

Fabrice Balanche: I haven't visited Damascus since 2016 due to visa issues. Damascus is generally secure with a strong police and army presence. However, some suburban areas like Douma in Ghouta are best avoided at night.

Aside from Damascus, Tartus and Latakia are regarded as relatively safe. What is your assessment of the situation there for returnees, as well as for individuals who may be required to relocate to these areas if they are not originally from the region?

Fabrice Balanche: Latakia and Tartus have remained peaceful, even during the war. People from Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus moved there. Alawites and Christians returned to their hometowns due to being targeted elsewhere, like in Aleppo. Sunni families, without local relatives, also relocated and reopened businesses. There are no issues between Alawites and Sunnis; mixed marriages are common. Security is generally good, aside from occasional Israeli strikes on weapon storage sites.

Is the humanitarian situation there comparable to the rest of the government-controlled areas?

Fabrice Balanche: Yes, it is very similar: There is lack of electricity and lack of jobs.

How risky is it for Syrians in Europe to protest against their government? Is the Syrian government monitoring these activities? Would protesters face prosecution upon return?

Fabrice Balanche: Protesting in Europe could of course lead to problems back home.

Would authorities be aware that you were protesting abroad?

Fabrice Balanche: Yes, they have a vast network of spies monitoring everything.

What sanctions could you face?

Fabrice Balanche: You could be jailed or summoned to the police or Mukhabarat. Even if you stay abroad, your family might face pressure: "Why is your son in Germany? He has demonstrated. Tell him to stop."

So they will summon family members for questioning?

Fabrice Balanche: Yes, certainly. For instance, young people who posted against the regime on Facebook in 2011 or 2012 faced repercussions even a decade later. A young woman in Homs was jailed for six months due to posts from ten years prior. Her family did not oppose the regime and managed to pay off the judge for her release because they had money. The Mukhabarat needs money, so they try to find past dissenters and extort bribes. It is also a way to show the regime's return to power and maintain control. This has both economic and political motives.

What about re-entry via Bab Al-Hawa into Idlib territory? Is there a fee for private individuals who want to enter? Who receives this money? Does one get payment confirmation? There's concern that paying this money means financing a terrorist organization.

Fabrice Balanche: Living in Idlib means paying taxes to the Salvation Government, created by Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham. HTS controls the oil company, so buying gasoline and fuel funds a terrorist organisation on a daily basis.

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: Syrians or even Turks living in Turkey are not permitted to travel to Idlib through Bab Al-Hawa. Entry is restricted to individuals who are employed by certain organisations and have formal work, allowing them to cross the border without incurring any fees.

3 Questions related to military service, especially in the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) (presentation by Muhsen Al-Mustafa)

Compulsory service

I will cover the following topics: compulsory service, reserve service, the exemption fee, and amnesty decrees. Subsequently, I will address the questions I received from you. I will start by showing a map depicting the situation of control in Syria (see Annex II, p. 3). Recruitment into the Syrian army occurs in the regime-controlled areas and in parts of the AANES, but not in Idlib or Azaz, in the HTS-controlled regions or in the SNA-controlled regions. Enlistment in HTS and SNA forces is completely voluntary. The Syrian Arab Republic's army operates under legislative decree 30 of 2007 and its 19 amendments, which govern compulsory and reserve service. Tracking these amendments can be difficult, especially for non-Arabic speakers, as some are passed without publication.

Assad has firm control over Syria's parliament and legislative process. There are two types of legislation: laws approved by the parliament and issued by the President, and legislative decrees issued directly by Assad and routinely approved by the parliament. The slide shows that three quarters of the amendments to the military service law were made by legislative decree (see Annex II, p. 5). Major legislative changes are enacted through decrees rather than parliament. When the regime needs to implement new policies, it issues and enacts a legislative decree.

Compulsory military service in Syria applies to males aged 18 to 42. The duration is 18 months for those with a basic educational certificate or higher, and 21 months for those without. This policy has been in place since Syria's independence. It was 30 months after the 1967 Six-Day War until 2004, but has been gradually reduced since 2005. Compulsory service ranks determine reserve service later. There are three categories: individuals, non-commissioned officers, and officers (see Annex II, p. 9). Individuals with no education serve as privates for 21 months, while those with a basic education certificate serve as corporals for 18 months. Non-commissioned officers include sergeants (secondary education certificate), first sergeants (institute certificate), and warrant officers (university degree with GPA under 75%), all serving 18 months. Warrant officers may serve as lieutenants if needed, especially in the educational administration or in the army itself. Lieutenant officers have a university degree with a GPA over 75% or higher education (masters, doctorate) and serve 18 months. Those with medical conditions assigned to non-field service are demoted by one rank, except lieutenants.

Reserve service

The legal framework for reserve service is outlined in Chapter 2, Part 2 of Legislative Degree No. 30 of 2007. According to Article 15 of Legislative Degree, a person is assigned to reserve service in the following cases:

- Individuals who complete their compulsory service are added to the Ministry of Defense's database and may be called for reserve duty when needed.
- Those who have served in the military of another country are also included in the reserve list and can be called upon at any time.
- Upon completing active service, individuals remain on the reserve list and can be summoned whenever required.

The assignment to reserve service begins the day after any of these conditions are met. Furthermore, if a reserve member reaches the age limit for their rank in active service, with an additional two years, their name will be removed from the reserve list. A person who has completed their active service (enlisted in the armed forces) and has not exceeded the age limit for reserve service will also be assigned to reserve service and an individual will remain on the reserve service after the age of 42, which is normal for those who have enlisted in the army.

The general reserve includes individuals who have completed their compulsory service or failed to perform it and are still within the legal age of service, they are called up. But this specific statute to call has never been implemented in the current conflict.

But individuals with scientific and professional qualifications, such as drivers or healthcare workers, can still be called up to reserve service after the age of 42. It is important to note the difference between being called up and being assigned to reserve service (see Annex II, p. 13). "Called up" (Al-Mad'ou) refers to someone officially summoned for reserve duty at a specific time, while "assigned" (Mukallaf) refers to someone in the reserve database who can be called at any time.

If someone is drafted, compulsory service lasts 18 or 21 months, followed by 24 months of continuous reserve service (see Annex II, p. 14). After discharge, they remain on the reserve list and can be called up until the age of 42 and the name will stay on the list for two years more. Officers serving as Lieutenants are discharged after 18 months and will not have to do reserve service right away, but will be placed on the reserve list as "assigned" and can be called for reserve service. In June 2024, a new plan for reserve service was announced (see Annex II, pp. 14-15). It sets the reserve service duration to 24 months and outlines three main phases, during which longer-serving reserve personnel will be discharged to end up only with reservists who serve up to 2 years. The first phase will be completed at the end of 2024, discharging of 46,000 reservists. The second phase was announced to begin next year, discharging another round of reservists until the end of next year, and then everyone will be discharged after 2 years of reserve service (For more information, see: <https://bit.ly/4fUQWaP>).

I tracked the amendments to the military service law regarding reserve service (see Annex II, p. 16). No changes were made to the law in this regard until the Turkish-Russian agreement. Between 2011 and 2020, no amendments occurred, as the regime prioritized human resources. After the agreement, an amendment allowed reservists to pay an exemption fee, reflecting the regime's shift to prioritizing monetary gain over service in a time without any major military operations. Assad offered people a choice: serve or pay for an exemption in US dollars.

I created a tool which assists in determining the duration of compulsory and reserve service in Syria, it is available here: <https://www.muhsenalmustafa.com/en/compulsory-reserve-service>. The tool provides an example of compulsory and reserve service if an individual were to begin their service today.

Exemption fee

The exemption fee for compulsory service varies based on years lived abroad: 10,000 US-Dollar for one year decreasing to \$9,000 for 2 years, and so on. For those in Syria, only individuals with partial or minor disabilities that allow them to serve in non-field service can pay 3,000 US-Dollar for exemption. Individuals living in Syria assigned to field service cannot pay for exemption.

Those who miss service and turn 42 without completing compulsory service must pay a fee of about 8,000 US-Dollars, due months after turning 42. This law was amended by the regime to collect money from the people. Each year of delayed payment incurs an additional \$200, up to a maximum of \$2,000. The highest missed service fee can therefore reach 10,000 US-Dollar. The regime may seize the individual's and their family's assets if the fee is unpaid. If the person abroad has assets in Syria, the regime will confiscate them. If those assets are insufficient, the regime can seize the spouse's and children's assets. If caught in Syria, the person may be imprisoned and denied a security clearance, which is issued by the political security branch. A security clearance is necessary, for example, to sell property. The regime can withhold the security clearance to enforce payment of the exemption fee.

There is a fee to be exempt from reserve service. Since 2022, those living abroad for at least one year can pay \$5,000. In Syria, people with partial disabilities that still allows them to serve can pay \$3,000, while those over 38 in field service pay \$4,800. The fee reduces by \$200 for each month already served. I created a tool to calculate exemption fees for various cases, as every case has unique conditions. The tool is available here: <https://www.muhsenalmustafa.com/en/fee-compulsory-reserve-service> (see Annex II, p. 23). The regime tries to drain society and feed the military. This practice began many years ago. For instance, there is an exemption fee of 10,000 US-Dollars. Paying this amount would be equivalent to nearly 137 million Syrian Pounds. To give some context, the monthly salary of an enlisted lieutenant is around 500,000 Syrian Pounds. Doing the math, a 10,000 US-Dollar fee can cover the salaries of 280 officers in the military for one month. Thus, it represents a significant source of income that the government seeks from individuals both inside and outside Syria to fund its military operations, to buy weapons, and to serve its war machine.

Amnesty decrees

Since 2011, Assad has issued 26 legislative amnesty decrees, which are typically a parliamentary prerogative. The latest was issued in September 2024. Despite these decrees, about 130,000 detainees and forcibly disappeared persons remain. Refugees returning from Lebanon have been detained by the regime. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) recorded cases where returnees were arrested for military service. In the first week of October, nine such cases have been confirmed. We await further updates from SNHR on those detained after returning from Lebanon.

The yellow line indicates the number of detained and forcibly disappeared individuals in Syria (see Annex II, p. 27). This number has decreased significantly as many opposing the regime or supporting the opposition have fled. The green columns show the number of people covered by amnesties. According to SNHR, around 100,000 people are still missing, possibly killed under torture, as evidenced by the Caesar photos. My brother-in-law disappeared in 2012, and despite numerous attempts and expenses, we still have no information on his whereabouts. So it is hard for Syrians to come back and again be confronted with this mentality of the regime.

The most recent amnesty decree, Legislative Decree No. 27 of 2024, grants amnesty for internal and external desertion crimes stipulated in Article 100 and 101 of the Military Penal Code. This is similar to previous amnesty decrees, but the regime makes conditions who gets this amnesty.

It is only for people who are hiding from justice if they surrender themselves within three months in case of internal desertion and four months in case of external desertion. This is actually some kind of trick. Assad grants amnesty for only two articles of the Penal Code. Many other articles, such as 102 and 103, cover desertion to the enemy and desertion by conspiracy. This allows the regime to charge those who fled the army and joined the opposition. The amnesty mainly benefits loyal individuals in regime-controlled areas or facilitates settlements. Articles 137 to 150, which include severe penalties such as death penalty or long prison sentences, can still be applied to soldiers who deserted. Thus, this amnesty mainly targets deserters within regime-controlled zones.

There are some special cases in Syria, like conscription in Suwayda, where the local Druze population has resisted conscription since 2014, leading to a lack of enforcement for both compulsory and reserve service. Voluntary enlistment is still possible. There are no formal agreements between Suwayda and the regime regarding this. Frequently, protests occur when someone is arrested for military service, prompting local militias to kidnap regime officers to negotiate their release. In Daraa, enforcing compulsory and reserve service faces challenges, especially in some opposition-controlled areas. Unlike the Northwest, there are unique control conditions. Arrests at checkpoints for ID and military booklet checks, as well as occasional raids, occur. Consequently, the implementation of compulsory and reserve service in Daraa is inconsistent. The regime sometimes offers draft evaders and deserters a six-month period to settle and rejoin the army.

Q&A

What is the current situation regarding the conscription of military service recruits, how long do they serve, where are they deployed, what tasks do they have to perform, is there involvement in active fighting?

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: A new conscript undergoes one and a half months of training and can then be sent to serve at the frontlines or in other places as needed. Non-commissioned officers train for about six months. Both can be involved in active combat. Many conscripts have been killed, as there are no restrictions on using compulsory service personnel in fighting. They can be deployed wherever necessary.

Does the apprehension of draft evaders by the Syrian authorities currently tend to lead to immediate conscription without further sanctions, or do they face imprisonment with the risk of torture?

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: As previously mentioned, each case is unique. In numerous instances, draft evaders are sent directly to military service if they have not delayed their conscription order multiple times. However, if an individual has repeatedly delayed the conscription order, they may face imprisonment, potential torture by authorities, and an extension of their service term. Following imprisonment, they will be dispatched to serve, possibly at the frontline or any other location where personnel are required.

An example (see Annex II, p. 35): A soldier from Lajat in Daraa province defected and joined the Free Syrian Army. He made a settlement after the regime regained control in 2018. Arrested a year and a half ago, his body was returned to his family two months ago after he died from torture in Sednaya military prison. This is one of the cases case that involved a settlement where the parties trusted the regime to honour the agreement or amnesty decrees. Another example (see Annex II, p. 36) involves a man from Deir Ez-Zor who served compulsory service. He failed to join his military unit only for several days, and the Military Police arrested him. His family tried to pay a bribe in exchange for his release and sending him back to serve, but they failed, instead they were informed of his death under torture.

What is the current status of reservists? Are they still being conscripted, and for how long? How does specialisation affect their service? Would older returnees from abroad who are reservists be drafted into the reserve such as those who were called a while ago while they were abroad and whose names appear in the reservists database of the defence ministry?

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: Since the agreement with Turkey in 2020, there has been no large military operation in the country. So, there is a reduced level of calls to the military service compared to the early years of the conflict after 2011, but if someone was called up to serve earlier, he will still be on the wanted list. And the regime can, if someone didn't respond to being called up for reserve, after the age of 42, they will sentence him to prison. So they can still call up people to reserve service anytime. Similar to compulsory service, qualifications play a role in who is called for reserve service. Qualifications are registered upon completing the service, even those living abroad may be called up for reserve because they are needed. Anyone can be called based on their qualification or specialisation prior to their time in the army. If there is a need for individuals with experience in air defense, those who served in the Air Force will be called up for reserve service.

Although military confrontations have reduced, systematic recruitment of reservists continues. Those who completed their mandatory service are automatically registered for reserve duty and can be called up depending on how recently they finished their service.

Reservists are typically called up in stages, starting with those who finished service within the past five years, followed by those who completed it 5–10 years earlier according to what he needs.

A three-phase plan for discharging tens of thousands of reservists was initiated in July 2024. By the end of 2025, the maximum reserve service will be reduced to two years.

Military qualifications and specialisations influence whether a reservist is called up. Specialised skills such as mechanics or electrical engineering may lead to specific assignments, but combat and infantry roles are generally prioritized.

Men who are registered as reservists upon completing their service, even those living abroad, may be called up if their names appear in the Ministry of Defense's database. There have been reports of arrests for reserve duty at checkpoints when returning to Syria, particularly for those who are in the database.

What percentage of those who completed basic military service are called up for reserve duty? In other words, what is the probability of being called up for reserve duty after completing military service?

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: Overall, the regime has reduced the reserve service, but there are no specific numbers or percentages. It depends on the needs and qualifications required. The reserve service list details each person's capabilities and rank.

What can you tell us about recruitment by the government in DAANES, inside and outside the government enclaves?

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: There is something like an agreement between DAANES and the Syrian regime forces. The Syrian regime can recruit within its controlled areas in Qamishli and Al-Hasaka, but not outside them. If someone needs a document from the regime and enters these areas, they will be checked at the checkpoint. If they haven't completed compulsory service or are called for reserve duty, they will be arrested and sent to serve.

Is the military service exemption fee recognized by the authorities if the country was left illegally?

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: Yes, individuals who left Syria illegally can pay the fee at any location with a Syrian embassy, or have a relative in Syria pay on their behalf. Processing takes about two months.

What documents does a Syrian refugee need to provide for the exemption fee process?

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: They typically need a passport, proof of residency, and possibly a military booklet. If they left Syria illegally, they must settle this issue and explain their departure. The application is then sent to Damascus and takes over a month for a response. If any documents are missing, they will need to provide them. It might be simpler to pay the fee within Syria.

Do you mean having someone like a relative pay it for you?

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: Yes, a relative can go to the recruitment branch with an ID or a photo of the ID. They can inquire at the recruitment branch about paying the exemption fee for the person abroad. They will be provided with an application form. After filling out the required information, they will proceed to pay the fee at the bank. For example, a person named Abdel Ghani Munir paid the exemption fee. He was deported from Turkey to Azaz, where he could not find work due to the challenging conditions. His parents persuaded him to settle with the regime and pay the exemption fee for his compulsory service. He paid the fee while traveling from Azaz to Aleppo, passing through Manbij. However, the military security branch in Aleppo arrested him, and a few days later, his body, showing signs of torture, was returned to his family. This indicates that safety might not be guaranteed even if one pays the fee. As reported, Abdel Ghani Munir had a history of opposition activities against the regime. The handling of

individuals by authorities can be unpredictable and lacks clear procedures, allowing officers or soldiers at checkpoints significant discretion.

Do individuals receive a written confirmation for paying the exemption fee?

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: Yes, there is a confirmation paper stating the payment was approved. It is also recorded in the military booklet.

When do you need a status settlement, who can perform it, and what steps are required to obtain it?

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: When returning from abroad, you need a settlement, especially if you left the country illegally. Military draft evaders and defectors also need a settlement, especially if they lived in areas under opposition control before. This also applies for civilians, who lived in areas under opposition control and now return to regime-controlled areas.

Many individuals begin by asking a trusted person from their village or city to visit the local branch of the intelligence agency and provide information about them. The agency will then gather all relevant details and inquire if the person has any past activity against the regime. For this procedure, general amnesties are not taken into account. The amnesties are rather meant as a deceptive sign to the international community that the regime is ready to forgive. This will involve bribing the officer to provide favourable information for the returnee. Sometimes they also ask about reserve service/ compulsory service to deal with that. The settlement process can vary based on application location, whether somebody applies for you in the country or you return from abroad and do the process at the border, but there is no clear procedure. Typically, on entry, individuals obliged to serve compulsory service receive a document allowing 15 days to visit their hometown before reporting to the recruitment branch. There, they submit the document or military booklet and begin service. Those living in opposition-controlled areas who return to government territory may be given six months to start their service. I also know about some individuals (not draft evaders) return to their village to reclaim land that someone tried to seize.

In similar situations, intelligence agencies investigate individuals thoroughly, including interrogations in every security branch, often requiring them to bribe officials for favourable outcomes. Despite not opposing the regime or being wanted, ordinary Syrian civilians must pay because officials seek additional income beyond their \$30 salary. This often involves multiple payments and persistent calls for further bribes. As mentioned earlier, the procedure is often unclear and varies by case. Border officers sometimes invent problems to solicit bribes and intimidate people. They may direct individuals to a vague and unknown “branch 251”, causing confusion. Then they offer help in exchange for money. It's difficult to outline a clear procedure as officer behaviour at borders can vary unpredictably.

Does the government with its presence of troops in Manbij area recruit in that region?

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: The regime does not recruit in Manbij as it is controlled by SDF forces. The regime only holds some border points between SNA areas and Manbij. They are present around Manbij due to the constant Turkish threat of a military operation, but they do not recruit there.

For military service in DAANES, does the administration follow the 18-24 age limit, or is it based on men born in 1998 and after, as per the 2021 decree?

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: This recent circular, issued by DAANES in June 2024, establishes the service age for men born between 1998 and 2006. Consequently, the age range is now from 18 to 26 years, rather than 18 to 24 years. (see Annex II, p. 46)

That means, that currently individuals aged 26 and over are exempt from service. Without a new decree, this will increase to 27, then 28, and so on over time. Is that correct?

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: Yes.

Are individuals in the HTS-controlled area or in the Turkish-controlled/SNA-area required to enlist with the rebels or the SNA/FSA?

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: In the HTS and Syrian National Army areas, service is entirely voluntary, with no compulsory requirements.

Do you have any information about the recruitment of minors in both Kurdish-administered regions and in government-controlled areas?

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: In the regime-controlled area, the law clearly states 18 years and above. There are reports, including from the UN, about the recruitment of children under 18. This recruitment appears to be into militias loyal to the regime, rather than in the regime itself. I assume it was more common in the past, during intense military operations within Syria when there was a high demand for human resources, leading to less prevention of child recruitment. In the SDF-controlled areas, child recruitment is reported to occur frequently. They have a revolutionary youth movement linked with the PKK and the YPG, which allegedly involves kidnapping children and sending them to training camps in Qandil, Iraq. In 2023, over 50 children were reportedly recruited in the SDF area, many of whom were taken from schools and sent away.

Is draft evasion not only sanctioned by law, but also still perceived as an act of political dissent, such as a lack of patriotism to defend the country? Does the government consider this a political act?

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: Yes, this is possible. The regime has the military penal code and a general penal code, allowing them to charge individuals under numerous articles. If I return to Syria, I could be charged under many of these articles.

How do security forces respond if someone in custody for draft evasion is called up for military service and still refuses to serve? Are there any known cases of this occurring?

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: I am not aware of any specific cases, but according to the law, individuals can be taken to court and potentially sent to a military prison such as Sednaya. Therefore, it is not an effective way to avoid military service in Syria. People generally prefer fulfilling their military service over being imprisoned in a military facility. I do not have knowledge of cases like that.

So, he could be tried by a military court, even though he is not yet a soldier?

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: Yes. According to the military service law, it connects with the military penal code. This means he can be charged under the military penal code and tried before a military court.

A Syrian minor who fled to Lebanon reported that other young Syrians were allegedly abducted or collected in UNHCR camps in Lebanon, and then the young men disappeared. It is now believed that they may have been taken to Syria and potentially forced into military service. Is this possible?

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: Yes, it is possible.

Have cases like that been reported?

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: Concrete cases are usually reported to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR); I do not receive them directly. I generally obtain numbers and cases from SNHR. In this instance, I am uncertain, but it may be possible.

Why do people abroad still pay an exemption fee, despite the risk of arbitrary arrest upon entry?

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: Paying the fee does not guarantee safety, but those with money and family in Syria may take the risk to visit loved ones. They pay the fee to enter, knowing the procedure is unclear and risky. For example, Abdel Ghani paid but was still arrested and killed (see Annex II, p. 41).

What could be the reason that this person - who was not part of the opposition and paid the exemption fee – was still tortured to death in Aleppo?

Muhsen Al-Mustafa: I inquired about his situation, he had no ties to the opposition. Living in Turkey or false information from spies or locals seeking revenge could result in arrest.

4 Annex I (Fabrice Balanche)

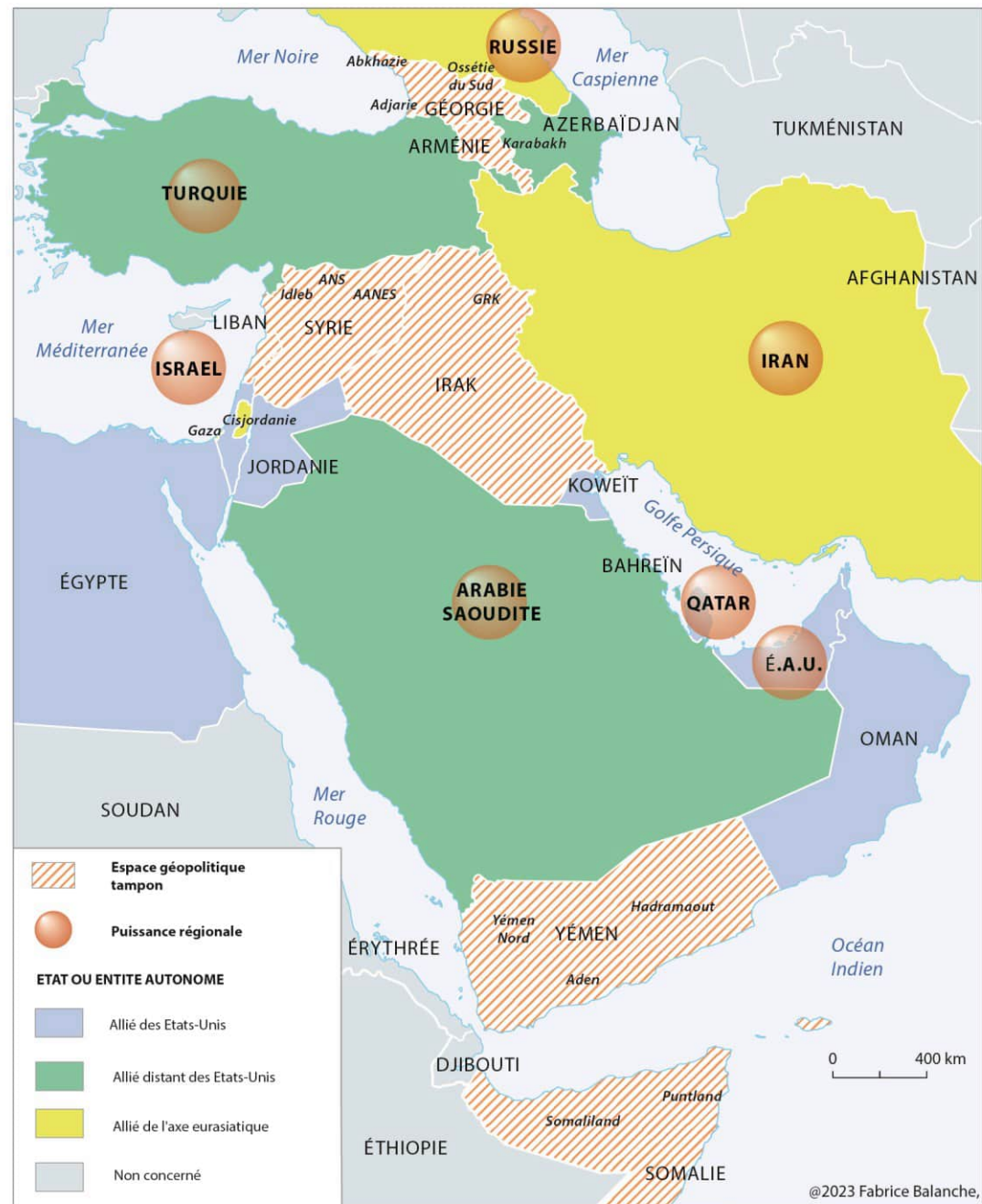
See the following 17 page presentation.

Syria today : divisions, ruins and the Shiite Crescent



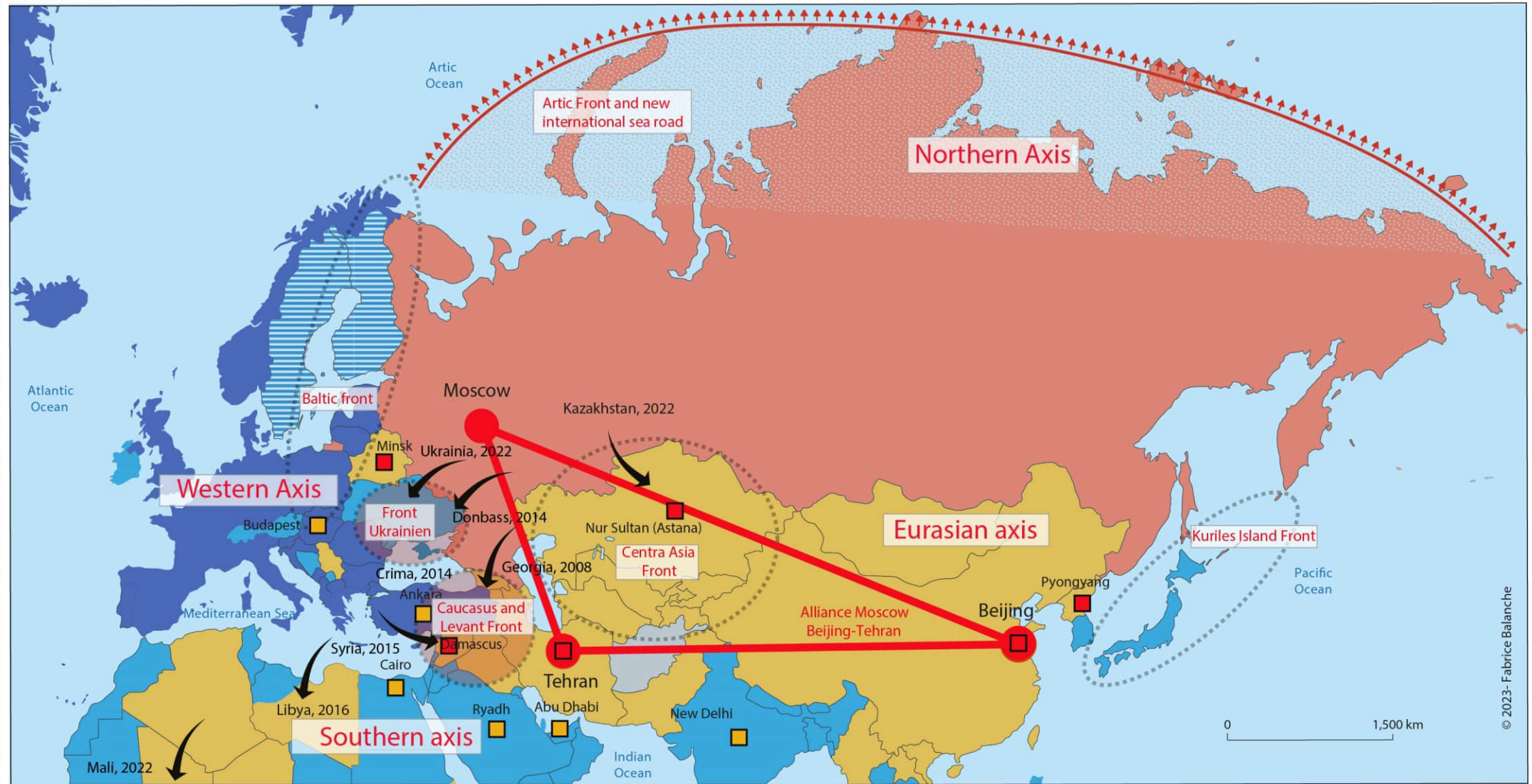
22-LES ESPACES GEOPOLITIQUES TAMPONS

LEVANT, CAUCASE, GOLFE D'ADEN



17-RUSSIAN POWER AXIS

From Heartland to Rimland



RUSSIAN TERRITORIAL POWER

- Russian Federation
- Pro-Russian country
- Major ally
- Secondary ally
- Friend of Russia
- Non descript country

OPPOSITION TO RUSSIA

- NATO member
- NATO candidate
- Pro-Western country

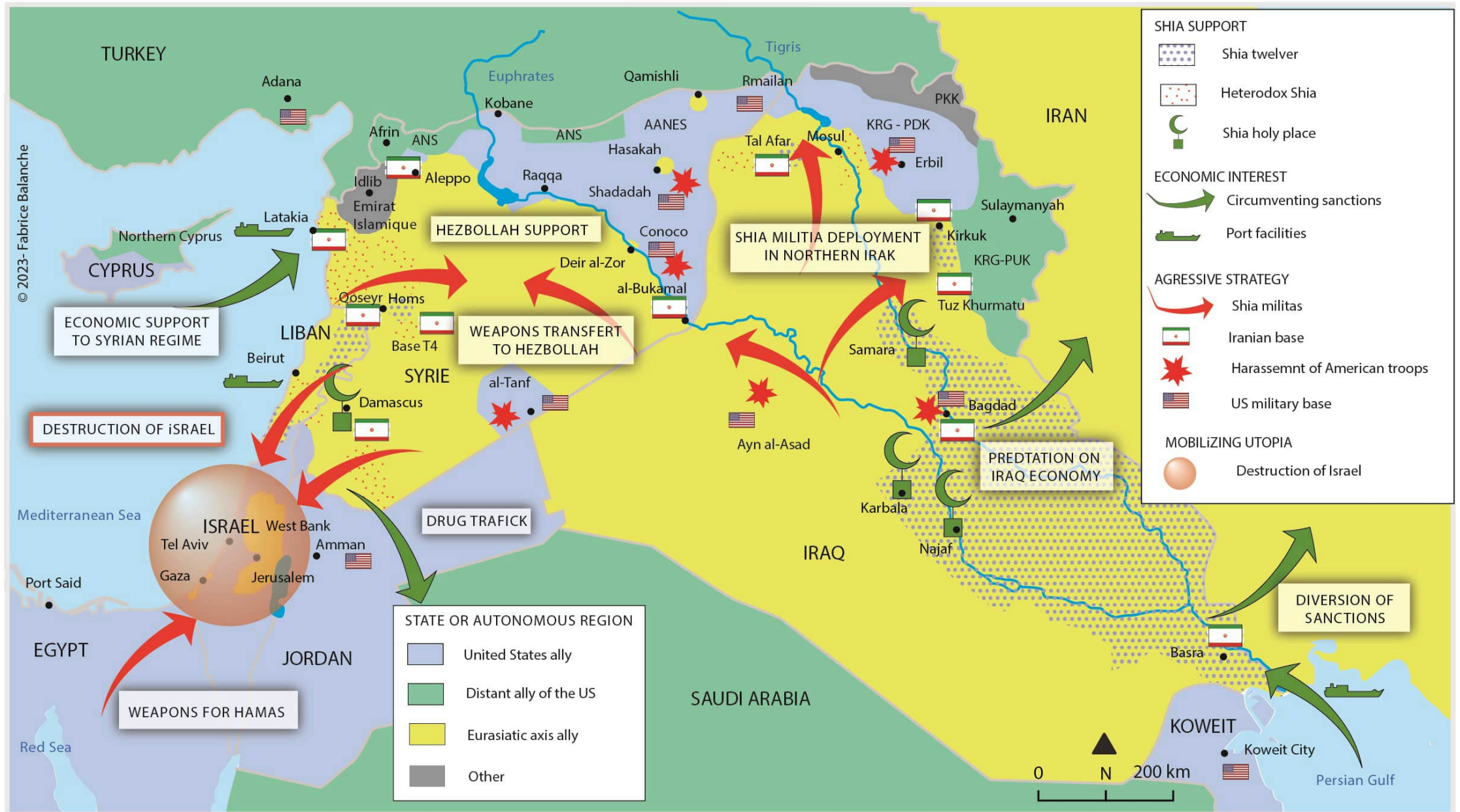
RUSSIAN STRATEGIC PROJECTION

- Russian intervention
- Active military front
- Aggressive soft power
- Arctic Front

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16-THE IRANIAN AXIS TO LEVANT

Shiitization, predation and destruction of Israel

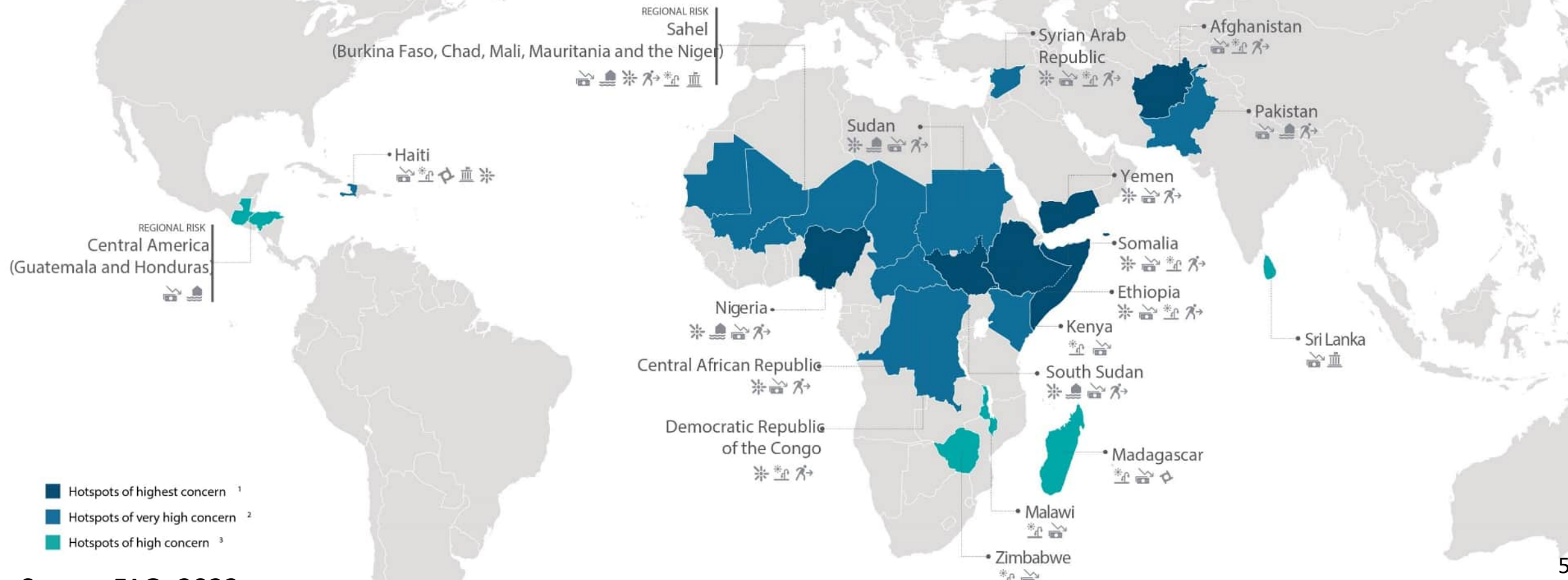


Early warning hunger hotspots

October 2022 to January 2023

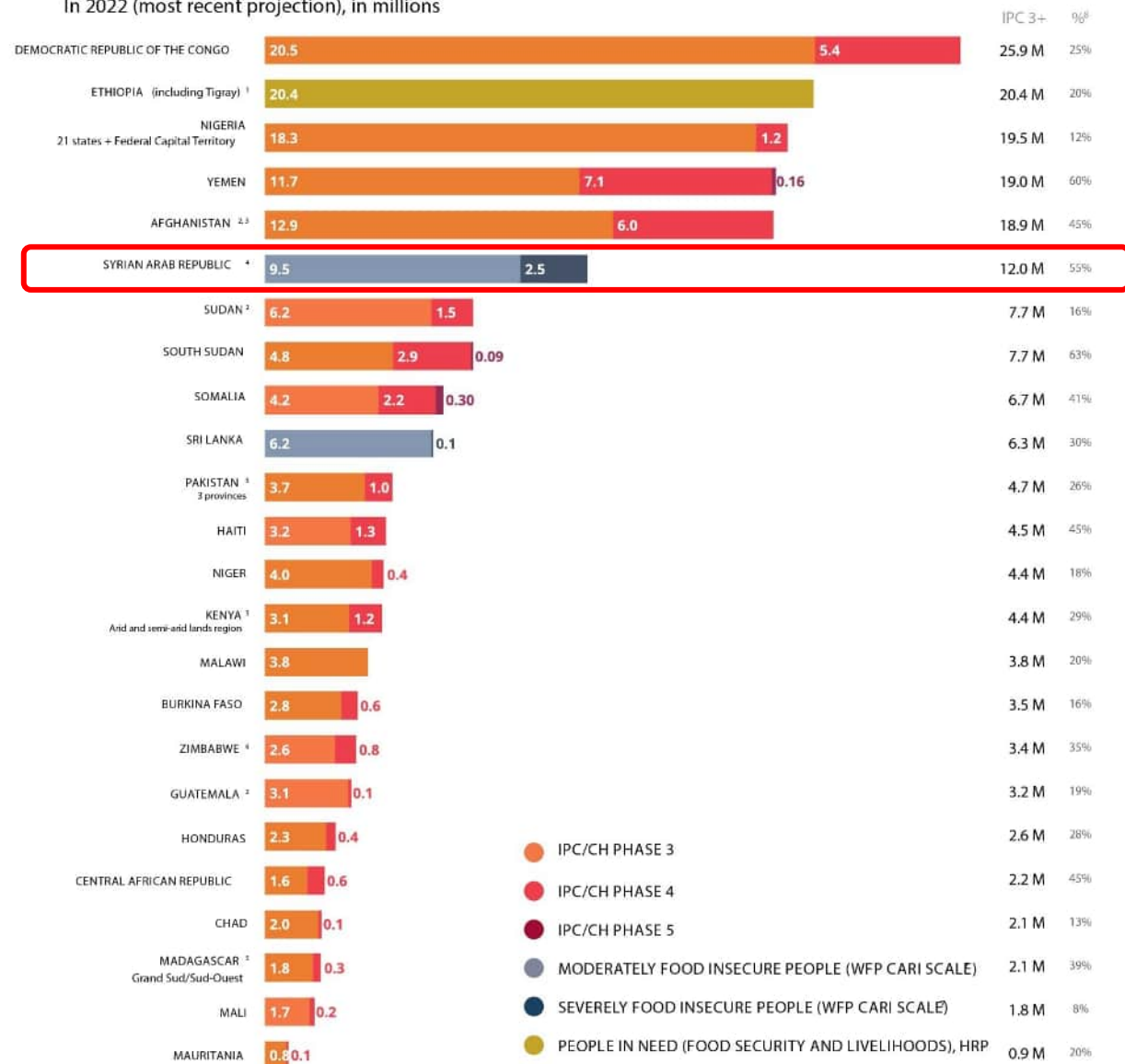
Key drivers and aggravating factors

-  Conflict/insecurity
-  Displacement
-  Dry conditions
-  Economic shocks
-  Flood
-  Political instability/unrest
-  Tropical cyclone



Number of people in acute food insecurity in hotspot countries

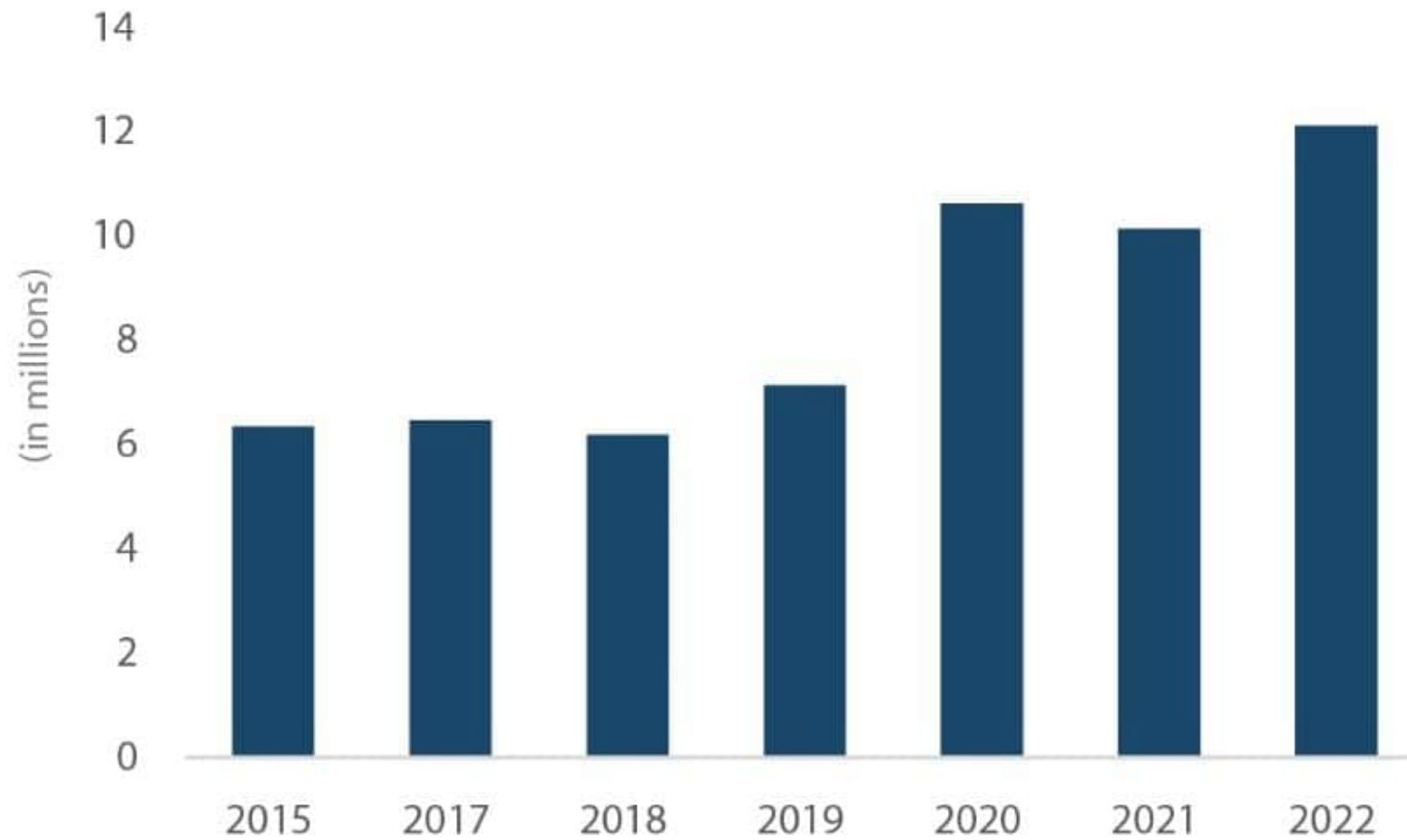
In 2022 (most recent projection), in millions



Syria

- WFP estimates 12.1 million Syrians face food insecurity in 2023
- That represents more than 2/3 of the resident population
- 51% more than in 2019.

FOOD INSECURITY TREND in Syria



SOURCE: WFP, MAR 2023

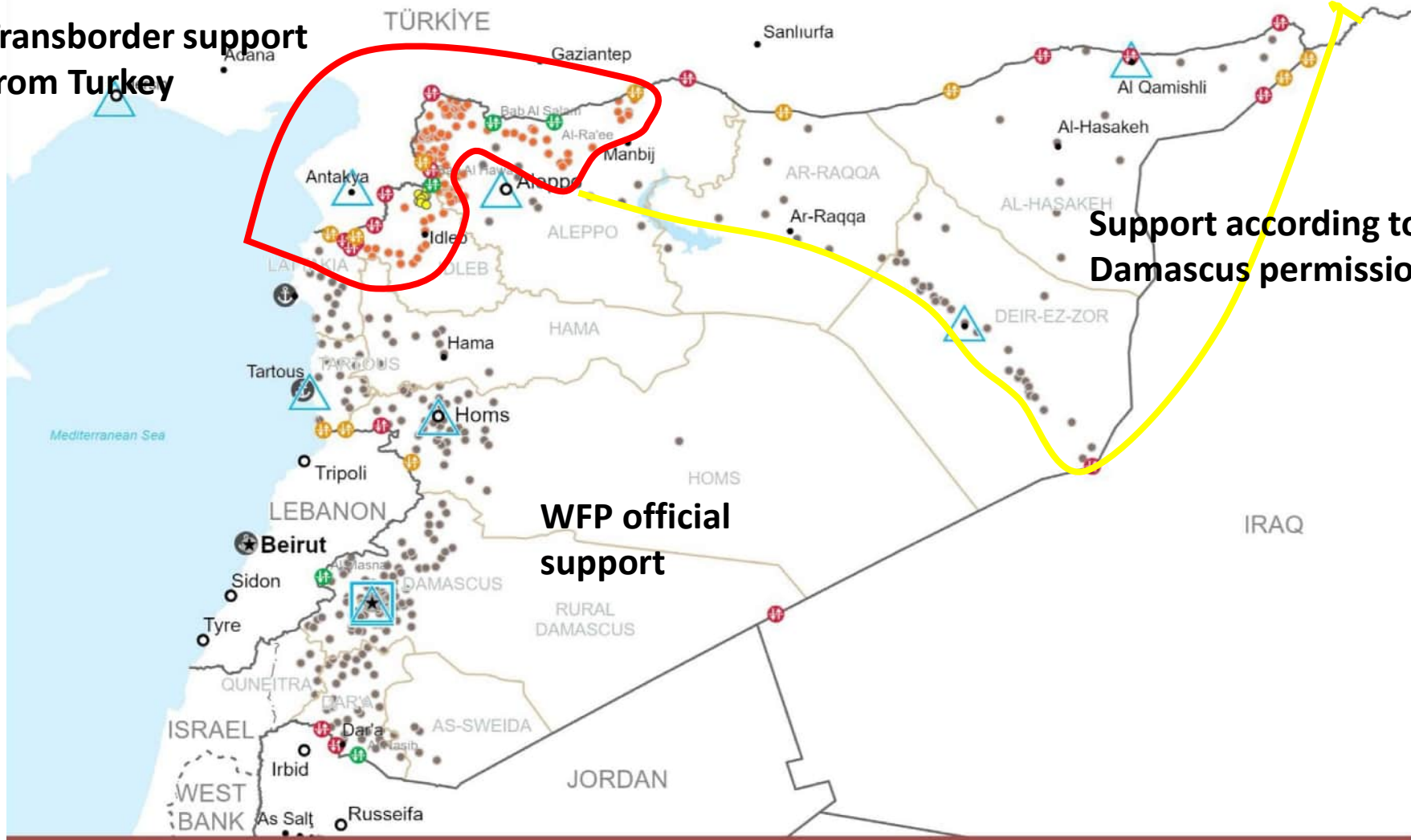
WFP interventions in 2023

SOURCE: WFP, MARCH 2023

Transborder support from Turkey

Support according to Damascus permission

WFP official support



- | | | | | | |
|----------------|---|-------------------|------------------------|---|-------------------------|
| Country Office | Warehouse | National Capital | International Boundary | Food Distribution Points (FDP) in March 2023 | |
| Field Office | Open Border Crossings | Major Town | Governorate Boundary | Regular Deliveries | Cross-Border Deliveries |
| | Open Border Crossings with Restrictions | Intermediate Town | Armistice Boundary | Cross-Line Deliveries | |
| | Closed Border Crossings | | | | |
| | Port | | | | |

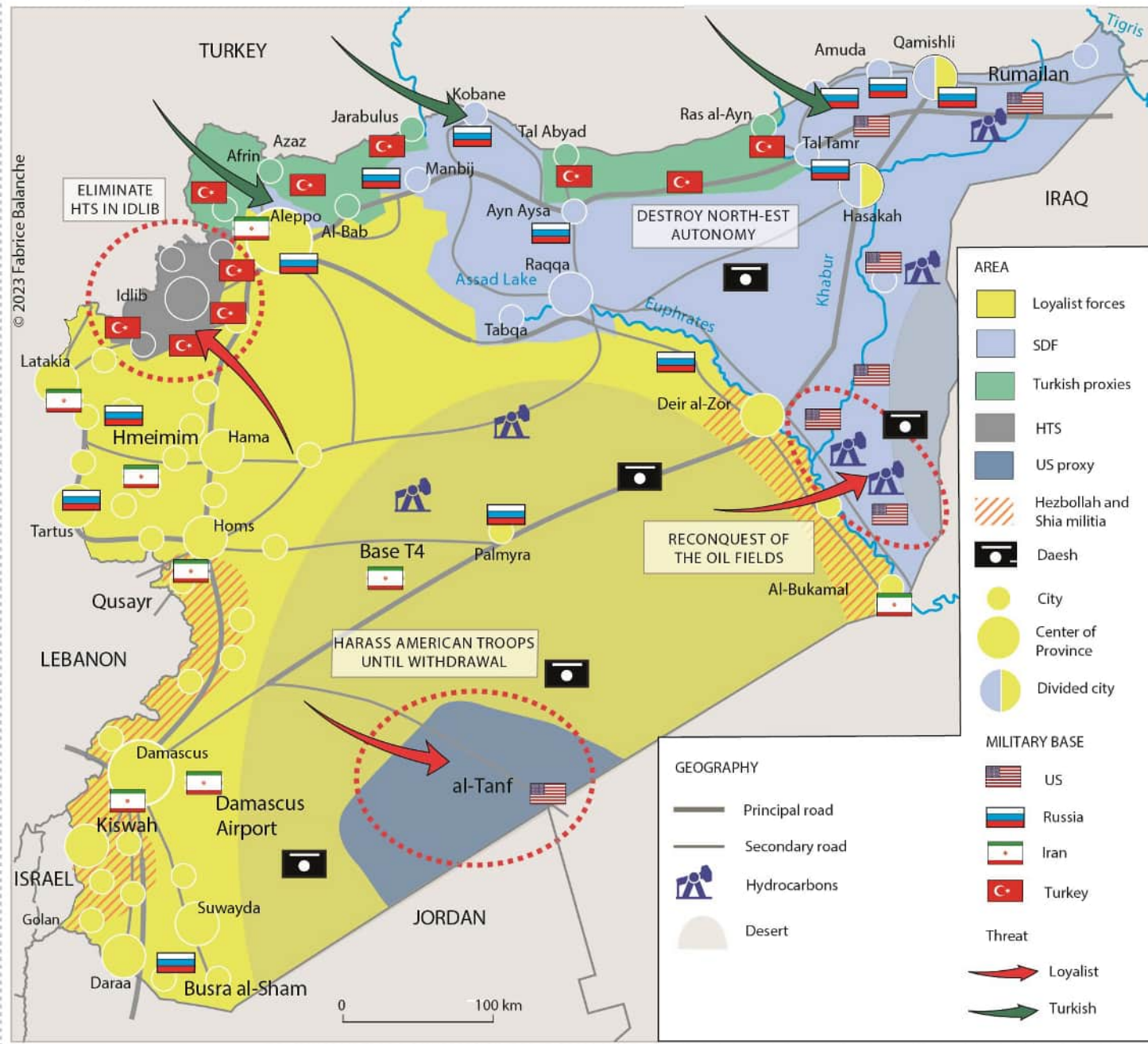
Sources: WFP, OCHA, GLCSC, UNGIWG, UNHCR, Geonames
 The designations employed and the presentation of material on this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of WFP concerning the legal or constitutional status of any country, territory, city or sea or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.
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Approx. 70.2% of total FDPs are displayed on this map.

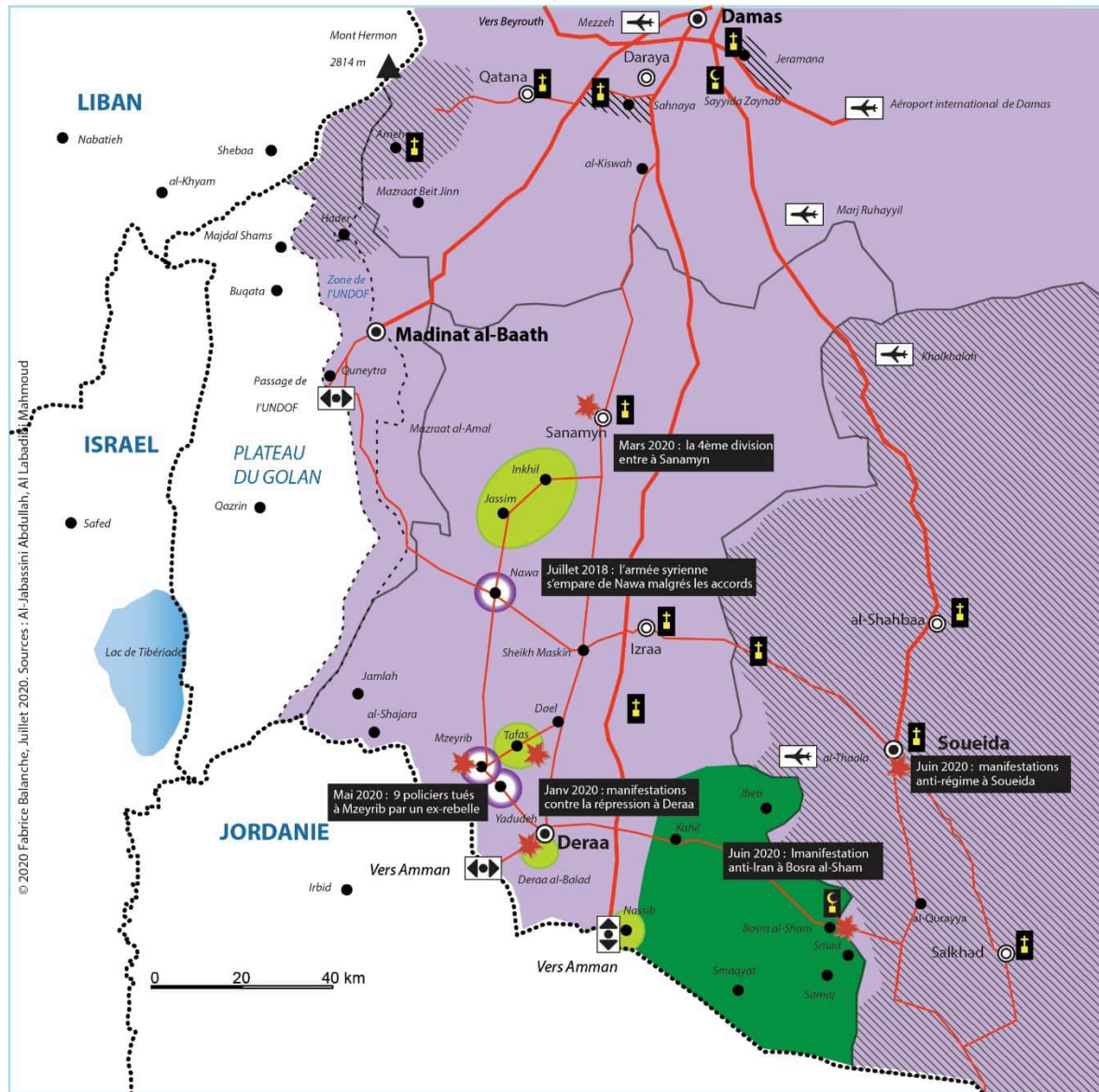
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13-SYRIAN MOSAIC

The regime wants to restore its full sovereignty



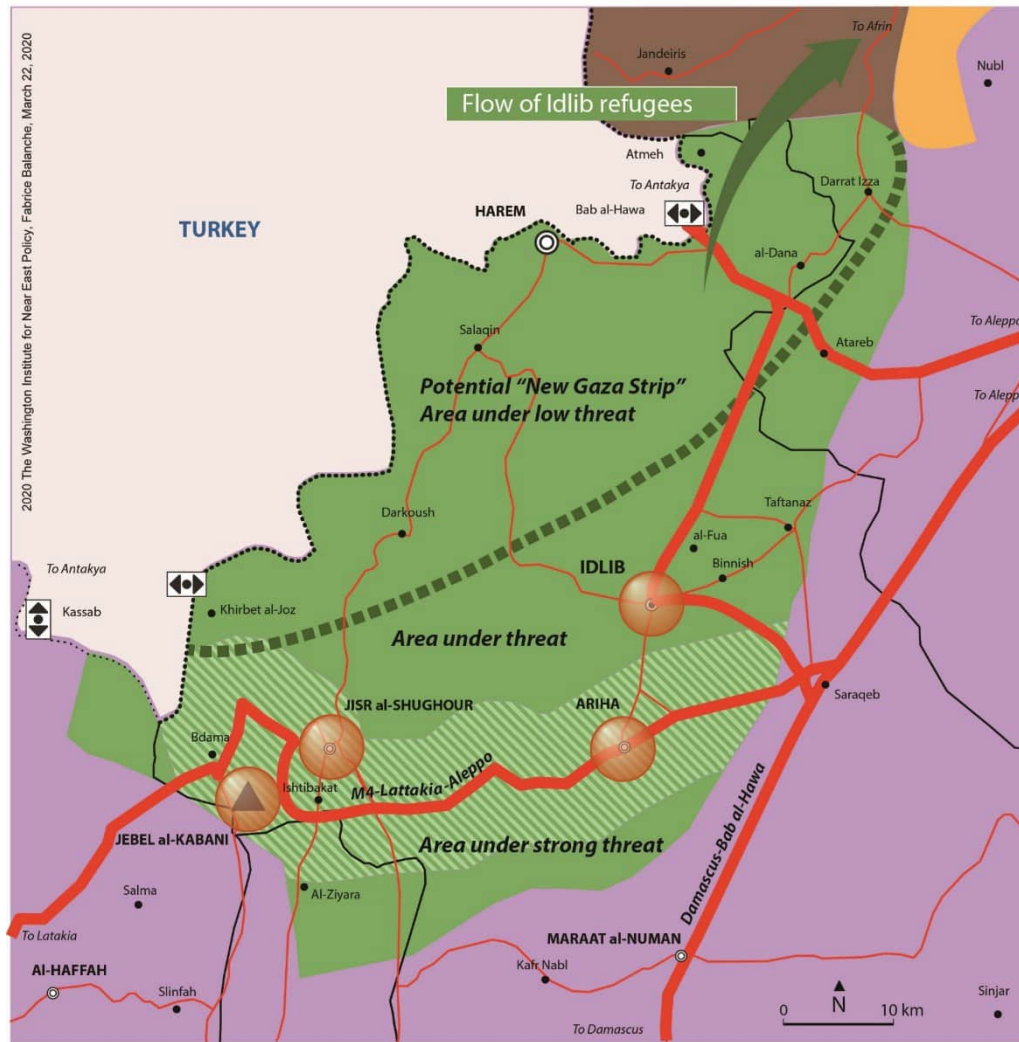
Le Sud de la Syrie après la reconquête, juillet 2020



© 2020 Fabrice Balanche, Juillet 2020. Sources : Al-Jabassini Abdullah, Al Labadie, Mahmoud

Zone sous contrôle de l'Armée Syrienne	Sunnite	Frontière internationale	Centre de province
Protection russe	Druze	Limite de province	Centre de district
Protection russe partielle	Chrétien	Ligne de cessez le feu du Golan en 1974	Localité
Protection russe supprimée par l'Armée Syrienne	Chiite	Poste frontière	Route principale
			Route secondaire

Small Idlib under threat

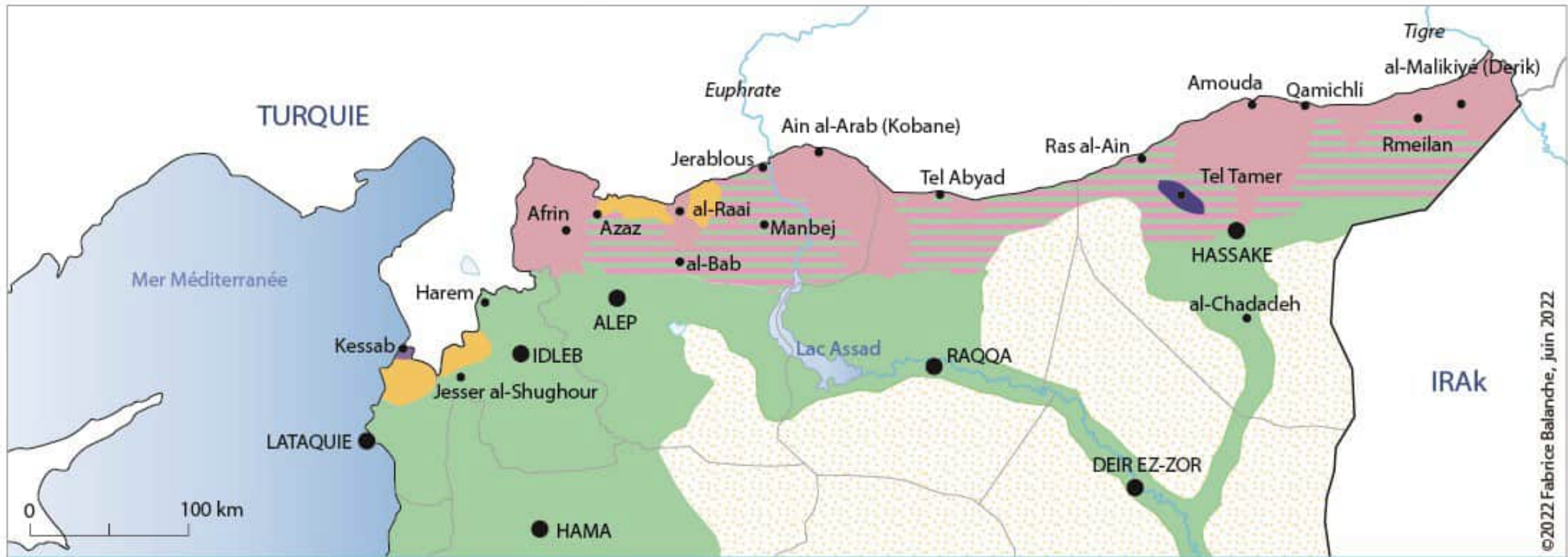


2020 The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Fabrice Balanche, March 22, 2020

AREAS OF CONTROL			
 Syrian Army	 YPG (Kurds)	 Rebels/Jihadists	 Turkish Army and Proxies
 Syrian Army target	 International border	 Province center	 Highway
 M4 demilitarized area	 Province border	 District center	 Secondary road
 Potential border of the "New Gaza Strip"	 Border crossing	 Town	



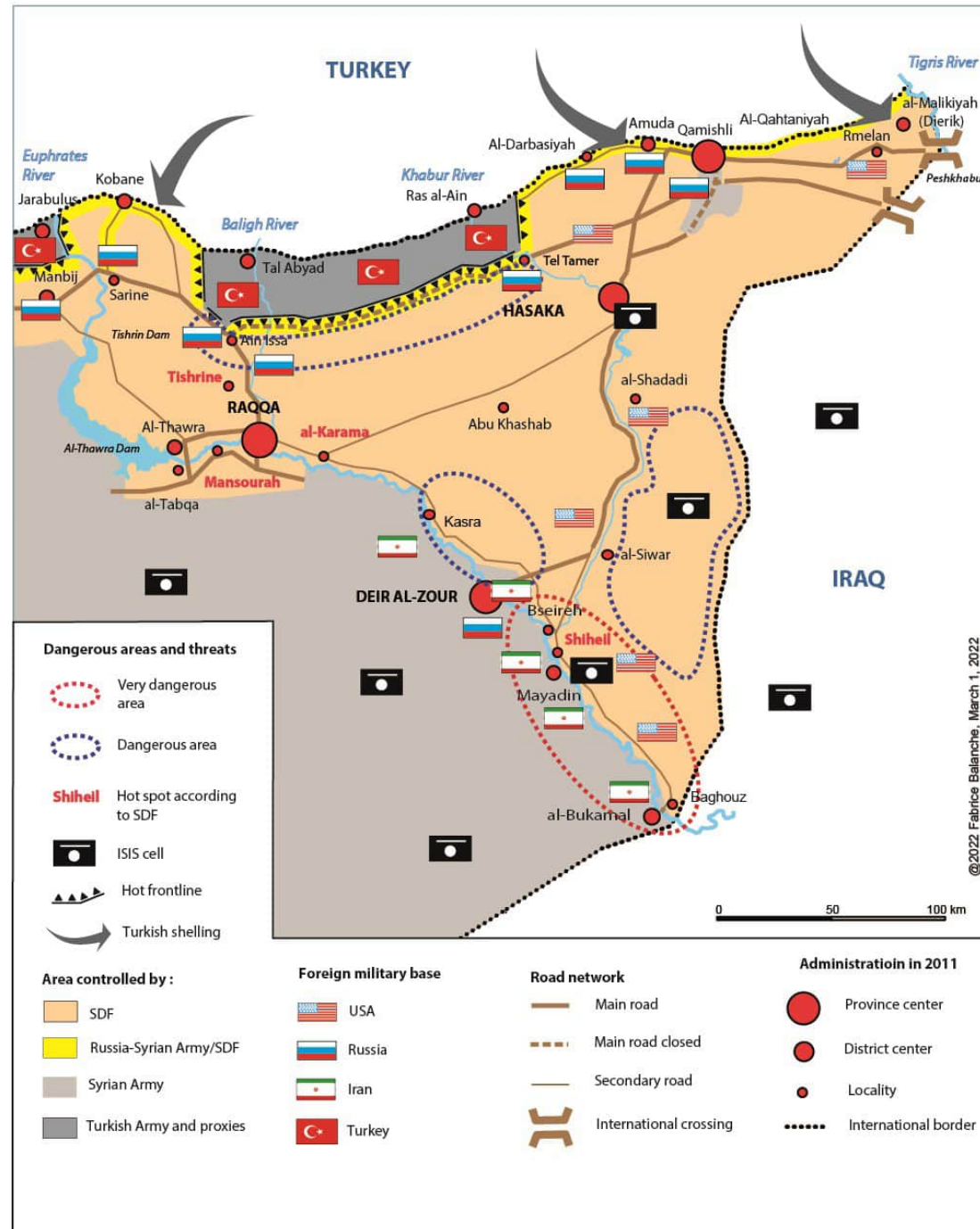
Les divisions ethniques dans le Nord de la Syrie avant la guerre



©2022 Fabrice Balandre, juin 2022



Dangerous areas and threats in Northeastern Syria







5 Annex II (Muhsen Al-Mustafa)

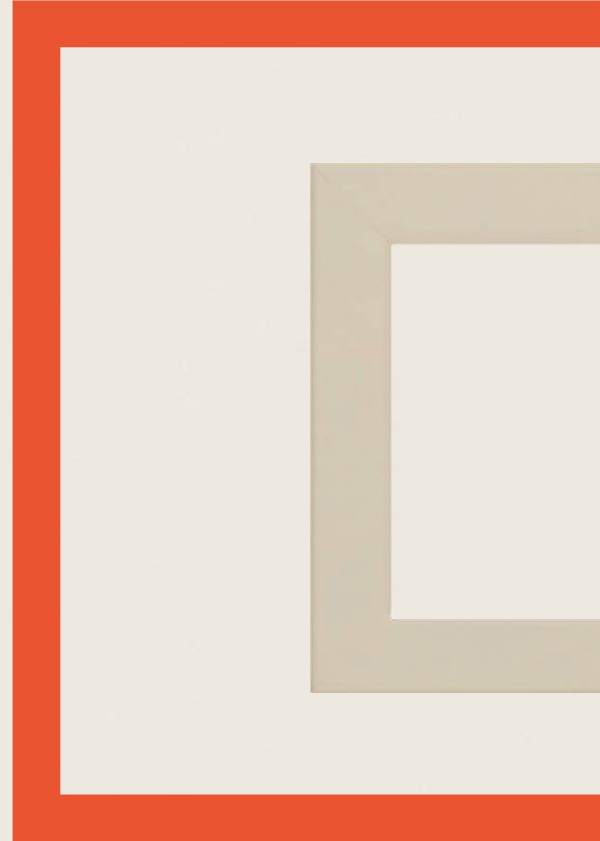
See the following 48 page presentation.

Military Service in Syria

24-10-2024



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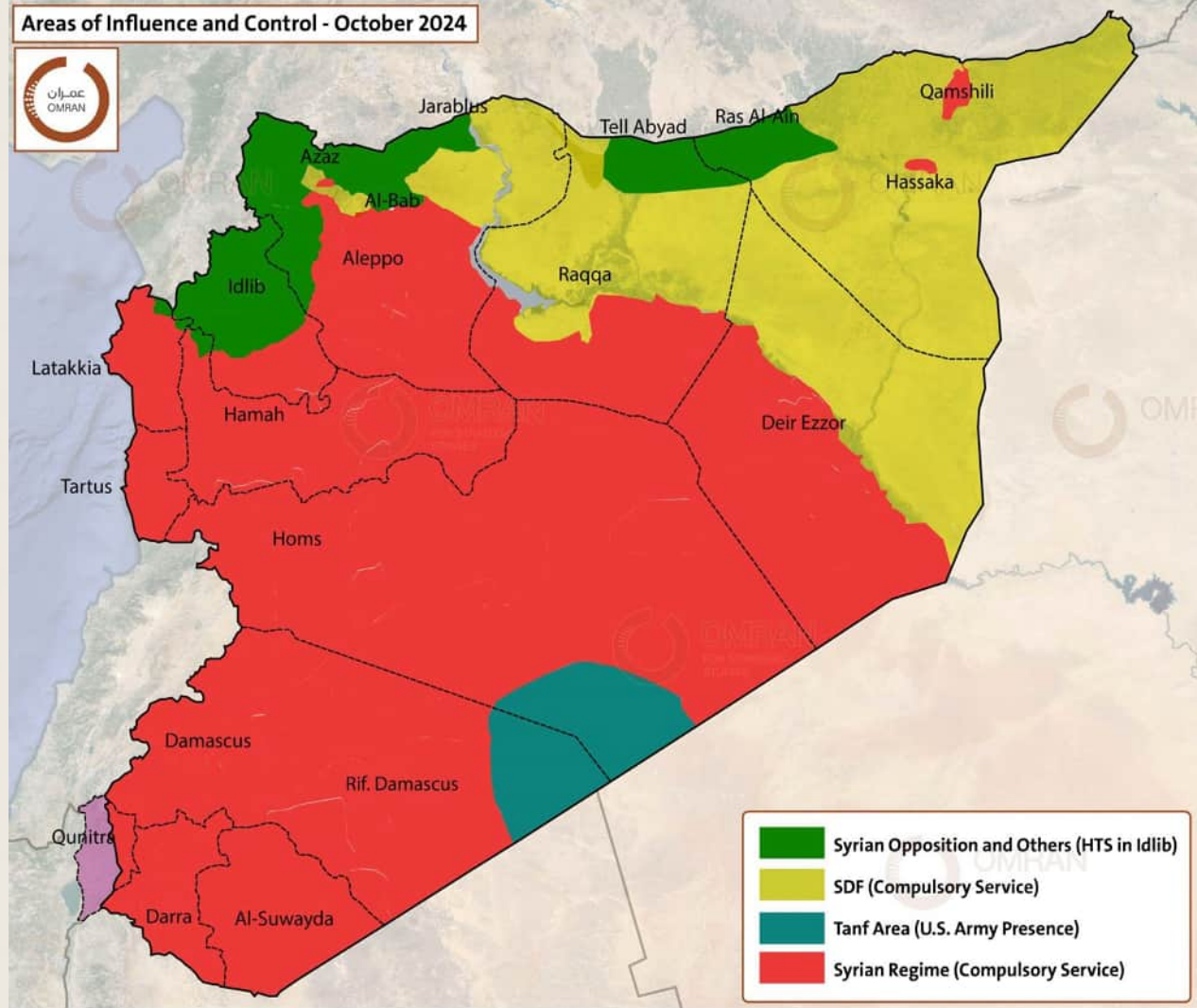
2

Main issues to cover

- Compulsory service
- Reserve service
- Exemption fee
- Amnesty decrees
- Q & A

3

Areas of Control in Syria



4

Legal Framework SAA:

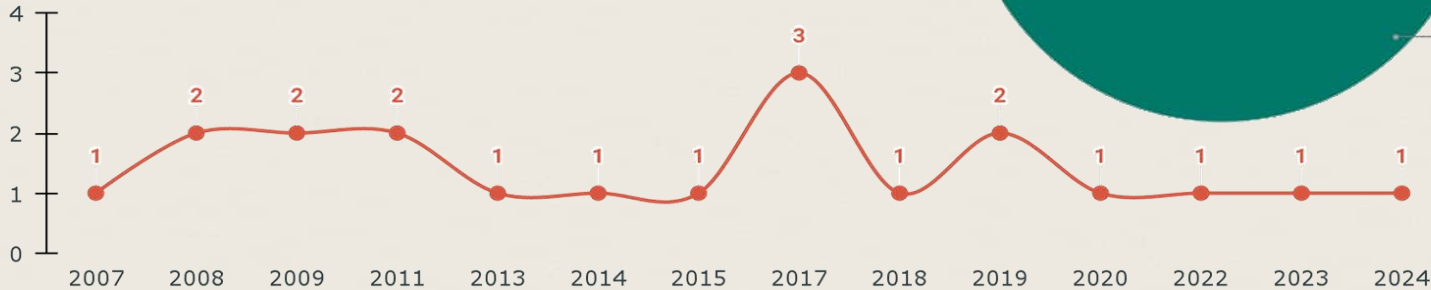
- Governed by Legislative Decree No. 30 of 2007 and amendments
- Beside the Law, there are 19 amendments since the issued the L.D 30 of 2007, those amendments make some issues hard to track and sometimes cause confusion

5

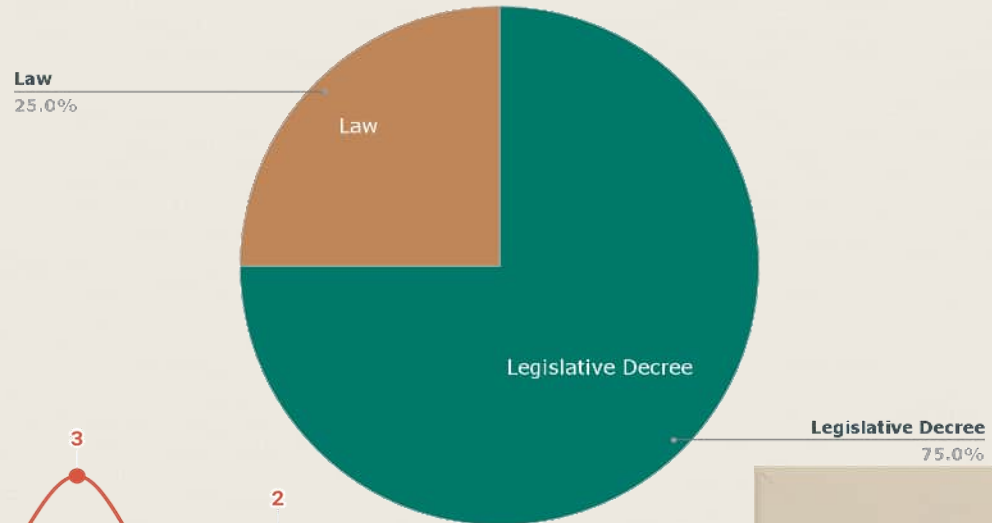
Who controls more?

Legislation in Syria is divided into **two** categories:

- 1. Laws:** These are approved by the Parliament and then issued by the President.
- 2. Legislative Decrees:** These are issued directly by the President.



The L.D No: 30 of 2007 and ammendmetns





Compulsory Military Service

7

Compulsory Military Service

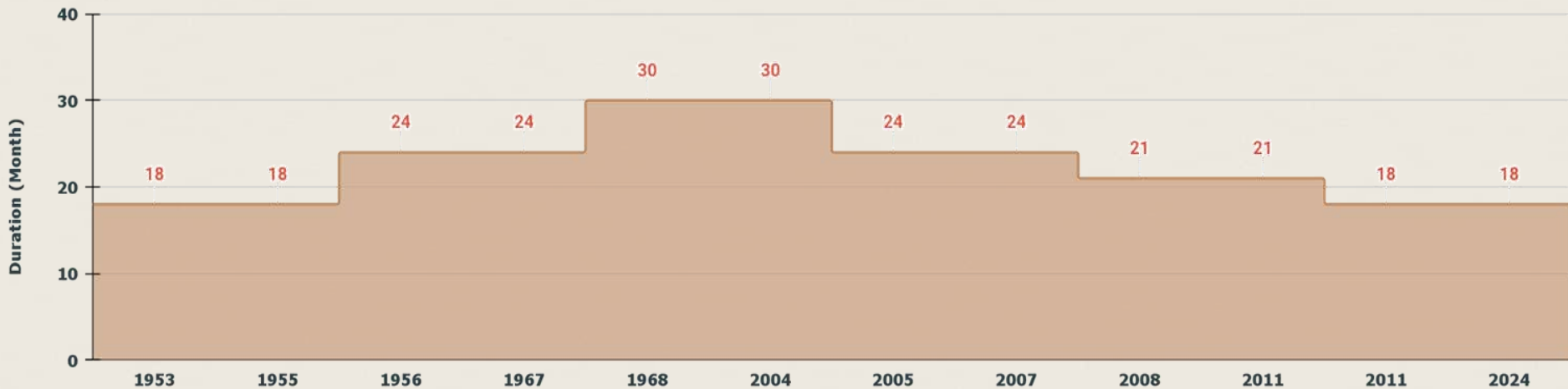
- Applies to all males aged 18 to 42.

Duration: **18 or 21 months**, depending on educational certificate.

A person with a Basic Education Certificate or higher will serve 18 months of compulsory service, while those without it will serve 21 months.

8

Duration of Compulsory Service



The Ranks of Compulsory Service: Article (52)

- **Individuals:**

1. **Private:** (No Degree): 21 months of compulsory service
2. **Corporal:** (Basic Education Certificate): 18 months of compulsory service

- **Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO):**

1. **Sergeant:** (Secondary Education Certificate): 18 months of compulsory service
2. **1st Sergeant:** (Institute Certificate): 18 months of compulsory service
3. **Warrant Officer:** (4 Year University Degree with GPA < 75%): 18 months of compulsory service .

- **Officers:**

1. **Lieutenant** (4 Year University Degree with GPA \geq 75%, 5 Year University Degree, or Higher Education - Master's or Doctorate): 18 months of compulsory service.

If a person has a medical condition and the medical board decides that his service should be non-field, he will be demoted by one rank.

10



Reserve Military Service



Legal Framework

The reserve service is outlined in **Chapter 2 of Part 2 of Legislative Decree No. 30 of 2007..**

- According to Article 15 of Legislative Decree No. 30 of 2007, a person is assigned to reserve service in the following cases:
 1. **Completion of compulsory service:** A person who has completed their compulsory service and has not exceeded the age limit for conscription will be transferred to reserve service.
 2. **Performing compulsory service in the army of another country:** If a person has performed compulsory military service in the army of another country, they will be assigned to reserve service in Syria after completing their service abroad.
 3. **Completion of active service:** A person who has completed their active service (enlisted in the armed forces) and has not exceeded the age limit for reserve service will also be assigned to reserve service.

The assignment to reserve service begins the day after any of these conditions are met. Additionally, if a reserve member reaches the age limit for their rank in active service, plus an additional two years, their name will be removed from the reserve lists.

Duration of Reserve Service

Based on the law, the duration of reserve service varies depending on the classification of the reserve

- **First Line Reserve:** The duration is five years.
- **Second Line Reserve:** The duration is five years, following the completion of the first line reserve.
- **Third Line Reserve:** The duration is five years, following the completion of the second line reserve.
- **General Reserve:** Citizens who have completed their mandatory service or failed to perform it and have not exceeded the legal age are called up

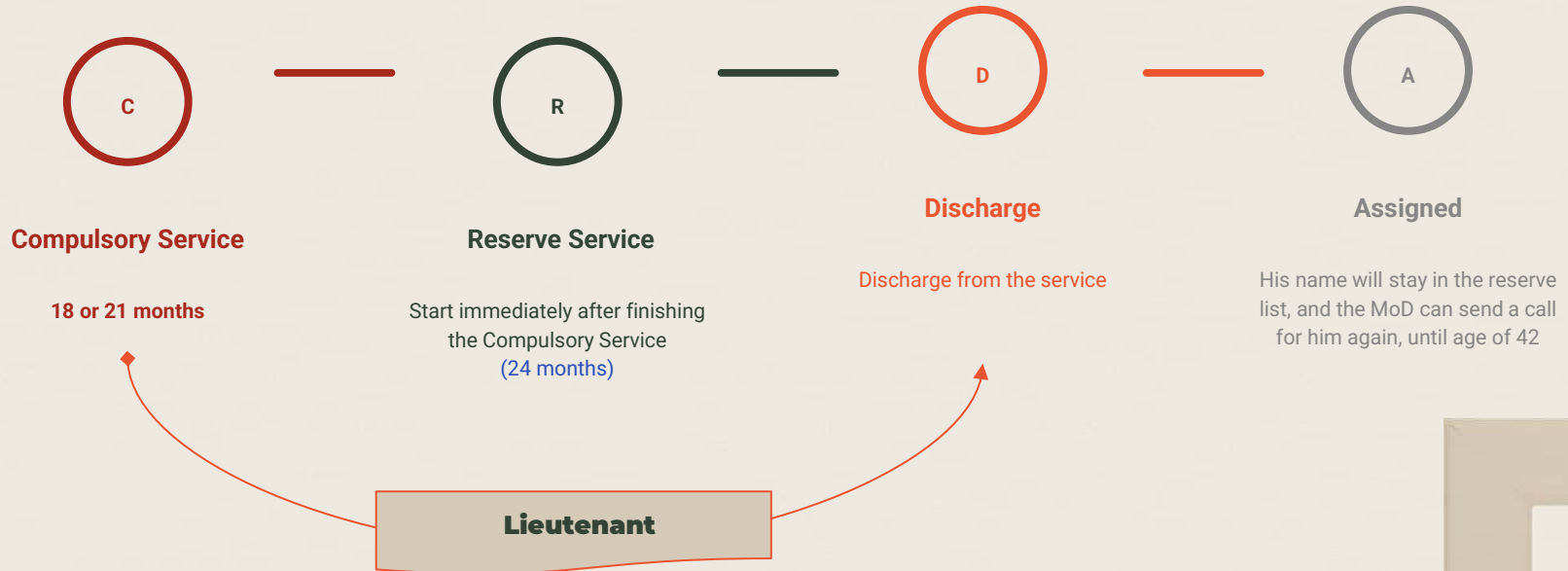
Please note, People with scientific and professional qualifications are not subject to the age requirement for the reserve service

A clarification for reserve service

The difference between "called for reserve service" and "assigned to reserve service" lies in their legal status under Syrian military service law:

- **Called (المدعو):** Refers to someone who has been officially summoned for reserve duty at a specific time.
- **Assigned (المكلف):** Refers to someone who is legally in reserve status and ready to be called upon at any time.

The current situation



The new plan for reserve service

The reserve service plan was officially announced in June 2024.

The plan is based on three main phases, culminating in a defined reserve service duration of 24 months. The structure of the plan is as follows:

Syria's Reserve Military Service Transformations and Objectives

Analysis Article

Syria's Reserve Military Service: Transformations and Objectives

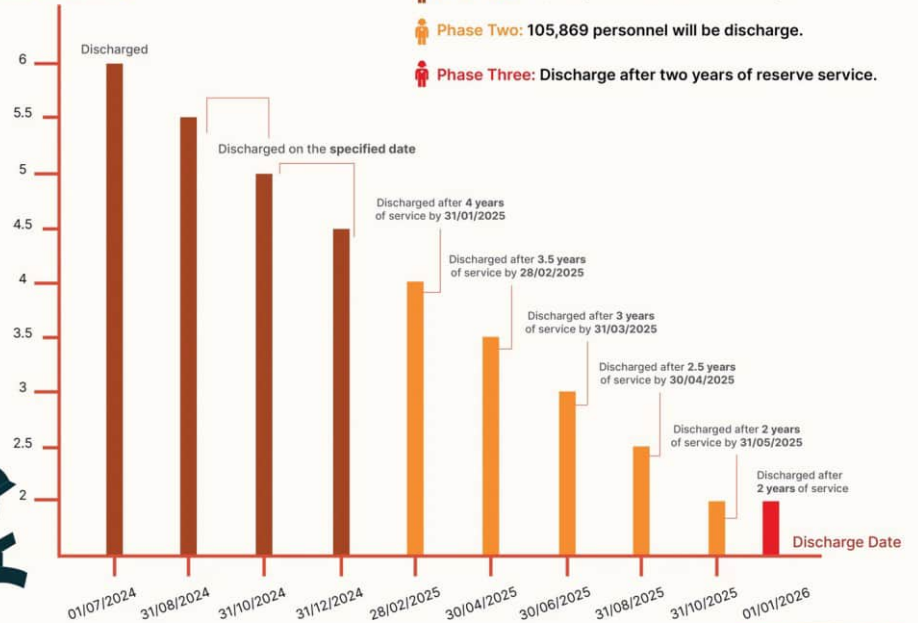
Muhsen Almustafa



Syria's Reserve Military Plan for the Discharge of Military Personnel

Years of Service

- Phase One: 46,044 personnel will be discharge.
- Phase Two: 105,869 personnel will be discharge.
- Phase Three: Discharge after two years of reserve service.

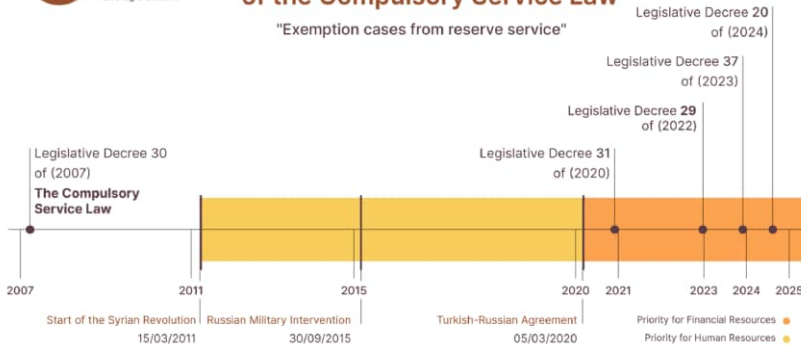


* According to Assad's regime, the plan may be subject to modifications in implementing some of its parts based on a study of reserve service issues, considering age criteria and the number of years of service.



Timeline for Amending Article 26 of the Compulsory Service Law

"Exemption cases from reserve service"



Legislative Decree 20 of (2024)

Legislative Decree 37 of (2023)

Legislative Decree 29 of (2022)

Legislative Decree 31 of (2020)

Legislative Decree 30 of (2007) The Compulsory Service Law

2007 2011 2015 2020 2021 2023 2024 2025

Start of the Syrian Revolution 15/03/2011 Russian Military Intervention 30/09/2015 Turkish-Russian Agreement 05/03/2020 Priority for Financial Resources ● Priority for Human Resources ●

Compulsory and Reserve Service Duration

A tool to help all

[Compulsory and Reserve Service](#)

Compulsory and Reserve Service Duration in Syria

اللغة / Select Language:

English

Select The Latet Certificate:

No Degree

Select Service Type:

Field Service

Enrollment Date:

19.10.2024

Category: Individuals

Rank: Private

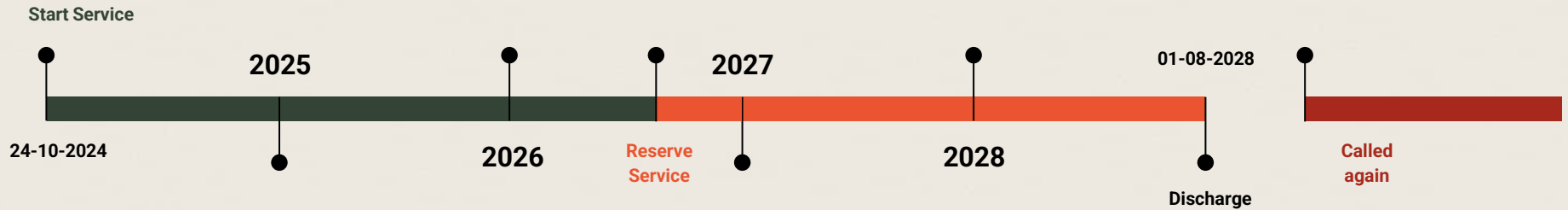
Discharge Date: 01/08/2028

Compulsory Service Duration: 21 months

Reserve Service Duration: 24 months

Total Service Duration: 3 years, 9 months

Compulsory and Reserve Service Duration





The exemption fee



The exemption fee for Compulsory Service

- **Living Abroad:**

1. **7,000 USD:** Residency of 4+ years.
2. **8,000 USD:** Residency of 3 years.
3. **9,000 USD:** Residency of 2 years.
4. **10,000 USD:** Residency of 1 year.

- **Living in Syria:**

1. **3,000 USD:** Applies if the individual has a partial or minor disability that still allows them to serve.
2. Those serving in **field service cannot pay** the exemption fee to avoid compulsory military service.

- **There are other conditions for the exemption fee.**

Missed service fee

The missed service fee applies to individuals who exceed the age of 42 without completing compulsory military service.

Missed Service Fee:

- The individual is required to pay a penalty called the "**missed service fee**" of **\$8,000 USD**.

Additional Penalties:

- Late fees apply for each year of delay: \$200 per year, up to a maximum of \$2,000.
- The individual's movable and immovable assets, as well as those of their spouse and children, may be seized.
- Imprisonment is also a possible consequence for non-payment.

Additional Restrictions:

- Individuals who exceed the age of 42 without settling the fee will not receive security clearance (e.g., from Political Security) to sell their property.

Exemption fee for Reserve Service

- Living Abroad:
 1. 5,000 USD: Residency of 1 year at least.
- Living in Syria:
 1. 3,000 USD: For individuals with a partial or minor disability that still allows them to serve.
 2. 4,800 USD: For those serving in field service who are over 38 years of age (having completed 37 years and one day). They may pay this fee to be exempt from reserve service
 3. This amount is reduced by 200 USD for each month of reserve service already performed.
- There are other conditions for the exemption fee.

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Exemption fee

A tool to help all

Compulsory and Reserve Service exemption fee

Exemption fee for compulsory and reserve service in Syria

Select Service:

Is your age over 42?

Select Case:

Duration of Residence Abroad (years):

Place of Birth:

Did you stay abroad for more than 5 years after the draft age?

Number of Delay Years (if any):

Exchange Rate:

Calculation Result

The compensation amount is 10000 USD.

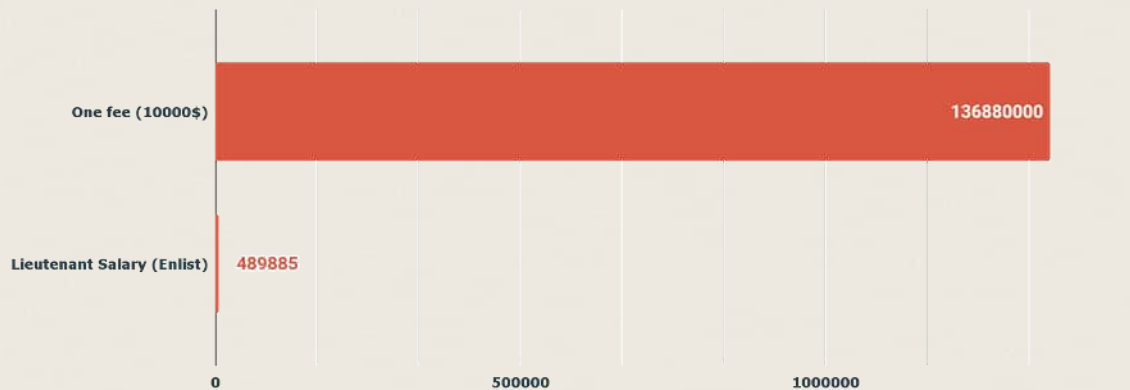
The delay fine is 400 USD.

Total amount due in USD is 10400 USD.

Total amount due in Syrian Pounds is 142,355,200 SYP.

24

Drain Society, Feed the Military



How many Lieutenant salaries can one fee amount cover?

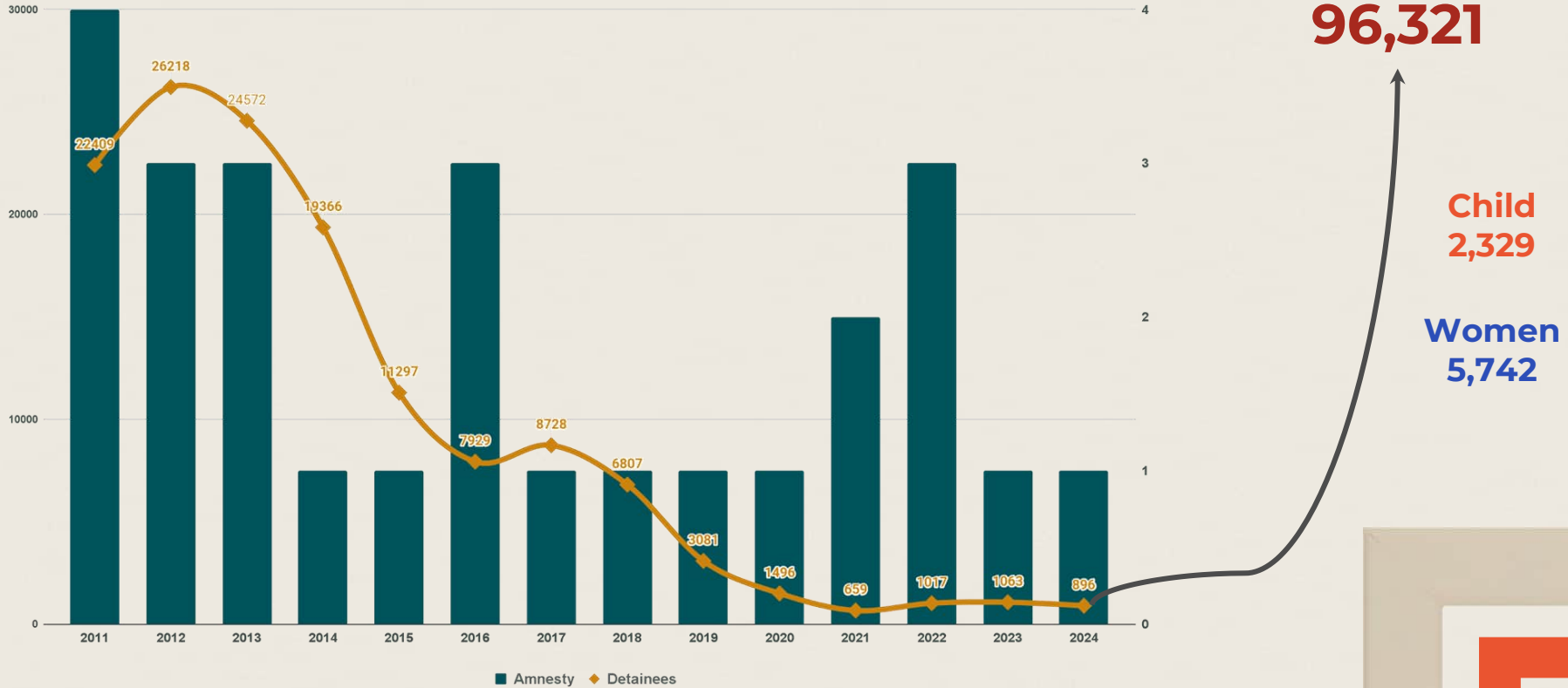


The Amnesty decrees

Amnesty decrees

- 26 amnesty decrees were issued by Assad since 2011.
- The last decree was issued in September 2024.
- Any way the detainees number still high about 130,000 detainees and forcably disappeared.
- the regime has detained people were refugees returning from Lebanon, some of them for military service.

Amnesty vs Enforced Disappearances



Legislative Decree No. 27 of 2024

- Grants amnesty for internal and external desertion crimes stipulated in Articles 100 and 101 of the Military Penal Code. However, similar to previous amnesty decrees, this one excludes individuals who are in hiding or fugitives from “justice” unless they surrender themselves within 3 months for internal desertion and 4 months for external desertion.
- Conversely, the decree excludes Articles 102 and 103 of the same law, which pertain to the crimes of "desertion to the enemy" and "desertion by conspiracy," punishable by death.

Legislative Decree No. 27 of 2024

- This exception is based on the classification of defecting soldiers who have joined the opposition.
- Additionally, there are several other articles in the law that lead to the death penalty or long prison sentences, such as Articles 137 to 150.
- This amnesty specifically targets loyalists or those residing in areas controlled by the regime who have deserted military service.

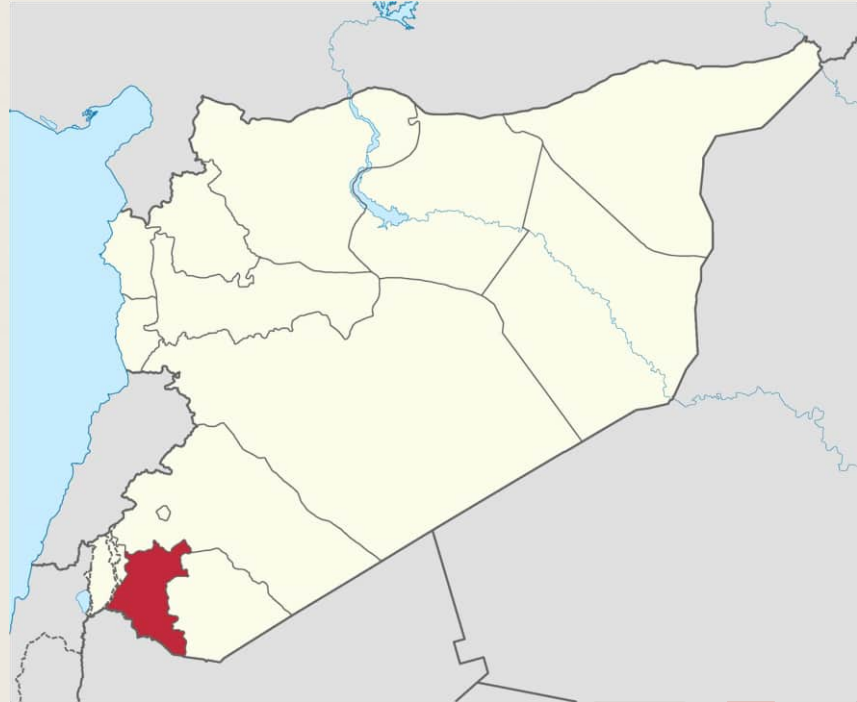
Conscription in Sweida

- In Sweida, the local Druze population has strongly resisted conscription into the Army from 2014. Both compulsory and reserve recruitment are generally not enforced in the governorate.
- This resistance has been a notable feature of the region, with Sweida standing out as a location where the army faces significant challenges in enforcing its military service laws.



Conscription in Daraa

- In Daraa, the issue of military conscription has been complicated due to the conflict. The army continues to face difficulties in enforcing Compulsory and reserve service, especially in areas previously under opposition control. Arrests of men evading military service are commonly reported at checkpoints, where their IDs and military booklets are checked. Some raids are still conducted, particularly in regions.



Q & A



Current situation regarding the conscription of military service recruits, how long are they serving, where are they deployed, what tasks do they do, involvement in active fighting?

Does the apprehension of draft evaders by the Syrian authorities currently tend to lead to immediate conscription without further sanctions, or is imprisonment with the risk of torture to be feared?

35

Saado Al-Sharaa

- From the Lajat area in Daraa, he is a defected soldier who fought in the Free Syrian Army and made a settlement after the regime took control of the area in 2018.
- The regime arrested him a year and a half ago, and handed his body over to his family two months ago after he was killed under torture in Sednaya military prison.



36

Muhammad Ahmad Al-Mukhalif Al-Ajil

- From Deir Ezzor, he was serving in the compulsory military service. He failed to join his military unit for several days, and then the military police arrested him.
- His family tried to pay a "bribe" in exchange for his release and sending him to the service, but they failed, before they were informed of his death under torture.
- His brother said that the regime forces arrested his brother 3 years ago and took him to compulsory military service.



Current situation regarding reservists, are they still conscripted, for how long, what role does a specialisation play, would older returnees from abroad who are reservists be drafted into the reserve? (for example reservists who have been called into the reserve a while ago while they were abroad and their names show up in the reservists database of the defence ministry)

Concerning reserve service: are there any estimated reports on what percentage of those who have already completed their basic military service are actually called up for reserve service at some point? In other words, what is the probability of being called up for reserve duty after having already completed military service? What is the range (e.g. 20 % or 80 %)?

Recruitment by government in DAANES areas, inside and outside the government enclaves

40

Military service exemption fee: is paid exemption recognized by authorities, even if country was left illegally?

41

Abdul Ghani Munir

- he is a 33-year-old engineer, married with two children, and has no political activity, whether opposition or loyal.
- He is just a evader of compulsory service. When he was deported from Turkey to the city of Azaz in northern Syria, he could not find work there, so his parents convinced him to settle his status with the regime and pay the military service fee.
- This was done and pay the fee, but when he returned, he gets arrested by the Military Security Branch. A few days later, he was taken out as a lifeless body bearing signs of torture.



42

Can a Syrian above 40, residing IN Syria, buy himself out of reserve service?

**In which cases do you need status settlement?
Who can do it and what do you need to do in
order to obtain it?**

44

How arbitrary are the actions of individual Syrian border officials considered to be? (also in relation to exemption from military service)

Does the Syrian government really only recruit in the security squares in the Kurdish region (Al-Qamishli and Al Hasakah city - المربعات الأمنية) or can it also be assumed that recruitment takes place in the region in and around Manbij, as the Syrian regime is also present there?

Military service in the DAANES: does the administration generally adhere to the age limit of 18-24 years or is the age limit actually the year 1998? (-> A 2021 decree limited service to men born 1998 and after...)

Rêveberiya Xweserîya Demokratîk a Herêma Bakur û Rojhilatê Sûriyê
Desteya Rêveber
Desteya Parastinê



الإدارة الذاتية الديمقراطية لإقليم شمال وشرق سوريا
المجلس التنفيذي
هيئة الدفاع

مكتبنا في حلب
المكتب في حماة
الرقم: / /
التاريخ: ٢٠٢٤/ /

JIMAR : / /
DĪROK : \ \ 2024

تعميم رقم /٢/

الرئاسة المشتركة لهيئة الدفاع لإقليم شمال وشرق سوريا تُعمم ما يلي:

- المكلفين المطلوبين لخدمة واجب الدفاع الذاتي لإقليم شمال وشرق سوريا ضمن مواليده (١٩٩٨ ولغاية ٢٠٠٦/٦/٣٠)
- على جميع المكلفين ممن دخل سن الثامن عشر مراجعة مراكز واجب الدفاع الذاتي لقطع الدفتر.
- يُبلغ هذا التعميم لمن يلزم بتنفيذه.

الرئاسة المشتركة لهيئة الدفاع
بيان علي زيدان العاصي

Are people in the HTS area or in the Turkish-controlled or SNA area also forced to enlist for the rebels or the SNA/FSA? - According to the Country information provided to the Austrian authorities it is only voluntarily, but is there also forced recruitment?

Thank You



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