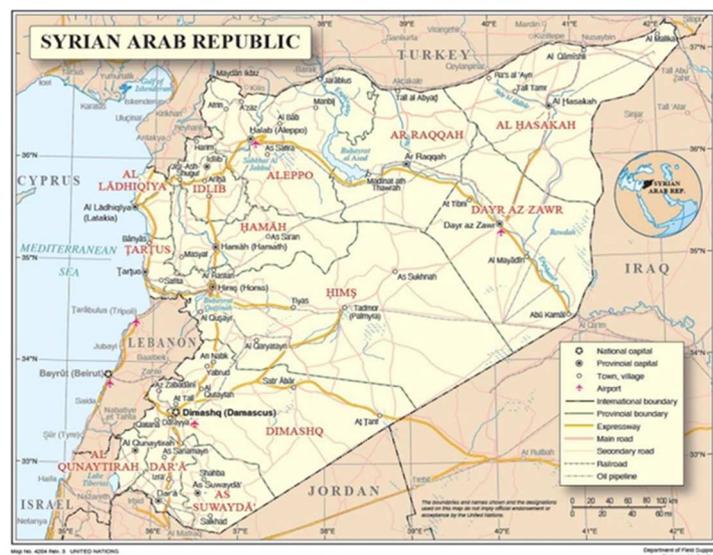


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# SYRIA

*Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus*



Ministry of Immigration  
and Integration

The Danish  
Immigration Service

This brief report is not, and does not purport to be, a detailed or comprehensive survey of all aspects or the issues addressed in the brief report. It should thus be weighed against other country of origin information available on the topic.

The brief report at hand does not include any policy recommendations or analysis. The information in the brief report does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Danish Immigration Service.

Furthermore, this brief report is not conclusive as to the determination or merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

**October 2020**

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## Executive summary

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Since May 2018, the Syrian authorities have had full control over the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus. The security grip in former-opposition controlled areas in Damascus and Rural Damascus is firm, and these areas are more secure than other areas in the south such as Daraa.

However, the number of targeted killings and assassinations of military and security service officers and affiliated officials increased during 2020. The same applies for kidnappings for ransom. Remaining explosives from the conflict continued to result in casualties in certain areas such as al-Yarmouk. In addition, the Israeli airstrikes against the positions of the Syrian government (GoS) and Iran-backed forces continued during the year.

There are still checkpoints in Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates, including on the road connecting Damascus to Damascus International Airport. Individuals wanted by the GoS, including conscripts, risk being arrested at the checkpoints. However, movement has become easier between Damascus and East Ghouta since mid-2019. A large number of residents from Rural Damascus go to Damascus on a daily basis for work, education or medical treatment.

Access to severely damaged areas is highly restricted and people need permission to access these areas. It is possible for people to move to and settle down in other areas in Damascus and Rural Damascus, provided that they obtain security approval from the Syrian authorities in the new area.

Syria is in deep economic crisis, which is reflected in a downfall of the Syrian pound and a sharp increase in food prices during 2020. In most areas of Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates, there is access to water, electricity, basic healthcare and schools. However, the services are under pressure and there are daily power and water cuts, as in many other places in Syria. There is no shortage of food, but food prices are high. Basic food items are provided at subsidised prices. However, the amount of food provided at subsidised prices can barely cover the people's needs.

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## Introduction

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This report focuses on the security situation, freedom of movement and socio-economic situation in Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates. It is a follow-up to the reports:

- Denmark, DIS and Danish Refugee Council, *Syria - Security Situation in Damascus Governorate and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019, [url](#)
- Denmark, DIS, *Syria - The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City*, March 2019, [url](#)

This brief report is written according to the EASO COI Report Methodology.<sup>1</sup> The report is based on information from written sources as well as information obtained through Skype meetings and email correspondences with sources located in Damascus (Syria), Istanbul (Turkey), Amman (Jordan), Doha (Qatar) and Birmingham (UK) in August and September 2020.

The purpose of the research was to collect updated information on recurring issues identified in cases pertaining to Syrian asylum seekers. The Terms of Reference (ToR) is included at the end of the report (Appendix 2).

Prior to the meetings, sources were identified on the basis of ToR and the expertise, merit and role of each source relevant to the mission. The research team consulted eight interlocutors in connection with the topic addressed in this report comprising individuals from international security and humanitarian organisations, Syrian human rights organisations, research institutes and media working on Syria.

The sources were briefed about the purpose of the meetings and informed that their statements would be included in a publicly available report in accordance with their preferred referencing. The meeting minutes were forwarded to each source for approval with the possibility to amend, comment or correct their statements. All sources approved the minutes sent to them, except one who never responded to the research team's request for approval of the minutes. As the source was informed that his statements would be used in the report in case no response was given within the set deadline, the minutes from the meeting with the source were also included in the report.

Some of the sources consulted have a presence inside Syria, others travel regularly to Syria and still others follow the situation from outside of Syria through information from a wide range of sources and contacts. The sources were asked how reference might be made to them in the report. Two out of eight sources requested to be referenced anonymously for the sake of discretion and upholding a tolerable working situation, as well as for personal safety. All sources are referenced in the report according to their own request.

The report is a synthesis of the information obtained from oral and written sources and does not include all details and nuances provided by the sources. In the report, care has been taken to present the views of the sources as accurately and transparently as possible. The statements of the interviewed sources are found in their full extent in Appendix 1 of this report.

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<sup>1</sup> European Union: European Asylum Support Office (EASO), *EASO Country of Origin Information report methodology*, June 2019, [url](#)

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During the interviews, the sources may have highlighted issues that are not addressed in the ToR. As these issues could be relevant to refugee status determination, they are included in the meeting minutes in Appendix 1, but they are not addressed in the report.

For the sake of reader-friendliness, transparency and accuracy, paragraphs in the meeting minutes in Appendix 1 have been given consecutive numbers, which are used in the report when referring to the statements of the sources in the footnotes.

Finally, attention should be called to the changeable and unstable situation in Syria and the fact that the information provided may quickly become outdated. Therefore, the issues addressed in this report should be monitored periodically and the information be brought up to date accordingly.

The research and editing of this report was finalised on 1 October 2020.

The report can be accessed from the website of DIS and is thus available to all stakeholders in the refugee status determination process as well as to the general public.

## Abbreviations

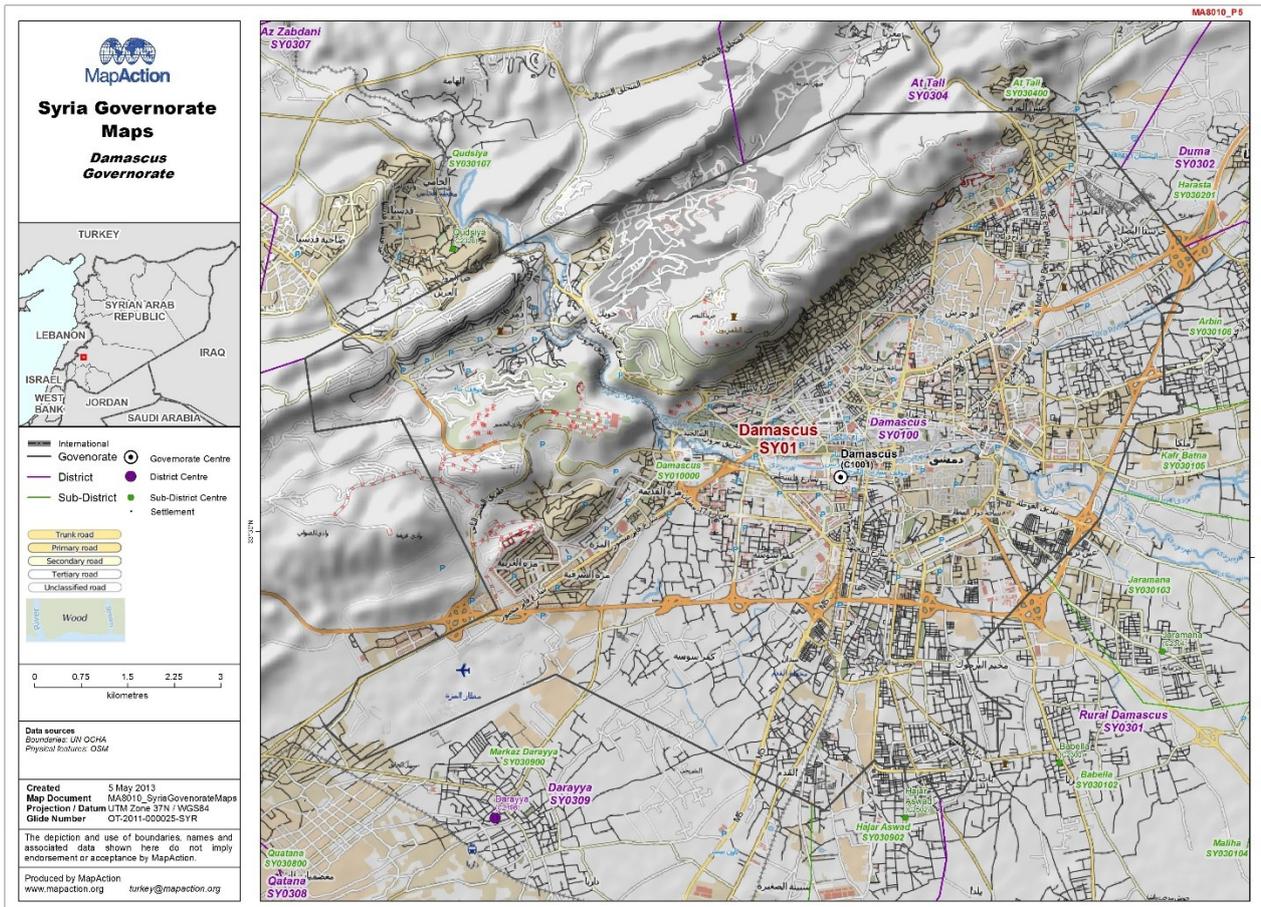
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<b>ACLED</b>	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
<b>COI</b>	Country of Origin Information
<b>DIS</b>	Danish Immigration Service
<b>EASO</b>	European Asylum Support Office
<b>ERW</b>	Explosive Remnants of War
<b>GoS</b>	Government of Syria
<b>IED</b>	Improvised Explosive Device
<b>IS</b>	Islamic State
<b>SAA</b>	Syrian Arab Army
<b>SNHR</b>	Syrian Network for Human Rights
<b>SOHR</b>	Syrian Observatory for Human Rights
<b>ToR</b>	Terms of Reference
<b>VBIED</b>	Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device
<b>UN OCHA</b>	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme

# 1. Background

## 1.1. General description of Damascus governorate

Damascus governorate is located in the south-western part of Syria and covers Syria’s capital. It is divided into 16 municipal districts: Barza, Qaboun, Jobar, al-Shaghour, al-Midan, al-Qadam, Kafr Sousa, Dummar, Mazzeh, Rukn al-Din, al-Salihiyah, al-Mouhajirin, Saroujah, al-Qanawat, Old Damascus, and al-Yarmouk Camp. The governorate is completely surrounded by the Rural Damascus governorate.<sup>2</sup>



Map 1: © MapAction, Damascus governorate<sup>3</sup>

Al-Yarmouk is an informal refugee camp which had a population of approximately 160,000 Palestinian refugees before the Syrian conflict started in 2011. The camp is located eight kilometres from Damascus City centre, and was set up in 1957 by the Syrian government. As a consequence of the armed battles and massive aerial attacks on the camp, it was to a large extent destroyed and only a few dozen families lived there, as of January 2019.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> EASO, *Syria – Security Situation*, May 2020, [url](#), pp. 177-178

<sup>3</sup> MapAction, *Syria 2013-2015, Damascus Governorate* [map], last updated 4 July 2016, [url](#)

<sup>4</sup> EASO, *Syria – Security Situation*, May 2020, [url](#), pp. 177-178



Esal al-Ward, al-Nabk, Deir Attiyeh, al-Zabadani, Dimas, Ein al-Fijeh, Madaya, Sarghaya, Qatana, Bait Jan, Sa'sa, Markaz Darayya (or Darayya city), Sahnaya and Hajar al-Aswad. The area in the governorate that borders Damascus City to the east is an area called East Ghouta.

In a map provided by REACH, East Ghouta is comprised of the following sub-districts and neighbourhoods: Harasta, Arbin, Douma, Misraba subdistricts, Modira, Beit Sawa, Hammura, Zamalka, Jobar, al-Masani, Qaboun, Aradi al-Jadide, Elauine, Hay al-Sadie, Dahiet al-Assad, Hezzeh, Saqba, Ein Terma, Kafr Batna, Eftreis, and Jisrein.<sup>8</sup>

### 1.3. Territorial control

In its newly published report, the Norwegian Landinfo summarises the Syrian conflict and the territorial control in Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates by the following timeline:

- April 2011 – autumn 2012: Demonstrations and eventually armed clashes in and around Damascus, but the Government of Syria (GoS) retained overall control over the two governorates.
- November 2012 – August 2013: Rebel groups took control of a number of cities and suburbs in the Rural Damascus governorate and they even succeeded in infiltrating the Jobar district of Damascus from the east.
- August 2013 – 2016: Through several offensives, the GoS forces managed to stop and to some extent reverse the rebels' advance, and subsequently besiege some of the rebel-held areas. In certain areas, local ceasefire agreements were signed between the rebels and the GoS.
- 2016 – April 2018: The GoS gradually regained control of the suburbs of Damascus. The ceasefire agreements, which were concluded earlier in the conflict, broke down. The rebels surrendered through a series of new agreements after intensified sieges and military attacks. The new "surrender agreements" [also called "reconciliation agreements"] resulted in many rebels being evacuated to Idlib and the GoS retaking control over the areas.
- Since May 2018: Syrian authorities have full control over Damascus and the entire governorate of Rural Damascus.<sup>9</sup>

The rebel groups have by and large only controlled the suburbs and cities around Damascus City in Rural Damascus governorate, while almost all of Damascus City has been under GoS control throughout the conflict. Within Damascus governorate, the rebels have had partial control over the districts of Jobar, Barza and Qaboon northeast of the city centre and in the southern districts of al-Qadam and al-Yarmouk.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> EASO, *Syria – Security Situation*, May 2020, [url](#), pp. 188-189

<sup>9</sup> Norway, Landinfo, *Syria, Konflikten i Damaskus – En tidslinje [Syria, the conflict in Damascus – a timeline]*, 8 September 2020; [url](#), p. 9

<sup>10</sup> Norway, Landinfo, *Syria, Konflikten i Damaskus – En tidslinje [Syria, the conflict in Damascus – a timeline]*, 8 September 2020; [url](#), p. 15

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The following areas in Damascus governorate were under GoS control throughout the conflict: Dummar, Mazzeh, Kafr Sousa (with the exception of a rebel offensive in March 2013), Muhajerin, al-Salihyah, Rukn al-Din, Saroujah, al-Qanawat, Old Damascus (Dimashq al-Qadima), and most of al-Shaghour and al-Midan.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Norway, Landinfo, Syria, Konflikten i Damaskus – En tidslinje[*Syria, the conflict in Damascus – a timeline*], 8 September 2020; [url](#), p. 15

## 2. Security situation in Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates

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### 2.1. General security situation

Since 2018, when the GoS retook control of all areas in Damascus and Rural Damascus from opposition groups, there have been no major security incidents (e.g. battles, military operations etc.) in the two governorates, according to Suhail Al-Ghazi, a non-resident fellow at Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy.<sup>12</sup>

Accordingly, the media outlet Syria Direct considered the security grip in former-opposition controlled areas in Rural Damascus and Damascus to be firm, and that these areas are more secure with regard to the number of security incidents than for example Daraa, where kidnappings and assassinations are widespread.<sup>13</sup> Syria Direct considered Damascus governorate as the most secure government-controlled governorate in Syria in terms of security incidents.<sup>14</sup>

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), Russian forces control East Ghouta and are located everywhere in the area.<sup>15</sup> Syria Direct mentioned the presence of Russian forces as the reason why East Ghouta has not witnessed assassinations and kidnappings, which has taken place in small numbers in other areas in Rural Damascus.<sup>16</sup> SOHR believed that the almost stable security situation in East Ghouta was due to the fact that people who stayed in the area after the reconciliation agreements in summer of 2018, and people who later returned, have not been involved in any armed attacks against the GoS.<sup>17</sup>

The international humanitarian organisation has not heard of security incidents taking place in al-Yarmouk Camp, which according to the source is due to the fact that only a few families are living there.<sup>18</sup> The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) mentioned that lootings were taking place by pro-government militias in al-Yarmouk and Jobar.<sup>19</sup> The international humanitarian organisation advised that there were rumours about looting taking place in al-Yarmouk; however, since no organisation has access to the camp and the access of civilians to the area is highly restricted, it is not possible for the source to comment on the information.<sup>20</sup>

In Palestinian refugee camps in Rural Damascus,<sup>21</sup> the situation is generally calm and Palestinian refugees have returned to some of these camps.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 55

<sup>13</sup> Syria Direct: 14

<sup>14</sup> Syria Direct: 12

<sup>15</sup> SOHR: 191

<sup>16</sup> Syria Direct: 13

<sup>17</sup> SOHR: 190

<sup>18</sup> The international humanitarian organisation: 162, 163

<sup>19</sup> SNHR: 149

<sup>20</sup> The international humanitarian organisation: 164

<sup>21</sup> According to the international humanitarian organisation, there are 12 Palestine refugee camps in Syria: nine official and three unofficial camps. There are five camps in Rural Damascus and only al-Yarmouk (unofficial camp) is located in Damascus. Apart from al-Yarmouk unofficial camp located in Damascus governorate, other Palestine refugee camps are located in Rural Damascus, Daraa, Aleppo, Hama, Latakia and Homs.

<sup>22</sup> The international humanitarian organisation: 162, 163

## 2.2. Security incidents

The number of security incidents in Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates had remarkably decreased in 2020 compared to the year before.<sup>23</sup>

In the period from 1 January to 12 September 2020, The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)<sup>24</sup> recorded 144 security incidents<sup>25</sup> coded as “battles”, “explosions/remote violence” and “violence against civilians” in Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates: 27 in Damascus and 116 in Rural Damascus.<sup>26</sup> These incidents caused 218 fatalities: 30 in Damascus and 188 in Rural Damascus governorate.

It appears from the ACLED data that “violence against civilians” almost exclusively comprises cases of individuals who were killed in prisons, many under torture. However, ACLED data does not contain information about why these individuals were arrested. Of the total number of 144 security incidents mentioned above, 79 were cases of violence against civilians: 14 in Damascus with 14 fatalities and 65 in Rural Damascus with 88 fatalities.

The following are examples of security incidents registered by ACLED during the period 1. January – 12. September 2020:

- “4 February 2020: An explosion caused by an unknown armed group targeted a checkpoint of Division-66 Tanks on al-Salam highway near Khan al-Shieh city, west of Damascus, killing at least one soldier and injuring others.
- 30 March 2020: One child was killed and three others were injured when an unexploded bomb detonated near their house on Khourshid Street in Kanaker town in the western countryside of Rural Damascus.
- 8 April 2020: A member of the GoS's military security shot and wounded a member of the 4th Division in the Wadi Barada area of Rural Damascus, reportedly over a dispute. No fatalities were reported.
- May 2020: Unidentified gunmen assassinated a member of the SAA's 4th Division in front of his place of residence in Bait Jan in Rural Damascus.

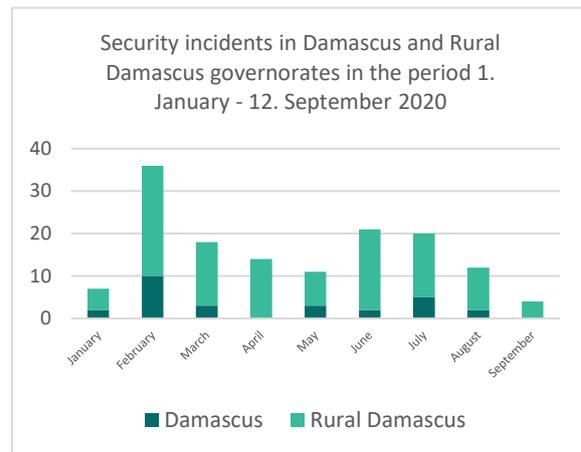


Figure 1: Security incidents coded as 'battles', 'explosions/remote violence' and 'violence against civilians' in the governorate of Damascus and Rural Damascus, 1 January – 12 September 2020, based on ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (15 September 2020), [url](#)

<sup>23</sup> Omran Studies: 124

<sup>24</sup> ACLED describes itself as “a disaggregated data collection, analysis, and crisis mapping project. ACLED collects the dates, actors, locations, fatalities, and types of all reported political violence and protest events across Africa, East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Southeastern and Eastern Europe and the Balkans.” ACLED, *About ACLED*, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>25</sup> ACLED uses the term ‘event’ when registering these incidents. ‘Security incident’ is used here in accordance with the way ACLED data is referred to in the EASO report: EASO, *Syria – Security Situation*, May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>26</sup> DIS’ analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, *Curated Data Files, Middle East*, 15 September 2020, [url](#)

- 18 July 2020: Two IEDs, planted by an unknown armed group, exploded in Nahr Aysha area in Damascus City, killing an [intelligence officer], and seriously injuring his brother.
- 31 August 2020: Israeli warplanes conducted an airstrike on the perimeter of Damascus International Airport and Kisweh in the southern Damascus countryside targeting GoS forces' positions and pro-Iranian militias, killing 11 people including three SAA soldiers, seven non-Syrian militiamen, including [some from] pro-Iran militias, and one civilian woman, and injuring more than ten others.
- 9 September 2020, unidentified gunmen on a motorcycle opened fire at a checkpoint of the GoS's security forces in Douma city, near the municipal stadium, wounding three members [of the security forces]. No fatalities were reported.<sup>27</sup>
- Around 18 August 2020 (as reported), a man died under torture in a [GoS] prison in Damascus city after he was arrested a year and a half ago.
- Around 29 August 2020 (as reported), a civilian from Aqrab in Hama died under torture in an unidentified [GoS] prison, coded to Sidnaya military prison. He was arrested on 15 August 2019 while returning from Lebanon via Areedah crossing.”

### 2.2.1. Targeted attacks against GoS military and security officers and officials

The consulted sources pointed at targeted killings and assassinations of GoS military and security service officers and affiliated officials as a major security issue in Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates in 2020.<sup>28</sup> According to an international security organisation consulted by DIS, the number of IED incidents increased dramatically in February 2020,<sup>29</sup> where six explosions occurred in Damascus City and another two in Rural Damascus. In comparison, 17 IED incidents were reported in the capital and surrounding areas throughout the whole of 2019.<sup>30</sup>

The modus operandi of these attacks consists of attaching an explosive device to the underside of the targeted vehicle. The explosion caused by the device is sufficient to kill or injure the person(s) in the vehicle, but not large enough to cause significant collateral damage in the wider area of the blast.<sup>31</sup>

The number of attacks against GoS military and security service officers and affiliated officials increased in the first quarter of 2020, but the attacks stopped completely around mid-March, when the GoS arrested six members of an underground opposition group called *Saraya Qasioun* who were allegedly behind these attacks. The attacks started again in late June.<sup>32</sup>

SOHR said that armed attacks against the GoS mainly took place in Qudsaya (in Rural Damascus, north-west of Damascus City) at night and in southern districts of Damascus.<sup>33</sup> However, the international security organisation stated that the attacks were concentrated in Rural Damascus, particularly in East Ghouta.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> DIS' analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, *Curated Data Files, Middle East*, 15 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>28</sup> The international security organisation: 1; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 55; Jusoor: 90; Syria Direct: 13; Omran Studies: 125

<sup>29</sup> See for instance: SOHR, *Damascus deteriorating security: six explosions rock Damascus in 15 days*, 26 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>30</sup> The international security organisation: 1

<sup>31</sup> The international security organisation: 2

<sup>32</sup> The international security organisation: 1

<sup>33</sup> SOHR: 193

<sup>34</sup> The international security organisation: 3

Whilst the first wave of attacks (January – mid-March 2020) to some extent disturbed the daily life in Damascus and Rural Damascus, the second wave (since late June) has not had any impact on people’s daily life because they have been isolated incidents, limited to certain areas and directed at security forces with minor damage to civilians.<sup>35</sup>

### 2.2.2. Kidnappings for ransom

Some sources mentioned that a growing number of kidnappings of civilians for ransom, including kidnapping of children, had taken place in Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates during the year.<sup>36</sup> In an article by SOHR from 2 August 2020, some pro-government militias and criminal gangs are mentioned as being behind the kidnappings.<sup>37</sup>

### 2.2.3. Explosive Remnants of War (ERW)

There are weekly reports of explosive remnants of war (ERW) and landmines going off and causing civilian casualties. However, the issue of unexploded ordnance and landmines is limited to areas where major military confrontations took place before summer 2018 between the GoS forces and opposition groups, e.g. in Jobar.<sup>38</sup> An international humanitarian organisation consulted by DIS advised that there were still concerns about ERW in al-Yarmouk although some rubble removal from the main streets has taken place. The few families that have returned to the area and people who intend to return risk being subjected to ERW explosions.<sup>39</sup>

### 2.2.4. Israeli air strikes

Israeli air strikes against specific military targets in southern districts of Damascus have taken place in Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates.<sup>40</sup> One of the latest of such strikes was reported by the Associated Press (AP) on 31 August 2020. Quoting Syrian officials, the news agency reported that Israel fired missiles during the night of 31 August against southern areas of Damascus killing two soldiers, wounding seven and causing material damage. Referring to an opposition war monitor, AP further reported that the missiles hit military posts south of Damascus.<sup>41</sup> According to Suhail Al-Ghazi, sometimes, the air defense missiles fired by the GoS forces against Israeli missiles have landed on civilian areas causing casualties.<sup>42</sup>

## 2.3. Security on the road to the airport

According to the sources, the road connecting Damascus with Damascus International Airport is considered safe and secure in terms of security incidents, and there have been no security incidents on the road in 2020.<sup>43</sup> The latest incidents on this road took place at the beginning of 2015. The road is used by civilians,

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<sup>35</sup> The international security organisation: 5

<sup>36</sup> Omran Studies: 125; SOHR: 192

<sup>37</sup> SOHR, *Kidnapping mafias in Syria*, 2 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>38</sup> The international security organisation: 5

<sup>39</sup> The international humanitarian organisation: 165

<sup>40</sup> The international security organisation: 6; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 55

<sup>41</sup> AP, *Syria says Israeli strike kills 2 soldiers, wounds 7*, 31 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>42</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 55

<sup>43</sup> Syria Direct: 37; Jusoor: 91; Omran Studies: 126; SOHR: 194

and it is the only way to reach the airport as all the side-roads are closed.<sup>44</sup> SNHR did not consider the road to be secure in terms of the risk of being detained at the checkpoints on the road.<sup>45</sup>

## 2.4. Presence of Islamic State and other opposition groups

According to Syria Direct, Islamic State (IS) and other opposition groups do not exist in Damascus or Rural Damascus anymore.<sup>46</sup>

In a report published by DIS in June 2020, it reads that “IS had a much stronger base in some of its main strongholds during the ‘caliphate’ than anywhere else in Syria, e.g. the Deir EzZor region.[...] Outside SDF and US coalition areas of operation, IS launched attacks in the governorates of Homs, Aleppo, Quneitara and Daraa during the first three months of 2020 and used smuggling networks and clandestine cells in Suweida and Daraa governorates to conduct sporadic attacks and move personnel and material.”<sup>47</sup> The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic reported in August 2020 that IS was active in central areas of the country, and its cells conducted attacks against the Syrian army’s positions in the Badiya al-Sham region and around Resafa.<sup>48</sup>

As regards the underground opposition group, *Saraya Qasioun*, mentioned in section 2.2.1., the international security organisation mentioned that although there were evidences indicating that *Saraya Qasioun* had been behind some of the targeted attacks against the military and security service personnel and their affiliated officials, there were contradictory reports and news on the extent to which the group was responsible for these attacks.<sup>49</sup> The independent research institution Jusoor believes that such attacks are rather conducted by individual persons, and not by a group. The intelligence services have already eliminated all opposition cells in Damascus and Rural Damascus, and they have the ability to infiltrate any cell.<sup>50</sup> Syria Direct questioned the existence of *Saraya Qasioun*, and rather believed that the assassinations were liquidations among the GoS’ officers themselves.<sup>51</sup> According to Omran Center for Strategic Studies, there is no confirmed information on who is behind these attacks.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Jusoor: 91

<sup>45</sup> SNHR: 142

<sup>46</sup> Syria Direct: 18

<sup>47</sup> Denmark, DIS, *Islamic State in Syria*, June 2020, [url](#), pp. 9-10

<sup>48</sup> OHCHR, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, 14 August 2020, [url](#), p.3

<sup>49</sup> The international security organisation: 3

<sup>50</sup> Jusoor: 90

<sup>51</sup> Syria Direct: 13

<sup>52</sup> Omran Studies: 125

### 3. Freedom of movement in Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates

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On a daily basis, a large number of residents from Rural Damascus go to Damascus for work, education (especially university students) or medical treatment. This was also the case before the conflict but due to the current economic crisis in Syria and the impact of the conflict on Rural Damascus, the number of residents who travel to Damascus has increased further.<sup>53</sup>

#### 3.1. Checkpoints in Damascus and Rural Damascus

The number of checkpoints was latest reduced in 2019 in both Damascus and Rural Damascus.<sup>54</sup>

In Damascus, checkpoints are located at entrances to Damascus City checking individuals moving in or out of the city.<sup>55</sup> There are also checkpoints at all side-roads near the entrances.<sup>56</sup> There are also checkpoints on the road that connect Damascus with the Lebanese border.<sup>57</sup> The checkpoints in Damascus are manned by Syrian and Russian forces.<sup>58</sup>

On the road between Damascus and Damascus International Airport, there are between eight and twelve checkpoints, both fixed and mobile. The checkpoints are mainly manned by Syrian intelligence services, the Republican Guard and Iranian forces. One checkpoint is manned by female volunteers.<sup>59</sup>

When the GoS took control over all of Rural Damascus in 2018, a significant number of checkpoints were installed in the area. However, the number was reduced during 2019. Today, checkpoints are placed at the main entrances to the cities in most of Rural Damascus.<sup>60</sup>

In East Ghouta, which was a stronghold for the Syrian opposition until the GoS recaptured the area in 2018, the restrictions to the freedom of movement have also been lessened since mid-2019. The number of checkpoints between Damascus and East Ghouta has been reduced from about six to three checkpoints.<sup>61</sup> There are still checkpoints at cities that are located at the entrances to East Ghouta. Additionally, there are checkpoints between some of the cities and areas within East Ghouta, e.g. a checkpoint between Douma and Harasta. There are even checkpoints between some neighbourhoods inside Douma. But checks are not conducted at the checkpoints between the cities in East Ghouta unless a specific security situation occurs.<sup>62</sup> Checkpoints inside East Ghouta are mainly controlled by Russian forces.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Syria Direct: 20, 21; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 67; Jusoor: 94; Omran Studies: 127

<sup>54</sup> SOHR: 195; Syria Direct: 19; Enab Baladi, *محافظة دمشق تعلن تغييرًا في خريطة الحواجز العسكرية [Damascus governorate announces a change in the military checkpoints map]*, 18 June 2019, [url](#)

<sup>55</sup> The international security organisation: 7; Syria Direct: 20; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 69; Jusoor: 92

<sup>56</sup> Jusoor: 92; SNHR: 150

<sup>57</sup> Omran Studies: 128

<sup>58</sup> SOHR: 196

<sup>59</sup> Jusoor: 91, 93; Omran Studies: 128, 129; SNHR: 142; SOHR: 194

<sup>60</sup> The international security organisation: 7; Syria Direct: 23; SOHR: 197

<sup>61</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 67

<sup>62</sup> Syria Direct: 22-24; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 67, 68; SNHR: 144. For more information about the exact location of the main checkpoints in Rural Damascus, see SNHR: 144.

<sup>63</sup> Syria Direct: 24

The northern and western parts of Rural Damascus are not divided into sectors, and there are only few checkpoints inside these parts of the governorate. Checkpoints are mainly located at main roads leading to the area.<sup>64</sup> In addition, there are checkpoints at the entrances of the Palestinian refugee camps in Rural Damascus, including Sbeineh, Khan Danoun, Jaramana, Qabr al-Sit and Khan al-Shieh.<sup>65</sup>

### 3.2. Procedure at checkpoints

Access to Damascus is permitted for people from all areas of Rural Damascus including people from former opposition-controlled areas such as East Ghouta.<sup>66</sup> However, when a security incident occurs, access to Damascus is restricted for one or two days.<sup>67</sup>

There is no difference between how Syrian and Palestinian refugees are being checked.<sup>68</sup>

In Damascus and Rural Damascus, checks are conducted more thoroughly at checkpoints which are located at the main roads and at the entrances to cities that divide Damascus and Rural Damascus.<sup>69</sup> The most thorough checks are conducted at the checkpoints between East Ghouta and Damascus. However, unless a security issue occurs, the security forces do not check the ID-cards of everyone. Particularly ID-cards of women and elderly men are not checked.<sup>70</sup>

At checkpoints controlled by Iranian forces, such as the checkpoints on the road from Damascus to the Damascus International Airport, thorough identity checks are conducted as the Iranian forces have access to the wanted lists of the four Syrian intelligence services as well as wanted lists from non-GoS actors such as Hezbollah. According to Omran Center for Strategic Studies, civilians would prefer to travel through the Lebanese land border instead of using the airport in order to avoid these checkpoints.<sup>71</sup> The SNHR has documented 19 arrests on this road in the period between January and September 2020.<sup>72</sup>

How checks are conducted varies from one checkpoint to another. At some checkpoints only cars are checked, whilst at others passengers' documents, including ID-cards, military conscription documents/conscription status documents and/or reconciliation documents, are also checked.<sup>73</sup> The international humanitarian organisation noted that Palestinian refugees may face challenges passing a checkpoint because many have lost their civil documentation.<sup>74</sup>

The authorities at checkpoints check people's names against online databases, including wanted lists, and people may be asked for clarification concerning certain issues. Each intelligence service has its own list of wanted people, including men wanted for military service.<sup>75</sup> At major checkpoints, such as the one at The

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<sup>64</sup> Syria Direct: 24; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 70; Jusoor: 95

<sup>65</sup> The international humanitarian organisation: 168

<sup>66</sup> Syria Direct: 21

<sup>67</sup> Jusoor: 94

<sup>68</sup> The international humanitarian organisation: 169

<sup>69</sup> Syria Direct: 20; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 71

<sup>70</sup> Syria Direct: 21; Jusoor: 96, 108; SOHR: 198-199

<sup>71</sup> Omran Studies: 129

<sup>72</sup> SNHR: 142

<sup>73</sup> Syria Direct: 20; SNHR: 143, 150; the international humanitarian organisation: 169. Reconciliation document is a document, which was issued to the residents of the former opposition-controlled areas which entered a reconciliation agreement with the GoS when it retook control over their areas. For more information about reconciliation agreements see: Syria Studies, Vol 9 No 2 (2017): *The Day After: Post-Uprising Realities & Challenges*: Raymond Hinesbusch and Omar Imady, *Syria's Reconciliation Agreements*, [url](#)

<sup>74</sup> The international humanitarian organisation: 169

<sup>75</sup> The international security organisation: 8; Syria Direct: 25; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 68, 69,71; Jusoor: 98-100

Institute of Electrical and Mechanical Engineering, all intelligence services are likely to be present at the same checkpoint. A person will therefore be checked against the wanted lists of all services.<sup>76</sup>

People who are in doubt whether their names are on wanted lists will sometimes pay mediators, who have connections with employees in the different intelligence services, in order to have their names informally checked against wanted lists of the intelligence services, before passing through any checkpoint.<sup>77</sup>

Before mid-2019, people who wanted to travel between Damascus City and Rural Damascus were required to leave their ID-cards at checkpoints and did not retrieve them before returning. In this way, the authorities could control the movement to the city. In addition, people were required to obtain a security approval in order to travel from Rural Damascus to Damascus. Since mid-2019, people from Damascus and Rural Damascus, including East Ghouta, have not been required to leave their ID-cards at checkpoints or obtain a security approval in order to travel between the two governorates.<sup>78</sup> Omran Center for Strategic Studies mentioned though that individuals who want to access or exit Douma need permission and are required to leave their ID-card at the checkpoint before entering or exiting the area.<sup>79</sup> According to Syria Direct, at some checkpoints at the entrances to East Ghouta, anyone exiting or entering is required to write his or her name down on a list.<sup>80</sup>

Since March 2020 the authorities at checkpoints in Rural Damascus have been trying to avoid checking people because of COVID-19. Checks have therefore only been conducted at few checkpoints in the governorate.<sup>81</sup>

### 3.3. Profiles of individuals arrested at checkpoints

According to Syria Direct, in general, the number of arrests of civilians by the government has decreased in Damascus and Rural Damascus in 2020.<sup>82</sup> According to the international security organisation, with the exception of people who are wanted by the GoS, people from Rural Damascus generally do not face issues when passing checkpoints and moving around within and between Rural Damascus and Damascus City.<sup>83</sup> The SNHR stated that while some people from Rural Damascus moved freely between the governorates, others were prevented from travelling freely or were even arrested. SNHR has recorded 56 arrests of individuals who were traveling between Damascus and Rural Damascus in the period from January to September 2020.<sup>84</sup>

At the checkpoints in Damascus and Rural Damascus, it is mainly people who are on wanted lists who are arrested.<sup>85</sup> This includes Syrian and Palestinian men wanted for obligatory or reserve military service,<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Jusoor: 100

<sup>77</sup> Jusoor: 99

<sup>78</sup> Syria Direct: 22; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 67; Jusoor: 97; SOHR: 199

<sup>79</sup> Omran Studies: 131

<sup>80</sup> Syria Direct: 22

<sup>81</sup> SOHR: 197

<sup>82</sup> Syria Direct: 15

<sup>83</sup> The international security organisation: 8

<sup>84</sup> SNHR: 139, 140, 143

<sup>85</sup> The international security organisation: 8; Syria Direct: 25; Omran Studies: 130; SNHR: 139, 140; the international humanitarian organisation: 169; SOHR: 199;

<sup>86</sup> According to Syria Direct, at the checkpoints at East Ghouta, 112 men were arrested for military service in June 2020. Syria Direct, *لغوطة الشرقية: من أهوال القيصر الروسي إلى التذرع بعقوبات القيصر الأميركي* [East Ghouta: From the Horrors of the Russian Tsar to the Invocation of the American Tsar's Punishments], 1 July 2020, [url](#)

individuals who have conducted political or armed anti-government activities, and people who have criminal charges against them.<sup>87</sup>

However, people who are not on wanted lists may also risk being harassed, interrogated or arrested at checkpoints. This includes persons who are relatives to prominent armed or political activists and persons who are suspected to be activists. In addition, persons who have been in contact with their relatives, who are wanted for security issues, are also at risk of being arrested.<sup>88</sup> Rami Abdurrahman, director at SOHR, knows of a person who was recently arrested because he had a phone call in 2018 with Rami Abdurrahman.<sup>89</sup> Rami Abdurrahman has also recently received information about two women who were arrested because they had been in touch with one of their relatives who fled from the GoS to Idlib, a governorate mainly controlled by the opposition.<sup>90</sup>

SNHR stated that since January 2020, the organisation had documented 38 cases of arrests of refugees returning to Syria through Damascus Airport or via the official and unofficial land borders with Lebanon.<sup>91</sup> However, SNHR did not specify the profile of those arrested or the reason for their arrests.

SNHR and Omran Center for Strategic Studies mentioned that some persons who worked for humanitarian or civil society organisations had been arrested<sup>92</sup> and released several times.<sup>93</sup>

SNHR documented a total of 327 cases of arrests in Damascus and Rural Damascus taking place between January and September 2020. According to SNHR, 250 detainees have been forcibly disappeared, i.e. being unable to communicate with the outside world.<sup>94</sup> The Danish Immigration Service was unable to have the number of enforced disappearance from SNHR corroborated through other sources. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic reported on at least 45 cases of enforced disappearance (34 men, one woman and 10 children) taking place in the period from 11 January 2020 to 1 July 2020 in Daraa, Homs, Quneitara, Rural Damascus and Suweida governorates. Those subjected to enforced disappearance comprised defectors as well as current and former humanitarian workers, activists and other civilians, including those who had undergone so-called “reconciliation” processes in Daraa governorate<sup>95</sup>

### 3.3.1. Freedom of movement for women

In general, women do not face particular problems with the authorities when moving around in Damascus or Rural Damascus.<sup>96</sup> Some sources stated that women are treated in the same way as men.<sup>97</sup> Some sources stated that it is often easier for women to pass through checkpoints as they are not checked as much as

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<sup>87</sup> The international security organisation: 8; Syria Direct: 25; Omran Studies: 130; SNHR: 139, 140; the international humanitarian organisation: 169; SOHR: 199; Orient Net, *مليشيا أسد تشن حملة اعتقال واسعة في بلدة صغيرة شرق دمشق [Assad's militia launches a widespread arrest campaign in a small town, east of Damascus]*, 19 August 2020, [url](#); Al-Araby al-Jadeed, *النظام السوري يعتقل دمشق*, *مدنيين بحجج مختلفة في ريف*, [The Syrian regime arrests civilians under various pretexts in Rural Damascus], 23 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>88</sup> Syria Direct: 25; Jusoor: 101; SNHR: 139, 143, 150; SOHR: 201

<sup>89</sup> Rami Abdurrahman is regarded by the GoS as a profiled political activist. *ed.*

<sup>90</sup> SOHR: 200

<sup>91</sup> SNHR: 139, 150

<sup>92</sup> SNHR: 139

<sup>93</sup> Omran Studies: 130

<sup>94</sup> SNHR: 139, 140

<sup>95</sup> OHCHR, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, 15 September 2020, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>96</sup> The international security organisation: 11; Syria Direct: 36; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 73

<sup>97</sup> Jusoor: 113; SNHR: 151

men,<sup>98</sup> which is why some men send female family members to complete procedures that require interaction with the authorities.<sup>99</sup> However, women wearing niqab, a veil which covers the face, are checked thoroughly at checkpoints controlled by the Syrian security forces.<sup>100</sup>

Some sources mentioned that there had been cases of harassment of women at checkpoints taking place occasionally.<sup>101</sup> There are cases of checkpoint personnel asking women additional questions about e.g. where they are heading, where they are coming from, and what the purpose of their trip is.<sup>102</sup> According to Suhail Al-Ghazi, prevalence of harassment of women depends on the checkpoint, the area and the mood of the officer in charge of the checkpoint. It is more prevalent in some areas of East Ghouta than in other areas in Rural Damascus. However, Suhail Al-Ghazi emphasised that he had not seen reports of physical harassment of women at checkpoints.<sup>103</sup>

There have also been cases of women being arrested at checkpoints for the purpose of extortion by the security officer in charge or for security reasons, e.g. pressuring them to make a family member (e.g. a brother, husband or son), who is part of the armed opposition, to turn himself in.<sup>104</sup> The SNHR noted that 13 women had been arrested since January 2020 while travelling between the areas of Damascus and Rural Damascus.<sup>105</sup> However, SNHR did not mention the reasons for these arrests.

### 3.4. Restrictions on access and return to certain areas

There is limited access and sometimes almost no access to certain areas in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus. In general, restrictions are implemented in areas and neighbourhoods that are severely damaged, are designated as military zones, where basic services are scarce, and/or where demining work is being conducted.<sup>106</sup> Residents who want to visit or return to such restricted areas need to obtain a security permission to be allowed to enter.<sup>107</sup>

People, whose houses are in a relatively good state, will in most cases be allowed to return and live in their houses (see section 3.4.1. and 3.4.2. for main areas to which access is restricted). In the areas to which access is not restricted, a security approval is not required of a persons who return to the house he or she owns. However, if they want to rebuild or repair their houses on their own expenses, they will need a security approval.<sup>108</sup>

A person can obtain this security approval by submitting a request to the branch of security services which is present in the area in question. When processing the request, the person's records are checked to determine if he/she is wanted, and if his/her house was destroyed or can be repaired. According to SNHR, the security branch also checks if the person's property has been confiscated. Individuals, who are not

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<sup>98</sup> The international security organisation: 11; Syria Direct: 36; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 72-73; SOHR: 199, 201

<sup>99</sup> Syria Direct: 36

<sup>100</sup> SOHR: 201

<sup>101</sup> Syria Direct: 36; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 72, 75; Jusoor: 113

<sup>102</sup> Suhail AL-Ghazi: 72, 75

<sup>103</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 75

<sup>104</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 74; SNHR: 151

<sup>105</sup> SNHR: 139-140

<sup>106</sup> The international security organisation: 10; Syria Direct: 30; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 59; Jusoor: 104; Omran Studies: 132; SNHR: 145-146; the international humanitarian organisation: 166

<sup>107</sup> Syria Direct: 27, 30; Jusoor: 104; Omran Studies: 136; SNHR: 145-146; the international humanitarian organisation: 167

<sup>108</sup> Syria Direct: 31, 33

wanted or whose houses are in a relatively good condition and not confiscated, will be allowed to return to their areas.<sup>109</sup> In general, people who are from areas previously controlled by IS or other jihadist groups, and who are not wanted by the GoS, have been allowed to return to their homes and are treated in the same way as people from other former opposition-controlled areas.<sup>110</sup>

### 3.4.1. *Restricted access to areas in Damascus governorate*

In Damascus governorate, access and return to al-Yarmouk Camp, Jobar, Qaboun, and al-Qadam are almost completely prohibited due to the massive destruction of these areas.<sup>111</sup>

#### Al-Yarmouk

The majority of people who fled al-Yarmouk during the conflict are still not allowed to return to the area. People can occasionally get permission to visit the area to check on their properties, but they are only allowed to enter and exit on the same day. Very few families have been able to return permanently. The lack of infrastructure is still a huge challenge for those who return.<sup>112</sup>

### 3.4.2. *Restricted access to areas in Rural Damascus*

In Rural Damascus access to Harran al-Awameed and to some areas in Darayya district and in East Ghouta, is restricted.<sup>113</sup>

#### Areas in Darayya

In Darayya district, access to the city of Hajar al-Aswad is not allowed, whereas access to other areas of Hajar al-Aswad sub-district has been allowed. In Darayya City, access to the south-west area of the city where the Shia-memorial of Sukayna lies is only allowed for pro-Iranian Shiite groups.<sup>114</sup> The north-eastern part of Darayya City, close to Mazzeh in Damascus, is a military area controlled by the Syrian Air Force Intelligence, and is also a no access area. Even locals who have properties in that area have not been permitted to enter.<sup>115</sup>

Although people are being allowed to return to other areas in Darayya City, not many people have returned, as nearly 80% of the houses in the area are destroyed and some people have not been given the permission to rebuild their houses.<sup>116</sup> According to Jusoor, only pro-government residents have been allowed to return to their houses in these areas.<sup>117</sup>

However, many civilians have returned to al-Muadamiya, a city in Darayya district, despite a number of arrests taking place in this area. According to Syria Direct, out of a list of 152 people from al-Muadamiya who wanted to return back, only two persons were not allowed.<sup>118</sup> According to the pro-government news-outlet Al-Khabar, people started returning to Darayya City in 2018 and the current number of residents in

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<sup>109</sup> SNHR: 147

<sup>110</sup> Jusoor: 106; SOHR: 204

<sup>111</sup> Syria Direct: 30; Jusoor: 102; SNHR: 148; SOHR: 202

<sup>112</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 59; SNHR: 149; the international humanitarian organisation: 166-167

<sup>113</sup> Syria Direct: 27-29; Jusoor: 102-105; Omran Studies: 135-137; SOHR: 202-203

<sup>114</sup> Sahnaya in Darayya district is an example of an area which has been controlled by the GoS under the Syrian conflict and to which access is not restricted (SOHR: 203)

<sup>115</sup> Syria Direct: 27; Omran Studies: 137

<sup>116</sup> Azamat, *مفاتيح عودة مؤجلة.. داريا [Darayya...the keys of return are postponed]*, 16 May 2019, [url](#); Syria Direct: 28; Jusoor 104

<sup>117</sup> Jusoor 104; Omran Studies 136

<sup>118</sup> Jusoor: 104

<sup>119</sup> Syria Direct: 29

the city is 15,000.<sup>119</sup> When the conflict in Syria broke out in 2011, the city had a population of 80–250,000, which was reduced to between 2,500 to 4,000 people by August 2016.<sup>120</sup>

### Areas in East Ghouta

In East Ghouta access to an area called Abbadeh is prevented because most of its residents were affiliated with IS or Jabhat al-Nusra before the GoS regained control of the area in 2018. Only pro-government residents from those areas have been allowed to return to their houses.<sup>121</sup>

Access and return to the destroyed areas in East Ghouta such as Douma, Harasta, Shefouniya and Arbeen also requires a security approval.<sup>122</sup>

According to Suhail Al-Ghazi, people who have not been active in the armed opposition usually do not face difficulties with regard to returning to their houses in the areas in East Ghouta.<sup>123</sup>

## 3.5. Possibility of moving to other areas of Damascus and Rural Damascus

People who want to move from one area in Damascus or Rural Damascus and settle down in another [e.g. moving from Damascus City or from al-Tal in Rural Damascus to al-Zabadani] will have to obtain a security approval in order to rent or buy a property in the new area. The security approval has to be obtained from the authorities in the new place the person intends to move to.<sup>124</sup> Jusoor stated that the person will have to go to the nearest security branch or police station to obtain a security approval.<sup>125</sup>

According to Syria Direct and Omran Center for Strategic Studies, obtaining the security approval takes place at a local mayor (*mukhtar*) office. When a person moves from one area to another, he will need to certify the contract (whether for renting or buying a property) with the mukhtar in the area he/she is moving to. As a part of this process, the mukhtar will send the contract information to local intelligence offices requesting their approval.<sup>126</sup> The registration of the contract will be approved if the tenant/buyer and the landlord/seller have no security issues and the property in question is not disputed.<sup>127</sup>

The sources interviewed knew of cases of people who had succeeded in obtaining security approvals to move from one area to another within and between Damascus City and Rural Damascus, including moving between East Ghouta and other areas.<sup>128</sup>

According to Omran Center for Strategic Studies, there is no difference between East Ghouta and the rest of Rural Damascus with regard to the possibility of moving to other areas. People from East Ghouta, who

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<sup>119</sup> Al-Khabar, *داریا تزیل آثار الحرب عن جبینها*, [Four years since its liberation and two years since the return of its residents...Darayya starts removing the traces of the war], 28 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>120</sup> EASO, *Syria – Exercise of authority in recaptured areas*, 8 January 2020, [url](#)

<sup>120</sup> Syria Direct: 29

<sup>121</sup> Jusoor: 103

<sup>122</sup> SNHR: 145

<sup>123</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 62. Omran Studies estimates that the number of residents in Douma today is 200,000-250,000. Omran Studies: 132

<sup>124</sup> The international security organisation: 9; Syria Direct: 31-32; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 63; Jusoor: 107, 110; Omran Studies: 133

<sup>125</sup> Jusoor: 110

<sup>126</sup> Syria Direct: 32; Omran Studies 133

<sup>127</sup> Syria Direct: 32; Jusoor: 110

<sup>128</sup> Syria Direct: 32; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 64- 66; Jusoor: 109, 112; SOHR: 205. See notes in Appendix 1 for more information about the cases the sources mentioned.

want to move to a location outside the area, will have to go through the same procedures as people from all other places in the government-controlled areas.<sup>129</sup>

Obtaining a security approval is not necessary for an individual who wants to return to his/her house after having left it during the conflict, provided that the person has documents proving his/her ownership of the house, and if the house is not destroyed. If the house is destroyed and the individual wants to repair it, a security approval is needed.<sup>130</sup>

Syria Direct assessed that the number of people moving from one area to another has increased in 2020, and it has become easier to deal with the authorities regarding obtaining necessary permissions to move to another area.<sup>131</sup> According to Suhail Al-Ghazi, in most cases people are given security approvals in order to move to a new location. Exceptions are mainly persons who have been involved in the armed opposition and persons who want to move to areas where the majority of residents are affiliated with the SAA, the security services or militias. In such areas, residents do not accept newcomers (e.g. Ish al-Warwar, an area north of Barza in Damascus City; and Dahiyat al-Assad, close to Harasta in Rural Damascus).<sup>132</sup> In addition, Jusoor stated that people who are in family (first and second degree) with persons, who are wanted in cases related to terrorism, will face difficulties in getting a security approval to rebuild or sell a house that is owned by their wanted relative.<sup>133</sup> According to Suhail Al-Ghazi, when people are denied the approval, it is mostly because the local security officer wants more bribes.<sup>134</sup>

Syrian citizens who live outside the country and want to return to reside in Syria will not go through the same security approval process when renting or buying a house because they would mainly have received such an approval before returning or upon arrival to Syria. This could be through the formal procedure of sorting out one's issues (*Taswiyat Wada'*),<sup>135</sup> which includes a security approval.<sup>136</sup>

Palestinian refugees are allowed by the GoS to reside in other places than in the Palestinian refugee camps. However, many Palestinian refugees prefer to reside in camps due to the relatively cheaper rent and to get easier access to UNRWA services. Many former al-Yarmouk residents live in other camps and informal settlements scattered around Syria.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Omran Studies: 134

<sup>130</sup> Syria Direct: 31

<sup>131</sup> Syria Direct: 33

<sup>132</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 63, 65

<sup>133</sup> Jusoor: 107

<sup>134</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 63

<sup>135</sup> Syria Direct: 34

<sup>136</sup> For more information about *Taswiyat Wada'* see: Denmark, DIS, *Syria: Military Service*, May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>137</sup> The international humanitarian organisation: 171-173

## 4. Socio-economic situation in Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates

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### 4.1. The socio-economic situation in Syria

Syria is experiencing a deep economic crisis as a consequence of the nine years of conflict, the international sanctions against Syria, the emergence of COVID-19 in the beginning of 2020 and the financial crisis in neighbouring Lebanon, in whose banks many Syrians have deposited their money.<sup>138</sup> (For more information on socio-economic situation in Syria, see: Danish Immigration Service. *SYRIA - security and socio-economic situation in the government-controlled areas*, October 2020, [url](#)).

### 4.2. Reconstruction and rehabilitation of infrastructure

No area in Rural Damascus is completely empty of residents as the financial conditions force some residents to return and live in their destroyed homes.<sup>139</sup>

Most former rebel-held areas in Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates have been subjected to varying degrees of destruction, with the level of destruction depending on the magnitude of the military operations, which have taken place in these areas.<sup>140</sup> Cities and areas such as al-Yarmouk, Hajar al-Aswad, Jobar, Douma, Harasta, Darayya, Qaboun, Maliha, Arbeen, Madyara, Ein Tarma, Zamalka and Hamouriya are mentioned by the sources as areas most affected by the conflict, whereas Qalamoun areas and the villages of Wadi Barada, Madaya, al-Zabadani and Baqqin are affected to a lesser degree.<sup>141</sup>

There is no actual reconstruction process taking place in Damascus and Rural Damascus.<sup>142</sup> The GoS has not started reconstruction of the most damaged areas in Damascus and Rural Damascus such as al-Yarmouk, Jobar, Douma, Harasta, and Hajar al-Aswad.<sup>143</sup> It has taken some initiative to restore the infrastructure in these areas and some progress has been made in this regard. However, the progress made is limited and far from enough to make these areas habitable in a way that people can have a normal life there.<sup>144</sup> For example, in Harasta the GoS has only removed rubbles from main roads and only restored the electricity and water networks in neighbourhoods that are inhabited.<sup>145</sup>

Reconstruction has been initiated by GoS in several areas in Rural Damascus. However, the progress is very slow. In some areas, civilians are reconstructing their houses, while the GoS has only restored the electricity and water networks in the inhabited neighbourhoods.<sup>146</sup> According to Syria Direct, NGOs who want to rebuild damaged areas are only allowed to rebuild areas that the GoS considers as pro-government. For

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<sup>138</sup> New York Times, *Syria's Economy Collapses Even as Civil War Winds to a Close*, 15 June 2020, [url](#); EASO, *Syria – Socio-economic situation: Damascus City*, February 2020, [url](#) p. 24

<sup>139</sup> SNHR: 154

<sup>140</sup> SNHR: 153

<sup>141</sup> Syria Direct: 38, 43; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 76; SNHR: 153; the international humanitarian organisation: 174

<sup>142</sup> SNHR: 152

<sup>143</sup> Syria Direct: 38

<sup>144</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 76

<sup>145</sup> Syria Direct: 38

<sup>146</sup> Syria Direct: 40

instance, a NGO was not allowed to do reconstruction work in the former-opposition controlled area, Jobar, and was instead referred to renovate Mazzeh 85, which is a pro-government area.<sup>147</sup>

The government has plans to rebuild Qaboun and al-Yarmouk.<sup>148</sup> The authorities announced a reorganisation plan for al-Yarmouk in June 2020. The plan is not moving ahead yet as many petitions and objections have been submitted, which the authorities are still looking into.<sup>149</sup> Syria Direct suspected the GoS of intending to seize people’s properties for its own benefit through these plans,<sup>150</sup> and SNHR likewise believed that the GoS’ plan was to “remodel” and not to reconstruct these areas.<sup>151</sup>

The Palestinian refugee camps in Rural Damascus are accessible and largely operational. The camps of Sbeineh, Khan al-Shieh and Qabr al-Sit were to some extent affected by the conflict, but it has been possible to rebuild their clinics, schools, sewage and the water network.<sup>152</sup>

### 4.3. Water, electricity and sanitation

There is provision of services, i.e. water, electricity and sanitation, in almost all inhabited areas of Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates, although the level of services varies from area to area.<sup>153</sup>

The GoS has partly restored the services in most areas.<sup>154</sup> However, there are shortages almost everywhere to varying degrees.<sup>155</sup> There are daily power and water cuts in almost all areas with some areas having water and electricity only few hours a day.<sup>156</sup> The regular power cuts have made people dependent on private-owned local and home power generators.<sup>157</sup> Most people can, however, not afford to pay for electricity from local power generators, and it is expensive to run home generators due to the shortage and the high price of fuel.<sup>158</sup>

In the most destroyed areas such as al-Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad, a shortage of basic services such as water and electricity still exists,<sup>159</sup> and the main water pipelines have not been repaired in all areas of Rural Damascus.<sup>160</sup> In the areas, which are not connected to water network, the water is brought by trucks.<sup>161</sup>

However, in general, as Rural Damascus is predominantly an agricultural area, people in most areas have wells from where water is available.<sup>162</sup> There was also a shortage of water in remote areas of Rural Damascus before the conflict because of an underdeveloped infrastructure.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Syria Direct: 42

<sup>148</sup> Syria Direct: 43

<sup>149</sup> The international humanitarian organisation: 175

<sup>150</sup> Syria Direct: 43

<sup>151</sup> SNHR: 152

<sup>152</sup> The international humanitarian organisation: 178

<sup>153</sup> Syria Direct: 44; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 77; Jusoor: 114; SNHR: 155; SOHR: 206

<sup>154</sup> Syria Direct: 44

<sup>155</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 77

<sup>156</sup> Syria Direct: 38, 44; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 77, 78; Jusoor: 116; SNHR: 155; the international humanitarian organisation: 180; SOHR: 206

<sup>157</sup> Syria Direct: 45; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 77; Jusoor: 116

<sup>158</sup> Syria Direct: 45; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 77

<sup>159</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 76

<sup>160</sup> Jusoor: 115

<sup>161</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 78; Jusoor: 115

<sup>162</sup> Syria Direct: 46

<sup>163</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 78

Although the water and electricity network in Damascus City has not been damaged during the conflict to the same extent as in Rural Damascus, there are daily power cuts, particularly during the summer.<sup>164</sup>

In some former opposition-controlled areas in Rural Damascus, which suffer the most from a lack of services, people consider lack of initiative by the GoS to restore the services as a punishment for their support to the opposition. According to Suhail Al-Ghazi, this may be true because there is a difference between areas with regard to provision of services. However, Al-Ghazi underlined that in recent years, lack of services has affected the whole country.<sup>165</sup>

#### 4.4. Healthcare

Medical service centres and hospitals have reopened in most areas in Damascus and Rural Damascus and each area has its own healthcare clinic providing most basic services.<sup>166</sup> In Douma a hospital has reopened.<sup>167</sup> Public healthcare services are almost free and a majority of people can afford it. Medicine provided through the public clinics is subsidised and much cheaper than medicine bought at pharmacies.<sup>168</sup>

However, the quality of healthcare services and the medicine provided is poor in both governorates, particularly in Rural Damascus. Damaged medical facilities, crowded and poorly equipped clinics and hospitals, a shortage of medical staff, rarely available specialised public medical treatment for children, women and those with chronic diseases, lack of medicine and poor quality of available medicine, are among the problems, which the healthcare sector is currently suffering from, according to the sources.<sup>169</sup> In general, in urban areas close to Damascus City such as Douma or Harasta, the facilities are better than in areas further away from the city.<sup>170</sup>

Most people have to go to Damascus City to receive most secondary or tertiary healthcare services such as regular check-ups or operations, or to buy medicine that is not available in Rural Damascus.<sup>171</sup> According to SOHR, everyday a significant number of people from East Ghouta go to Damascus for healthcare purposes as medical healthcare services in East Ghouta only provide primary treatment.<sup>172</sup> However, the quality of medical treatment is not high even in Damascus, and some medication is sometimes not available even in the pharmacies in Damascus.<sup>173</sup>

Palestinian refugees have access to UNRWA healthcare facilities throughout the country. These facilities are found inside as well as outside the camps. Palestinian refugees can be referred by UNRWA to secondary and tertiary healthcare, i.e. hospitals. UNRWA subsidises access to secondary or tertiary healthcare in Syria.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 79

<sup>165</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 80

<sup>166</sup> Syria Direct: 47; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 84

<sup>167</sup> Syria Direct: 47

<sup>168</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 88

<sup>169</sup> Syria Direct: 48; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 84; Jusoos: 117, 119, SNHR: 157, 158

<sup>170</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 85

<sup>171</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 85; Jusoos: 118; SNHR: 157

<sup>172</sup> SOHR: 210

<sup>173</sup> Syria Direct: 48; Jusoos: 118

<sup>174</sup> The international humanitarian organisation: 182, 183

#### 4.4.1. COVID-19

In a report of 17 September 2020 produced by UN OCHA Syria in Damascus in collaboration with WHO Syria and a Damascus-based humanitarian partner, Damascus and Rural Damascus are mentioned as areas of concern with regard to the spread of COVID-19. Of the 3,654 cases announced by the Syrian Ministry of Health as of 17 September 2020, 126 are reported to be healthcare workers, largely working in Damascus.<sup>175</sup> As of June 2020, southern Syria was the epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic in Syria, and the towns of Ras al-Ma'ara and Jdeidet al-Fadel (Rural Damascus governorate), were under full lockdown.<sup>176</sup> There are test laboratories in Damascus, and a new laboratory has also been established in Rural Damascus.<sup>177</sup> The infection rate is assessed to be much higher than the number announced by the GoS.<sup>178</sup>

#### 4.5. Schools

Children have access to schools and primary education in almost all areas of Damascus and Rural Damascus.<sup>179</sup> In areas where there are no schools, children can attend schools in neighbouring areas.<sup>180</sup> However, schools are overcrowded and suffer from shortages of teachers, and in remote areas, children have to go long distances to go to school.<sup>181</sup> In addition, many school buildings were damaged during the conflict.<sup>182</sup> The international organisations have, according to Suhail Al-Ghazi, contributed to repairing schools, and the GoS has also helped with this, though not to the same extent as these organisations.<sup>183</sup>

UNRWA provides education services to Palestinian refugee students from grade 1 to 9. There are 103 UNRWA-managed schools around Syria, both inside and outside the camps, most of which are around Rural Damascus and Damascus. In the areas where Palestinian refugees have been displaced, UNRWA has tried to open temporary schools. For example in Yalda, schools were opened for Palestinian refugee children who were displaced from al-Yarmouk Camp.<sup>184</sup>

#### 4.6. Food

According to the consulted sources, there is no shortage of food in the governorates of Damascus or Rural Damascus; however, the food prices are high.<sup>185</sup> WFP reported in June 2020 that Syria was facing an unprecedented and uncontrolled growth in food prices. In June, food prices increased by 48% from May, and thereby tripled in just eight months.<sup>186</sup>

Due to the sharp increase of food prices, the GoS started selling rationed quantities of basic food items, such as tea, rice, and sugar through authorized retailers at subsidised prices. By using the so-called “smart

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<sup>175</sup> Syria Direct: 49, 50; Jusoor: 120; UN News, *Syria COVID spread may be much higher than figures suggest, Lowcock tells Security Council*, 16 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>176</sup> WFP, *Syria Situation Report #6*, June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>177</sup> UN OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 – Humanitarian Update No. 18*, 17 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>178</sup> Syria Direct: 49, 50; Jusoor: 120; UN News, *Syria COVID spread may be much higher than figures suggest, Lowcock tells Security Council*, 16 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>179</sup> Syria Direct: 51; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 89; Jusoor: 121; SNHR: 161

<sup>180</sup> Jusoor: 121; SNHR: 161

<sup>181</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 89

<sup>182</sup> SNHR: 161

<sup>183</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 89

<sup>184</sup> The international humanitarian organisation: 186, 187

<sup>185</sup> Syria Direct: 52; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 81; Jusoor: 122; SNHR: 156

<sup>186</sup> WFP, *Syria Situation Report #6*, June 2020, [url](#)

*card*”, each family can purchase up to one kilogram of tea, three kilograms of rice and four kilograms of sugar at subsidised prices.<sup>187</sup>

However, sometimes these food items are not available in the required quantity at some government food markets, which is why people will have to go to food markets in other areas to find the items.<sup>188</sup> Moreover, in remote areas, people have difficulties in accessing the government-authorized retailers due to transportation problems.<sup>189</sup>

In addition, people have to stand in long queues to buy the subsidised goods, and the amount of food they are eligible to buy is not enough to feed them.<sup>190</sup> According to SNHR, this situation has made some individuals dependent on cultivating their land and raising domestic livestock in order to secure food supplies.<sup>191</sup> In most of Rural Damascus, which is predominantly an agricultural area, people can manage their basic food needs through agriculture and raising livestock. However, in areas with restricted access such as al-Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad, it is difficult for people to secure their basic food needs.<sup>192</sup>

The international humanitarian organisation advised that food security has become the first priority for Palestinian refugees in Syria as well as for Syrians.<sup>193</sup> It is only the Palestinian refugees who are registered with GAPAR who are eligible to obtain “*smart cards*”.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Syria Direct, *Smart cards for rationing: how the Syrian government is outsmarting accountability*, 17 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>188</sup> Syria Direct: 52

<sup>189</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 82

<sup>190</sup> Jusoor: 122

<sup>191</sup> SNHR: 156

<sup>192</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi: 76

<sup>193</sup> The international humanitarian organisation: 184

<sup>194</sup> The international humanitarian organisation: 185

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## Appendix 1: Meeting minutes

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### Skype meeting with an international security organization, 6 August 2020

About the source: The source works with analysis of the security situation in Syria and receives daily reports on the security situation in the whole country.

#### *Security situation in Damascus and Rural Damascus*

1. The security situation in Damascus City deteriorated in the beginning of 2020. In January 2020, there was a series of assassinations and attacks with IEDs and VBIEDs targeting the GoS officers and affiliated officials in Damascus City and Rural Damascus. The number of IED incidents increased dramatically in February, where six explosions occurred in Damascus City and another two in Rural Damascus. In comparison, seventeen IED incidents were reported in the capital and surrounding areas throughout the whole of 2019. The attacks continued until mid-March where the GoS arrested six members of an underground opposition group called *Saraya Qasioun* (سرايا قاسيون) who were allegedly behind these attacks. Since then, the attacks stopped completely until late June where they started again and have increased since.
2. The modus operandi of these attacks basically consists of attaching an explosive device to the underside of the targeted vehicle. The explosion caused by the device is sufficient to kill or injure the person(s) in the vehicle, but not large enough to cause significant collateral damage to the wider area of the blast.
3. Whilst in the first wave of attacks (i.e. January- mid-March) the attacks took place in both Damascus City and Rural Damascus, the second wave (late June – now) the attacks have been concentrated in Rural Damascus, particularly in East Ghouta. Although there are evidences indicating that *Saraya Qasioun* have been behind some of these attacks, there are contradictory reports and news on the extent to which the group is responsible for these.
4. Whilst the first wave of attacks (January – mid-March 2020) to some extent disturbed the daily life in Damascus and Rif Damascus, the second wave (late June – now) has not had any impact on the life of people because they have been isolated incidents directed at security forces with minor damage to civilians, and they have been limited to certain areas.
5. The above mentioned asymmetric attacks with IED and VBIED as well as unexploded ordnances and landmines have been the main security issues in Damascus and Rural Damascus since the beginning of 2020. There are weekly reports of unexploded ordnances and landmines going off and causing civilian casualties. The source underlined, however, that the issue of unexploded ordnances and landmines is limited to the areas where major military confrontations took place between the GoS forces and the opposition groups, for instance, Jobar.
6. There have also been a number of Israeli air strikes against specific military targets in southern districts of Damascus. The targets are Hezbollah and other Iran-backed militia groups as well as Palestinian jihadist groups.

### *Freedom of movement*

7. The source did not have much information about the checkpoints in Damascus and Rural Damascus as it does not work with this issue. However, according to the source, there are still checkpoints at entrances to Damascus City checking individuals moving in or out of the city. The source considers that the number of checkpoints in Rif Damascus has not changed since 2019. When the GoS took entire control over Rural Damascus in 2018, a significant number of checkpoints were installed in the area. However, the number was reduced during 2019 so that today, you mostly find checkpoints at the main entrances to the major cities and neighborhoods in Rural Damascus.
8. When moving between Damascus City and Rural Damascus, people can be asked to show their IDs or asked for clarification concerning certain issues. There have been cases of people being detained at checkpoints because they were wanted for security issues or other reasons. Nevertheless, these are isolated cases, and people from Rural Damascus generally do not face issues with regard to passing checkpoints and moving around within or between Rural Damascus and Damascus City.
9. In order to move from one place and settle down in another in Damascus City and Rural Damascus, one is required to obtain a security approval from the authorities in the new place. The source knew a couple of cases of people who had to obtain security approval to move from one area to another in Damascus City.
10. There are areas in Rural Damascus to which the access is restricted due to demining activities.
11. The source has not seen reports on women facing particular issues when moving around in Damascus or Rural Damascus.

### **Skype meetings with Ammar Hamou, Senior Editor, and Walid Al Nofal, Reporter, Syria Direct, 10-11 August 2020**

About the source: On the website of Syria Direct, it reads: *“Syria Direct is an independent media organization that seeks to promote a democratic and just future for the Syrian people. (...) Founded in 2013, Syria Direct is a registered LLC in Jordan, and is financed through grants and projects. [Syria Direct’s] main activities are: 1) Media coverage on Syria: Publishing original news reports, interviews with newsmakers, and newsworthy photographs and videos from Syria, as well as newsletters; 2) Training: Syria Direct conducts trainings and workshops on basic and advanced journalism skills as well as investigative and conflict reporting.”*<sup>195</sup>

### *Security situation in Damascus and Rural Damascus*

12. Damascus is the most secure government-controlled governorate in Syria in terms of security incidents. However, Damascus has a lot of issues such as the pressure on the city in terms of the number of civilians that enter it from Rural Damascus and other governorates on a daily basis for work, education, health care purposes etc. The source estimates that the number of civilians that enters the Damascus on a daily basis from North Daraa, Homs, Qunaitra and

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<sup>195</sup> Syria Direct, About us, [url](#)

especially Rural Damascus, is as much as the number of the city's residents, and the number of people in the city gets doubled during the day.

13. A small number of assassinations and kidnappings in former-opposition controlled areas in Damascus and Rural Damascus has taken place except for East Ghouta as it is mostly controlled by Russian forces. Parts of these operations were claimed by the underground group, "*Qasioun Brigades*". However, the source suspects the existence of this group, and rather believes that the assassinations are liquidations among the GoS' officers themselves taking place under the name of "*Qasioun Brigades*".
14. The security grip in former-oppositions controlled areas in Rural Damascus and Damascus is firm. However, these areas are more secure with regard to the number of security incidents than for example Deraa, where kidnappings and assassinations are widespread.
15. In general, the number of arrests of civilians by the government has decreased in Damascus and Rural Damascus in 2020.
16. The ability of the GoS security forces to conduct arrest campaigns of people in East Ghouta has been limited. This is due to the Russian forces who control the area and who intervene and prevent the Syrian security forces from arresting civilians. However, in some cases when the Russian patrols are not present in a certain area in East Ghouta, the Syrian security forces succeed in arresting these civilians inside that area. Arrests of people also take place at checkpoints when they are on their way to Damascus. Once a person has been arrested, the Russian forces do not interfere.
17. In East and West Ghouta the government has its informers who are civilians who deliver information about the residents to the authorities. Sometimes those informers deliver false information in order to get credit and be considered as pro-government by the authorities.
18. Islamic State and other opposition groups do not exist in Damascus or Rural Damascus anymore

### *Freedom of movement in Damascus and Rural Damascus*

19. In Damascus and Rural Damascus the number of checkpoints were latest reduced in 2019.
20. There are checkpoints at the entrances to Damascus City. People from Rural Damascus travel regularly to Damascus and will only face checks at some of the checkpoints.
21. Access to Damascus is permitted for people from all areas including people from former opposition-controlled areas in Rural Damascus such as East Ghouta. However, sometimes people from East Ghouta who want to go to Damascus are checked intensively at checkpoints why, for instance, a half hour trip may take one hour. There are few checkpoints inside Damascus City.
22. At the road between Damascus and East Ghouta, at entrances to East Ghouta there are checkpoints where anyone exiting or entering East Ghouta will have to write his name down on a list at the checkpoint. Checkpoints at entrances to East Ghouta from Damascus are located at the cities of Douma, Ein Tarma, Maliha and Harasta. Previously, people passing

through these checkpoints had to leave their ID-cards at the checkpoint until they returned. This requirement has been lifted, according to Syria Direct's sources in East Ghouta.

23. In Rural Damascus the checkpoints are at the entrances to the governorate and at the main roads. Additionally, there are checkpoints between some of the cities and areas, as for example in East Ghouta there is a checkpoint between Douma and Harasta. There are even checkpoints between some neighborhoods in Douma. No checks are conducted at checkpoints between the cities in East Ghouta unless a specific security situation occurs.
24. In the Northern and Western districts of Rural Damascus, there are almost no checkpoints. For example, there is no checkpoint between al-Tal and Mnein or between al-Tal and Ma'raba. However, between Douma to al-Tal there is a checkpoint because Douma is in East Ghouta and mainly under the control of Russian forces.
25. At checkpoints the main purpose of checking people is to arrest individuals on wanted lists, including men wanted for military service and people who conducted political or anti-government activities. However, people who are suspected can risk being arrested and interrogated. In addition, different security forces control different checkpoints in both Damascus and Rural Damascus, and they have different wanted lists.
26. There are few areas in East Ghouta where access is restricted because of the vast damage of the buildings.
27. In Rural Damascus in Darayya city, which is under the control of Iranian forces and their allied militants, access of civilians is mostly restricted and almost no resident has been allowed to return back to their houses in the area. People who want to enter the area or/and want to reconstruct their houses will need a security clearance which is only granted in few cases.
28. For security reasons, access to areas in Darayya city that are opposite to the Mazzeh Military Airport is completely restricted even to its original residents. There are rumours that the GoS is planning to build business companies for pro-government personalities.
29. Many civilians have returned to al-Muadamiya, a city in Darayya District, despite the presence of a number of arrests in this area. The source has information that out of a list of 152 people from al-Muadamiya who wanted to return back, only two persons were not allowed.
30. The destruction of the areas of al-Yarmouk, Jobar and Darayya is severe why only visits by locals are permitted. To enter these areas, a person has to be from the area and has to obtain a written entrance permission issued from the security apparatus. People, whose houses are in a relatively good condition, are allowed to return to their houses.
31. People who want to move from one area in Rural Damascus and settle down in another area in the governorate will have to obtain a security approval. The source knows cases of people who have obtained such approvals. However, if a person for instance has left his house in East Ghouta during the conflict and stayed in Damascus, and he now wants to return to his own house in East Ghouta and live there, he does not need security approval if he has documents

proving his ownership of the house and if the house is not destroyed. But he will need security approval if the house is destroyed and he wants to repair it.

32. Obtaining the security approval is a part of registering the new property contract. When a person moves from one area to another, he will need to certify the contract (whether for renting or buying a property) at a local mayor (*Mukhtar*) in the area he/she is moving to. As a part of this process, the Mukhtar will send the contract information to local intelligence offices requesting for their approval. The registration of the contract will be approved if the tenant/buyer and the landlord/seller have no security issues and the property in question is not disputed. The source knows people who got such an approval and moved from one area in Rural Damascus to another.
33. There are cases where people move from one place to another without certifying their contracts. The sources does not have information about the number of people moving from one area to another. However, it is the source's assessment that the number has increased in 2020, and it has become easier to deal with the system regarding obtaining necessary permissions to move.
34. Syrian citizens who live outside Syria and want to return to reside in Syria will not go through the same security approval process when renting or buying a house because they would mainly have received such an approval before returning or upon arrival to Syria. This could be through the formal process of sorting out one's issues (*taswiyat wada'*)
35. Sometimes people are on wanted lists without knowing it. This is why people, who are not required to sort out their issues from abroad, informally check whether they are on a wanted list before return. This check is conducted through relatives in Syria by bribing an employee in the security services to check whether the person's name is on the wanted lists of any of the four intelligence directorates, the Military Intelligence, the Air Force Intelligence, the Political Security Directorate, and the General Intelligence Directorate. The source knows Syrians in Jordan who did this check before visiting or returning to areas in Rural Damascus including East Ghouta.
36. Women do not face the same difficulties with the authorities as men do when moving around in Damascus or Rural Damascus, and in general they are not treated as harshly as men by the authorities. Sometimes women are treated better by the authorities why some men send a female member from the family to complete procedures that require interaction with the authorities, as for example registration of a newborn. However, there have been reports of harassment of women at checkpoints taking place occasionally.
37. There have not been security incidents in the road between the airport and Damascus and the airport and Rural Damascus. The road can be regarded as safe despite the checkpoints on the road.

### *Socio-economic situation*

38. In the most damaged areas in Damascus and Rural Damascus such as al-Yarmouk, Jobar, Douma, Harasta, and Hajar al-Aswad, the GoS has not started reconstruction, and the re-

establishment of basic services is limited. For example, in Harasta the GoS has only removed rubbles from the main roads and only restored the electricity and water networks in neighbourhoods that are inhabited. However, there are frequent electricity cuts and sometimes the electricity is only available for four hours a day. Harasta has about 20.000 inhabitants, and 60-70% of the area is destroyed. Other information says that 80-85% of Harasta is destroyed.

39. The GoS has not allowed reconstruction of houses in Harasta although it has 20.000 inhabitants and 60-70% of the area is destroyed. Other information says that 80-85% of Harasta is destroyed.
40. In other areas in Rural Damascus, reconstruction has been initiated by GoS, however, it is processing very slow. In some areas civilians are conducting some reconstruction of their houses. Also in these areas the government has only restored the electricity and water networks in the neighbourhoods that are inhabited.
41. Inhabitants of Hajar al-Aswad have been allowed to return back to the area if their houses are in a relatively good condition. However, and like in many other damaged areas, many houses are likely to collapse.
42. NGOs who want to rebuild damaged areas in government-controlled areas are only allowed to rebuild areas that the GoS considers as pro-government. An NGO was not allowed to rebuild the former-opposition controlled area, Jobar, and was instead referred to renovate Mazzeh 85, which is a pro-government area.
43. 50% of Douma in Rural Damascus was damaged but the residents were allowed to rebuild their damaged houses. Jobar, Qaboun and al-Yarmouk are areas with more than 75% damage. Few families have been allowed to go back to their houses in these areas, but people have not been allowed to rebuild their houses. In Qaboun and al-Yarmouk the government has plans to rebuild the areas to seizure people's properties for its own benefits.

#### Access to basic services (water, electricity, sanitation)

44. In almost all inhabited areas in Rural Damascus there are water and electricity to a certain level. The government has partly restored the services in most areas. However, there are frequent cuts of both electricity and water.
45. People are dependent on power generators that supply them with more hours of electricity. Most people cannot afford to pay to get electricity from local power generators, but most Syrians have family members living abroad which financially support them with their expenses.
46. In general, in most areas in Rural Damascus, which is predominantly an agricultural area, people have wells where water is available.

#### Access to healthcare services

47. Medical service centers and hospitals have reopened in most areas in Damascus and Rural Damascus. In Douma a hospital has reopened.

48. The quality of medical treatment varies from one area to another. However, in general, medical treatment is not good even in Damascus City.
49. Coronavirus is spreading quickly in especially in East Ghouta because the government is not making any effort to contain the epidemic in that area. For example, the public hospital in Douma does not conduct Covid-19 tests because of lack of capabilities. Some people go to Damascus City to get tested if they can afford the expenses. The GoS has not registered so many cases of Covid-19 in East Ghouta, however, the source has received information of hundreds of people infected with Covid-19 virus in that area.
50. The number of people who are infected with Covid-19 is much higher than reported by the Syrian authorities and international organisations, including WHO. WHO's information about people infected with Covid-19 stems from the GoS and therefore it is inaccurate. The real number of Covid-19 cases is much higher.

#### Access to school

51. There are schools in all areas in Damascus and Rural Damascus that are providing education to children.

#### Access to food

52. All food items are available, although the prices are high. The government has implemented the Smart Card (*Bitaaqa Zakia*) which allows Syrians to buy some basic food items of a certain quantity at a relatively cheap price (almost sixty percent of its price on the market) at food markets (*Marakaz Suriya Liltijara*), owned by the GoS in all government-controlled areas. This includes food items such as tea, sugar and oil. Sometimes these food items are not available in the required quantity at some government food markets, why people will have to go to food markets in other areas to find the items.
53. Sometimes, people have to spend more money to access food at government food markets than buying the food in the market. As an example, the source mentioned the case of a person from Deraa who had to travel 15 kilometers to an area called Sanamein to get one basic food item with the Smart Card. With the money he spent on transport, he could have bought the food item at the higher price in the market.
54. Most Syrians have family members living outside Syria and they depend on the money transfers they receive from these family members. Syrian families who do not have family members outside Syria who can support them financially try to adapt to the current situation by avoiding expensive food items, as for example meat and chicken, and instead spend money on basic food items. Some families even have to limit their consumption of cheaper food items such as tea.

## Skype meeting with Suhail Al-Ghazi, non-resident fellow at Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 5 August 2020

About the source: The source is a Syrian researcher and activist from Damascus. In addition to being the non-resident fellow at Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, he is also a member of Verify-Syria fact-

checking platform. His research focuses is on the military and security situation of Syria as well as the socio-economic situation in government-held areas.

### *Security situation in Damascus and Rural Damascus*

55. Since 2018, when the GoS retook control of areas in Damascus and Rural Damascus from opposition groups, there have been no major security incidents (e.g. battles, military operations etc.) in the two governorates. There are two exceptions in this regard: the first one is occasional Israeli airstrikes against military targets in Damascus suburbs. Sometimes, the air defense missiles fired by the GoS forces have landed on civilian areas causing casualties. Another security issue is IED attacks against SAA and security officers in Damascus and Rural Damascus, which has escalated since September 2019. Most of these attacks have been claimed by an underground insurgent group who call themselves *Saraya Qasioun* (سرايا قاسيون)<sup>196</sup>, and some security officers and other GoS affiliated individuals have been killed by these attacks. The explosions caused by IEDs are not huge and do not always cause civilian casualties.
56. The GoS has continued detaining people in various areas in Damascus countryside, mostly in areas previously controlled by the opposition groups such as East Ghouta. The detainees are mainly previous fighters and persons connected to or assumed to have information about opposition groups in in the northern Syria. It is not clear how many persons have been arrested since January 2020 as the reported number varies between 100 and 250. This is due to the fact that it is difficult to document and verify the arrests. About 50 to 60 percent of those arrested have later been released. Among the arrested one finds many who entered the reconciliation agreements with the GoS when the GoS took control over the former opposition-controlled areas in Rural Damascus in 2018. Sometimes former opposition fighters were arrested because the local pro-government militias wanted to know where the opposition groups hid their weapons or antiquity catches in the area when they had control over it.
57. In areas in Rural Damascus, which the GoS recaptured before 2018, the security situation is normal and the number of arrests is much less than in East Ghouta. Most of the former opposition fighters in these areas joined the GoS forces upon the recapture. Overall, since January 2020, East Ghouta has witnessed more arrests and detentions compared to other areas in Rural Damascus.
58. In southwest and west of Damascus close to Quneitara governorate, there were recently arrests of members of an underground group who targeted officers in the SAA and other GoS officials.
59. Regarding the southern districts such as al-Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad, around 80 percent of buildings in these areas are severely destructed and thus not inhabitable. Currently, there are

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<sup>196</sup> In an interview conducted by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, Saraya Qasioun stated that its “work is concentrated in Damascus and all its countryside areas. Until now Saraya Qasioun has undertaken more than ten operations, some of which have been in the heart of the capital Damascus.” Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, Saraya Qasioun: Interview, 7 July 2020, [url](#). [accessed 12 July 2020]. *ed.*

not many civilians living there. In addition, there are still local pro-government militias who do not want people, who have connection to the opposition, to return to their homes in these areas. One of the reasons for the militias' resistance to the return of civilians is also that the militias want to confiscate people's properties in their absence. Most of the people, who fled al-Yarmouk during the conflict, are not allowed to return to the area again, and they will be held back at checkpoints at the entrances of these areas. There are about 200 civilians living in al-Yarmouk now, but they do not receive any services from the GoS. The situation in Hajar al-Aswad is similar to al-Yarmouk.

60. Also in other areas in Rural Damascus, particularly in the western and northern districts, there were cases of people whose properties were confiscated by the pro-government militias who had good connections with the local authorities. This happened mostly in the beginning when the GoS recaptured these areas from the opposition. But the source also know recent cases of families who returned from Lebanon to their hometowns in Zabadani, Jdeidet al-Fadel and Barza, to find out that their properties were confiscated by the militias. In some cases, the families had to relocate to another area because they could not get their properties back. Such cases happened to people who were considered to have connection to the opposition. Hezbollah, who controls most of these areas, did not want these persons to return
61. Civilians with no connection to opposition groups have not faced difficulties and resistance from Hezbollah or other pro-government militias with regard to returning to their home areas.
62. In areas such as East Ghouta, which are mainly controlled by the security services – and not the militias – people usually do not face the above-mentioned difficulties with regard to returning to their houses unless they have been part of the armed opposition. In such cases, they will encounter problems from the security services, i.e. risk of being detained at checkpoints etc.

### *Freedom of movement in Damascus and Rural Damascus*

63. It is possible to move from one area in Rural Damascus and rent or buy a house and settle down in another (for instance from Zabadani to Al-Tal). However, in order to move from one area to another, one has to register one's new residence with the local authorities in the area to which the person moves, and this requires obtaining a security clearance/approval. If the individual is denied the security approval, he will not be able to move to the new area. Without a security approval, he will not even be able to move his furniture through checkpoints. In most cases, people obtain security approvals, and when they are denied the approvals, it is mostly because the local security officer wants more bribes to approve the move.
64. The source knew a family who, four months ago (April 2020), wanted to move from Damascus City to Maa'raba in Al-Tal district in Rural Damascus due to high rents in Damascus City. However, they were denied security approval in Maa'raba when they wanted to register their new rented house. The family was not given a reason for the denial by the authorities, and instead they moved to Adra in Douma district in Rural Damascus where they obtained a

- security approval and rented a house. The source assumes that the family could obtain a security approval in the second area because the family did not have a security issue at all to be denied a security approval. The local security officers in the first area just wanted a bribe.
65. There are also some areas in Damascus City and Rural Damascus, which people are allowed to access but where it will be difficult to find a place to buy or rent because the majority of population is affiliated with the SAA, the security services or militias. People residing in such areas do not want people from outside to move in and settle down in their areas. As examples, the source mentioned Ish al-Warwar (an area north of Barza) in Damascus City and Dahiyat Al-Assad, which is close to Harasta in Rural Damascus.
66. With regard to access to East Ghouta, people can now move into the area, rent or buy a house and settle down there provided that they, like any other place in Syria, obtain a security approval from local authorities. The source has not seen reports of ordinary civilians (i.e. those not involved in armed opposition) generally not being able to obtain a security approval. There are, however, checkpoints in East Ghouta and anyone wanted by the GoS will be held back and arrested at the checkpoints.
67. Since the middle of 2019, most of the restrictions at checkpoints between East Ghouta and Damascus City have been lifted and it has thus become easier for people from East Ghouta to go to Damascus for different purposes (e.g. work, study, medical care etc.). Previously, people had to obtain a paper from the local security authorities in the areas in East Ghouta where they lived in order to pass through checkpoints, but this requirement is lifted now. In addition, the number of checkpoints between Damascus and East Ghouta has been reduced within the last year; now people pass two-three checkpoints to go from Damascus to East Ghouta whereas they previously had to go through five-six checkpoints.
68. After the GoS recaptured East Ghouta from the opposition in 2018, it divided East Ghouta into three sectors and restricted freedom of movement between these sectors by closing some of the roads connecting these areas. At the same time, they installed fixed and mobile checkpoints at the open roads checking anyone moving from one sector to another. Since mid-2019, however, the GoS has lifted most of the restrictions imposed at the checkpoints inside East Ghouta, which means that almost all roads between the sectors are open, and the checks at checkpoints are not as strict as before. However, individuals wanted by the GoS still risk being arrested at these checkpoints.
69. There are still checkpoints at the entrances to Damascus City. Main checkpoints are located at highways leading to the city. At these checkpoints, passengers' IDs and papers are checked against online databases, including wanted lists. Occasionally, there are queues at these checkpoints and people have to wait some time in order to enter the city.
70. The northern and western parts of Rural Damascus are not divided into sectors, and you do not find many checkpoints inside these areas. Checkpoints are mainly located at main roads leading to the area.

71. At checkpoints In Rural Damascus, the checkpoints personnel usually only check people's IDs. It is merely at checkpoints located at the main roads (which have access to computers and the internet) where people's names are checked against wanted lists of the intelligence services.
72. It is easier for women and children to pass through checkpoints than men, particularly men at the military service age, i.e.18-42. Sometimes the personnel at checkpoints demand money in order to let civilians to go through. If this happens, it is not easy to pass by checkpoints.
73. Women do usually not experience problems moving from one area to another in Rural Damascus.
74. There have been cases of women being arrested at checkpoints for the purpose of extortion by the security officer in charge or for security reasons, e.g. pressuring them to make a family member (e.g. a brother, husband or son) who is part of the armed opposition to turn himself in.
75. There have been cases of women being subjected to harassment by the checkpoint personnel posing them extra questions about, for instance, where they are heading, where they are coming from, what the purpose of their trip is etc. Prevalence of harassment of women depends on the checkpoint, the area and the mood of the officer in charge of the checkpoint. It is more prevalent in some areas of East Ghouta than other areas in Rural Damascus. The source has not seen reports of physical harassment of women at checkpoints.

### *Socio-economic situation*

#### **Access to basic services (water, electricity, sanitation)**

76. Areas such as al-Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad are the most destroyed areas in Damascus and Rural Damascus. The destruction in some parts of East Ghouta such as Harasta, Douma and Jobar is also huge, particularly Jobar. The GoS has taken some initiative to restore the infrastructure in these areas and some progress has been made in this regard. However, the progress made is far from enough to make these areas habitable in a way that people can have a normal life there. The shortage of basic services such as water and electricity still exists in these areas. In most of Rural Damascus, which is predominantly an agricultural area, people can manage their basis needs through agriculture and cattle raising. But in areas with restricted access such as al-Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad, the inhabitants do not have this possibility unless someone from outside of Syria helps them.
77. There is no area in Rural Damascus where the provision of services, i.e. water, electricity, sanitation, is completely absent. However, there are shortages almost everywhere to varying degrees. In most areas, there is four-five hours daily power cut, and people cannot use home generators anymore because of the shortage and the high price of fuel necessary to run the generators.
78. In many areas, there is also daily water cuts with only three-four hours water supply a day. In the areas where the water pipelines are damaged, the water is transported by the trucks coming around, and the water price is between 4.000 – 6.000 SYP a barrel. These areas are mostly in southern and western parts of Damascus as well as in East Ghouta. In remote areas

in Rural Damascus, which are far from the urban centers, there was shortage of water even before the conflict because the infrastructure there is underdeveloped.

79. Although the water and electricity network in Damascus City is not damaged due to the conflict to the same extent as in Rural Damascus, there are daily power cuts, particularly during the summer.
80. In some former opposition-controlled areas in Rural Damascus, which suffer most from lack of services, people consider lack of initiative by the GoS as a punishment for their support to the opposition. According to the source, this may be true because there is a difference between different areas with regard to provision of services. However, the source underlined that in recent years, lack of services has affected the whole country. In some areas, for instance in East Ghouta, the local authorities have asked people to collect money in order to restore water or electricity networks in their areas, but people in some areas are too poor to contribute.

#### Access to food

81. There is no shortage of food, neither in Rural Damascus nor in other areas of the country. However, the food prices are high and many people can hardly afford buying the items necessary to cover their basic needs. The GoS gives subsidies for bread, oil, rice, tea and sugar provided through its own trade centers, i.e. small supermarkets, located in different areas. Each family is provided with a Smart Card with which they can buy these items at relatively low prices. The amount of food allocated to each family depends on the size of the family. A family can for instance buy one kilogram of sugar and one kilogram of rice per family member per month when using the Smart Card.
82. In remote areas in Rural Damascus, people had to go to other areas to buy basic food items even before the conflict. Nowadays, when food prices are high and people are dependent on buying the basic food items at GoS trade centers, they face difficulties in accessing basic food items due to transportation problems (e.g. lack of car or fuel, unsecure road in the night).
83. Regarding access to bread, there are bakeries in many areas, and in the areas, where bakeries have been destructed because of the conflict, the local administration has appointed specific people to transport bread to these areas. People can also buy bread by using their Smart Cards mentioned above.

#### Access to healthcare services

84. There are basic healthcare services in most areas of Rural Damascus and each area has its own healthcare clinic providing most basic services. However, these clinics are often crowded and poorly equipped. There are also some hospitals in Rural Damascus, but they are crowded and underdeveloped.
85. In general, in urban areas close to Damascus City such as Douma or Harasta, the facilities are better than areas further away from the city. People have to go to Damascus City to receive most secondary or tertiary healthcare services such as regular checkup or operations.

86. Before 2019, people had to obtain a paper from the local security office in their area in order to go to pass checkpoints and go to a hospital in Damascus, but this restriction was lifted in 2019. However, if a person is wanted by the authorities, as for instance draft evaders, it will be difficult for him to go to Damascus for medical care due to the checkpoints and the risk of being detained.
87. Regarding the healthcare situation in remote areas, the healthcare services were not developed in these areas even before the conflict. However, whilst there were at least doctors and basic healthcare clinics in these areas before the conflict, people now have to drive long distances (e.g. 30 min. drive or even more) to come to a doctor, a clinic or a pharmacy. Considering the fact that people are often poor in these areas (that they cannot afford having a car, and it is not secure to drive on unrepaired roads in these areas in the night) their access to healthcare is more limited compared to other areas and compared to before the conflict.
88. Healthcare services are almost free and a vast majority of people can afford it. Medicine provided through the public clinics is subsidised and much cheaper than medicine bought at pharmacies.

#### Access to school

89. All children have access to school in Rural Damascus, and no child is missing the possibility to get basic education due to lack of schools. However, schools are overcrowded and suffer from shortages, and in remote areas, children have to go long distances (e.g. four-five km. or more) to reach to school. The international organisations have contributed to repairing schools, and the GoS has also helped with this, though to a lesser extent.

## Skype meeting with Jusoor, 25 August 2020

About the source: On the website of Jusoor for Studies, one reads: Jusoor is *"an independent institution specializing in information management and conducting studies and research related to the Syrian political and social affairs in particular and the Middle East region in general. [Jusoor] aims to build bridges with officials and decision makers in various state fields and developing sectors to help them make balanced decisions related to regional issues by providing them with accurate, detailed and professional data and reports."*<sup>197</sup>

### *Security situation in Damascus and Rural Damascus*

90. There have been a few minor explosions in Damascus and Rural Damascus since January 2020. For example there has been an explosion in Mashrou Dummar in Damascus in January 2020 that targeted a military personnel/officer. An underground cell called *"Saraya Qasioun"* announced its responsibility for the explosion. However, the source believes that it is most likely an attack carried out by individuals and not a cell as there is evidence that the intelligence services have eliminated all cells in Damascus and Rural Damascus and they have the ability to breakthrough any cell.

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<sup>197</sup> Jusoor: [url](#)

91. In general, security incidents are almost unlikely on the road between Damascus and Damascus Airport. The latest incidents on this road took place at the beginning of 2015. The Syrian Air Force Intelligence and Iranian forces control the checkpoints and the villages at the road between Damascus and Damascus International Airport. The road to the airport is used by civilians and it is the only way to reach the airport as all the side-roads are closed.

### *Freedom of movement in Damascus and Rif Damascus*

92. There are checkpoints at the entrances to Damascus governorate. There are also checkpoints at all side-roads near the entrances.
93. There are seven bridges on the road between Damascus and Damascus Airport. Near each bridge there is a fixed checkpoint. In addition, there is a big fixed checkpoint at the Institute of Electrical and Mechanical Engineering in Damascus in the beginning of the road. Sometimes mobile checkpoints are placed at some of the side roads.
94. On a daily basis, most people from Rural Damascus go to Damascus for work (because job opportunities are scarce in Rural Damascus), education (especially university students) or medical treatment. When a security incident occurs, access to Damascus is restricted for one or two days.
95. In areas in Rural Damascus that have come under the control of the GoS without a reconciliation agreement, there are checkpoints only at entrances to cities and on the main roads.
96. In the areas that signed reconciliation agreements with the GoS, as areas in East Ghouta, the security grip is more firm and there are checkpoints on all roads of these areas. These checkpoints are operated by between 3 to 20 security officers depending on the road in question. Most of these checkpoints are fixed. However, in these areas, it is usually only few civilians whose ID-cards are checked at the checkpoints located at entrances to the cities, and the rest can pass by these checkpoints without being individually checked. However, when a security issue occurs, the ID-cards of all civilians who pass the checkpoints are checked.
97. Before mid-2019, people who, for instance, wanted to go from Damascus City to Rural Damascus, were required to leave their ID-cards at checkpoints until they came back to the city and retrieved their cards. In this way, the authorities could control the movement to the city. In addition, people were required to obtain a security approval in order to move from Rural Damascus to Damascus. Since mid-2019, people from Rural Damascus and Damascus are no longer required to leave their ID-cards at checkpoints or obtain a security approval in order to move between two governorates.
98. When ID-cards are checked at checkpoints in reconciled areas, as for example East Ghouta, people's names are checked against wanted lists. Each intelligence service has its own list of wanted people, including men wanted for military service.
99. Sometimes, people who are in doubt whether their names are on wanted lists pay to mediators, who have connections with employees in the different intelligence services, in order to have their names checked against wanted lists of the intelligence services.

100. At major checkpoints, such as the one at Institute of Electrical and Mechanical Engineering, all intelligence services are likely to be in control at the same checkpoint. A person will therefore be checked against the wanted lists of different services.
101. People who are relatives to and have the same family names as well-known opposition leaders or deserters, such as Aloush, al-Buwaydany and Khebiye and others from Douma, face harassment at some checkpoints, i.e. a person might be delayed at the checkpoint for hours, risk being insulted or beaten up, or arrested for interrogation.
102. Access of civilians to Jobar and al-Yarmouk is highly limited by the GoS because of the severe damages to the areas. Access to Harran al-Awamiyid, which is an area near Damascus Airport that the GoS re-controlled in 2014, is not allowed even for residents who originally lived in the area.
103. Also, access to an area in East Ghouta called Abbadeh is prevented because most of its residents were affiliated with IS or Nusra before the GoS regained control of the area in 2018. Only pro-government residents, including Baathists and people who fought together with the SAA from those areas, have been allowed to return to their houses in these areas.
104. Khalf al-Bassateen in al-Razi, which is located in Darayya city at the border with Mazzeh in Damascus, is a military area. Locals who have properties in the area have not been permitted to enter it. People are allowed to return to other areas in Darayya city. However, not many people have returned as nearly 80% of the houses in the area are destroyed and most people have not been given the permission to restore their houses. Only pro-government residents, including Baathists and people who fought with the SAA, have been allowed to return to their houses in these areas.
105. Darayya has been one of the first areas that protested and fought against the GoS. Therefore, in the beginning of the conflict IDPs from this area were subjected to discrimination in other government-controlled areas. Some people were also arrested and some were killed. For this reason, most people from Darayya, who left Syria, are afraid of returning to Syria, because they fear that they will face issues solely because they are from Darayya.
106. People who are from areas previously controlled by IS or other Jihadist groups, have not been suspected by the GoS of affiliation with IS or other Jihadist groups when returning to their home areas; they are treated in the same way as people from other former opposition-controlled areas. These people have been allowed to return to their areas unless they have been wanted by the GoS.
107. Security approvals are required by the GoS for a number of purposes. For example, people, who want to sell or rebuild their houses, conduct reconstruction work or open a store, are required to obtain a security approval beforehand. People who are regarded as pro-government obtain security approvals quickly. People who are in family (first and second degree) with persons, who are wanted in cases related to terrorism, will face difficulties in getting a security approval to rebuild or sell a house that is owned by their wanted relative.

108. The security grip is most firm in Arbin, Saqba and Douma in Rural Damascus. Therefore the security forces conduct thorough security checks at checkpoints in these areas.
109. There are many people who move from one area in Rural Damascus to another. For example, many people from East Ghouta have rented houses and resided in areas like al-Tal, Sahnaya, Jdeidet al-Wadi and Adra. Some people who found their houses destroyed in East Ghouta, also moved to other places in East Ghouta.
110. Since 2012, everyone who wants to move to and settle down in an area in Damascus or Rural Damascus is required a security approval. Both the landlord/seller and the tenant/buyer of the house are required to go to the nearest security branch or police station to make an *identification report* (محضر تعريف [mahdar ta'rif]). When their names have been checked against wanted lists, they will both get security approvals.
111. The landlord/seller and the tenant/buyer will be prosecuted if they conclude a rent or sell agreement without obtaining security approvals.
112. Usually, people who leave Damascus to settle down in Rural Damascus because of the high rents in the City are originally from Rural Damascus.
113. There is no difference between the treatment of women and men at checkpoints in Damascus and Rural Damascus. Occasionally, harassment of women may occur, however this is rare.

### *Socio-economic situation*

#### **Access to basic services (water, electricity, sanitation)**

114. Basic services are available in almost all areas in Damascus and not in all areas in Rural Damascus that are inhabited.
115. The main water pipelines have not been repaired in all areas in Rural Damascus. In some areas in Rural Damascus, people buy water from trucks which transport water to the areas. However, in most areas in Rural Damascus water is available because of the many wells in the governorate.
116. In average, electricity is only available two hours every eight hours. Therefore, most people in Damascus and Rural Damascus depend on private power generators, which many have in their homes.

#### **Access to healthcare services**

117. The public healthcare centers in most areas in Rural Damascus are in a very bad condition and there are shortages of medical staff. Specialised public medical treatment for children, women and those with chronic diseases are rarely available. Therefore people either seek public medical treatment in Damascus City where the healthcare centers are relatively better or they go to private doctors and hospitals.
118. Most medication is not available in the pharmacies in Rural Damascus. Most people go to Damascus in order to buy their medication. However, some medication is sometimes not available even in the pharmacies in Damascus.

119. Since the implementation of the Caesar sanctions and the fall of the Syrian pound, the GoS has forced the Syrian medicine companies to sell medication at prices lower than the production costs. Some companies started producing low-quality medication with less efficiency by using less active ingredients in the medication, whereas other companies closed completely. Therefore most medication in Syria today is either not efficient or not available.
120. Covid-19 is widespread in Syria but the GoS hides the real number of people who are infected with the virus to avoid the anger of citizens against it.

#### Access to school

121. Schools are available in almost all areas in Damascus and Rural Damascus. The quality of education varies from school to school and there is a shortage of teachers. Children, who live in areas where schools are destroyed, go to schools in neighboring areas.

#### Access to food

122. Basic food items are available in Rural Damascus and Damascus, but they are very expensive. People in both governorates use the Smart Card to buy their basic food items at a relatively cheap price. However, the amount of basic food items that can be bought with Smart Cards is not sufficient to feed people. Also, to buy food items with the Smart Card, one has to stand in long queues every day, and sometimes the items are sold out.
123. Most people in Syria have relatives who live outside Syria and they depend on money transfers from their relatives. However, at the end of 2019, the GoS launched a massive campaign against money transfers from outside Syria; many people were threatened with prosecution on terrorism-related charges for receiving foreign remittances, and many money transfer companies were closed. Since the beginning of 2020, it has been extremely difficult to transfer money to the government-controlled areas, regardless of how small the amount may be.

### Skype meeting with Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 19 August 2020

About the source: Omran Center for Strategic Studies was established in November 2013 in Istanbul, Turkey. It is a research institution focusing on political affairs, local administration, and development sectors in Syria. It assesses complex set of data and publishes studies and policy briefs addressing relevant actors and institutions working on Syrian affairs.<sup>198</sup>

#### *Security situation in Damascus and Rural Damascus*

124. In general, security incidents in Damascus and Rural Damascus have remarkably decreased. The source has conducted thorough research on Qalamoun, Douma and al-Tal.
125. Besides a growing number of kidnappings of civilians for ransom, there have been incidents of targeted assassinations (by sniper) of individuals affiliated with Syrian security forces and informants of GoS, especially in Douma and Qalamoun. There is no confirmed information on who is behind the incidents.

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<sup>198</sup> Omran Sutdies, *About us*, [url](#)

126. There has not been any security incident on the road between Damascus and Damascus International Airport in 2020.

### *Freedom of movement in Damascus and Rural Damascus*

127. A huge number of residents in Rural Damascus go to Damascus on a daily basis for work, education and medical treatment. This was also the case before the conflict but due to the current economic crisis in Syria and the impact of the conflict on Rural Damascus, the number of residents who travel to Damascus has further increased.

128. There are checkpoints on the road between Damascus and Damascus International Airport and on the roads that connect Damascus with the Lebanese border.

129. There is a checkpoint close to the airport where the Fourth Division, Brigade 313, which is controlled by Iranian forces, is operating. At checkpoints controlled by Iranian forces, thorough ID-checks, against the wanted lists of the four security services, are conducted. The Iranian forces have access to the security information of all Syrian intelligence services and non-governmental services such as Hezbollah. One of the reasons why civilians would prefer to travel through the Lebanese land border instead of using the airport is to avoid this kind of checkpoints.

130. At all checkpoints the security personnel of the GoS is looking for people on wanted list. This mainly includes men wanted for the obligatory or reserve military service, political activists and people who have criminal charges against them. Also, people working in humanitarian or civil society organisations have been arrested and released several times.

131. Anyone who wants to access or exit Douma needs permission and are required to leave his/her ID-card at the checkpoint before entering or exiting the area.

132. Citizens who left Douma to Qalamoun and Homs during the siege did not return to the city as the area is severely damaged and basic services are scarce. The source estimates that the number of residents in Douma today is 200 to 250,000.

133. Everyone who wants to move from one area to another in the government-controlled areas will need a security approval from the authorities in the area he wants to move to. For example, a person from one area in Rural Damascus who wants to move to another area in Rural Damascus or Damascus will need to go to the Mukhtar in the area he wants to move to and apply for an approval. This application will go from the Mukhtar to the intelligence branch responsible for area, who decides whether to give a security approval.

134. There is no difference between East Ghouta and the rest of Rural Damascus with regard to possibility to move to other areas. People from East Ghouta who want to move to a location outside the area have to go through the same procedure as people from all other places in the government-controlled areas.

135. 90% of Darayya is closed. Only few of the original residents of Darayya have returned to settle down in the area. These are the residents who left the area in the beginning of the

Syrian conflict. All citizens who lived in Darayya under the siege were forced by the GoS to leave the area and go to opposition-controlled areas in Northern Syria.

136. Some of the residents who left Darayya before the siege and went back after the GoS retook control over Darayya were not given security approvals to rebuild their houses.
137. The Iranians are interested in the area in Darayya where the memorial Sukayna lies. They do not want other than pro-Iranians to reside there.
138. From the beginning of 2020 the GoS has been selling properties of people from the opposition, who went to Idlib, to investors.

## Information provided by the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) via email, 13 August and 4, 10 and 17 September 2020

About the source: SNHR was founded in June 2011 and works with documenting human rights violations in Syria and defending human rights of Syrians at the international level. It publishes different kinds of documentation reports via different media outlets, such as its website, traditional and new media outlets, printouts, seminars, meetings and through participating in United Nation's Human rights Council's sessions sources, also first-hand sources such as survivors and eyewitnesses.

### *Security situation in Damascus and Rural Damascus*

139. Syrian regime forces have continued carrying out arbitrary arrests intensifying in 2020. The SNHR's team has documented at least 327 arrests in Rural Damascus governorate and Damascus City between January and September 2020; these arrests were concentrated mainly in the cities and towns of Douma, Arbeen and Harasta in Rural Damascus governorate. Following groups are particularly targeted:

- Residents of areas who made settlements of their security situation and who did not leave the areas via convoys for opposition-controlled areas in mainly northwest Syria when the Syrian regime forces took control over their area. This group includes those who worked within humanitarian organizations and local councils, medical personnel, former members of the opposition factions, and civilians.
- Those who were internally displaced via convoys to opposition-controlled areas in mainly northwest Syria , and who then decided to return due to the military situation or their poor economic and social conditions in their places of displacement, who made settlements of their security situation through local reconciliation committees prior to their return.
- Refugees returning to Syria directly through Damascus Airport or returning from Lebanon either via the official crossings or unofficially through smuggling routes. The total number of arrests of such individuals is 38. Those returning from Lebanon had made settlements of their security situation through local reconciliation committees or through mediators with the Syrian embassy in Lebanon.
- Individuals with ties to the opposition.
- Those wanted for military conscription.

- Individuals with connections to people in areas outside Syrian regime control
  - Media workers, writers and dramatists who expressed their opinions and criticised the living and economic conditions via social media.
  - 56 arrests of individuals, including 13 women and four children, while they were travelling between the villages and towns of Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates.
140. Of the aforementioned 327 record of arrests, about 250 detainees have been forcibly disappeared, i.e. being unable to communicate with the outside world; they cannot be assigned a lawyer, no one knows what the charges are against them, and SNHR does not know which branch of the regime's security forces arrested them. It is difficult to distinguish between those who have been arrested for military service or for other reasons, as the Syrian regime conducts mass raids and arrests in these areas without discrimination, then searches these individuals' records, discovering that some of those detained are wanted for military service or other reasons, and in most cases the two reasons converge. The 13 cases of women arrested at checkpoints mentioned above are among those 250 individuals who have been forcibly disappeared.
141. There is no presence of any opposition armed group or Islamist organization in Damascus City or Rural Damascus, with all areas of Damascus being under the control of Syrian regime forces.
142. The road is not secure due to nearly seven checkpoints being spread out along the road connecting Damascus International Airport to Damascus City, with these checkpoints being affiliated mainly with the Republican Guard forces, the Fourth Division, and the Military Intelligence Division. The personnel at these checkpoints conduct checks on civilians while they are passing through; since the area is under the control of Syrian Regime forces and there is no presence of any non-regime factions or other armed group, the main goal of the checkpoints is to detain civilians exclusively and expose them to arrest for various reasons. At least 19 of the above-mentioned 327 arrests documented by SNHR in the period January-September 2020 are individuals arrested at Damascus Airport or at checkpoints located on the Airport road. Civilians fear using the road because of the risk of being arrested at checkpoints.

### *Freedom of movement in Damascus City and Rural Damascus*

143. The checkpoints are mainly located at the entrances to Rural Damascus governorate and to towns there and on roads leading to the International Road (Damascus Highway- al Mutahaleq). The checkpoint personnel check of those passing through possess cards showing their settlement status and documents for their national service and conscription status (such as the military service book, any military service-deferral documents, vacations and other relevant documentation). In general, there is a high level of scrutiny of all individuals wishing to enter or leave Rural Damascus governorate. Citizens' ability to move freely and travel between areas fluctuates according to the whims of checkpoint personnel. Some people can move and travel freely, while others are prevented or arrested for many reasons, either because they are among those who settled their situation or because they belong to families

of prominent political activists such as "Ziadeh" family in Damascus (because of the known activist Radwan Ziadeh) or because of being friends of such profiled activists or for other reasons.

144. The most notable checkpoints stationed in Damascus suburbs, which in most cases carry out checks and inspections of passers-by, are as follows:

- Several checkpoints are found along Al Mutahaleq al Janoubi (the main bridge) which is a vital road passing from the south to the north of Damascus City, linking Damascus suburbs with the International Road. A total of 15 military checkpoints can be found along this thoroughfare.
- A checkpoint at the western entrance to Douma city
- Al Akhdar checkpoint or al Kayyas which is affiliated with the Fourth Division, located at the entrance to al Mutahaleq al Janoubi, leading to Ein Tarma town
- Zamalka town's checkpoint, at the western entrance to Zamalka town near al Mutahaleq al Janoubi
- Abbaret al Qaboun checkpoint, located in the southeastern part of al Qaboun neighborhood near al Mutahaleq al Janoubi
- Abbaret al Qaboun checkpoint, located in the southeastern part of al Qaboun neighborhood near al Mutahaleq al Janoubi
- The checkpoint at the western entrance to al Qaboun neighborhood for those coming from al Mutahaleq al Janoubi
- Adra Central Prison's checkpoint
- The checkpoint at the 'Mdayyea Jmalou' crossing linking the towns of Hamouriya, Beit Sawa and Arbeen, which is the biggest checkpoint in the central sector in al Ghouta in Damascus suburbs

145. There is no complete prevention of return of people to the areas of Rural Damascus governorate. The prevention is limited only to a specific group of people and to specific areas, such as areas where neighbourhoods and homes were completely destroyed. Examples of such areas are the towns of Douma, Harasta, Shefouniya and Arbeen, with return to these areas only partially allowed and limited to those who were able to return after obtaining security permission and repair their houses at their own expense.

146. In areas where homes were destroyed and/or confiscated by Syrian Regime forces, security permission is required for entry. Sometimes, checkpoints personnel prevent the return of civilians in order to blackmail them and obtain sums of money in exchange for their entry.

147. A person can obtain security permission by submitting a request to the security branch in the area, and if the security branch agree, the person can return to his/her home. When processing the request, the person's records are checked to determine if he/she is wanted or

not, if his/her house was destroyed or can be repaired, or if it was confiscated; many of the homes in these areas were confiscated, with their owners forbidden from returning to them.

148. There are areas in Damascus City to which access is restricted by the authorities. The access is denied to] Jobar, al-Qaboun, al-Yarmouk Camp, Hajar al-Aswad, and al-Qadam while al-Qalamoun can be accessed.
149. Access to the neighbourhoods of Jobar and al-Yarmouk is banned due to massive destruction there, with personnel at the checkpoints only allowing vehicles belonging to regime-affiliated militia leaders to return for looting and theft operations. This information is based on what SNHR has been told by the people and former residents who belong to these areas, and who were not able to gain access to their areas. Additionally, the regime will reorganize the destroyed area and rebuild it in accordance with new organizational plans. According to the new organizational plans, only residents who stayed in areas under regime control and who are able to prove their ownership will be able to obtain new homes there in future. However, this matter will take many years.
150. There are military checkpoints at all entrances to Damascus City and roads leading to it. This check is carried out for all buses and cars carrying civilians. The personnel ask drivers and passengers for their identification cards. The check is more thorough if the individual is from an area where settlement agreements are imposed or if he is from an anti-Syrian regime family or has family members known to be popular uprising activists or members of factions of the armed opposition. Usually, the personnel at the checkpoints ask for identification cards and military conscription documents, and they are looking for those who are wanted for military service or who have agreed on a security settlement or who are wanted by the security branches.
151. Checks of women at checkpoints are carried out in the same way as men and sometimes under high level orders to put pressure on their relatives who are wanted by the security branches.

### *Socio-economic situation*

152. There is no actual reconstruction process, as state resources are being used for military operations, hunting down those calling for political change and suppressing any criticism of the regime. What is happening is attempts by the regime to seize control of land and property by imposing arbitrary laws that violate the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the phase of forced reorganization in al-Yarmouk Camp and the neighbourhoods of al-Qadam, Hajar al-Aswad and Jobar in Damascus City is still going on. In Rural Damascus governorate, the Syrian regime has not yet specified the areas it wants to remodel rather than reconstruct.
153. Most areas of Rural Damascus that were outside the control of the Syrian regime forces were affected by the destruction to varying degrees, with the level of destruction depending on the magnitude of the military operations that they were subjected to until the Syrian regime seized control of them. Cities and towns such as Darayya, then al Mlaiha, Douma, Harasta Arbeen, Madyara, Ein Tarma, Zamalka and Hamouriya are the worst affected areas while

areas such as Qalamoun areas and the villages of Wadi Barada, Madaya, Zabadani and Baqqin are the least affected compared to the aforementioned ones.

154. No area in Rural Damascus is completely empty of residents, as the financial conditions force some residents to return and live in their destroyed homes. The cities of Darayya and al-Mlaiha are the worst affected, with most residents of these prevented from returning to their homes. There is no return to the areas or neighborhoods surrounding Darayya. The Darayya city and its environs are almost completely lacking essential amenities required to maintain life (electricity, water, sanitation networks, hospitals, schools, etc.). The Syrian regime has not yet undertaken any rehabilitation operations and not provided the necessary services to make the areas habitable after seizing control of them. Meanwhile, millions of dollars are spent on the expenses and salaries of the security services which practice arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance and torture, and millions more dollars on the costs of the continuous military build-up surrounding the Idlib region.

#### Access to electricity, sanitation and water in Rural Damascus

155. The services in Syria are largely neglected by the Syrian regime. The areas in Rural Damascus that were subjected to indiscriminate bombing operations by Syrian Regime forces before the regime tightened control over them in the summer of 2018 are the worst affected. SNHR has documented dozens of attacks on infrastructure, such as water tanks and water networks during the military operation in these areas before the regime forces took control over them. In general, the real service situation in all areas of Rural Damascus is the same with regard to services of electricity, water and sanitation. While no area is completely deprived of these services, they are subject to severe rationing of electricity provided by the public network, and some areas depend on electrical transformers. In regard to water, although it is available, some areas are deprived of the public water network and dependent on water wells. We have not witnessed any infrastructure rehabilitation since the Syrian regime took control of these areas.

#### Access to Food

156. There is no area in Damascus suburbs that does not receive food, however the food is provided at high prices that exceed the vast majority of citizens' purchasing power, so citizens resort to securing their basic needs only such as bread, legumes and vegetables. Meanwhile, some of the population depend on agriculture and on raising domestic livestock on their lands to secure their supplies despite the high cost of this.

#### Access to basic health care services

157. Most areas lack healthcare facilities as a result of the military campaigns carried out by Syrian regime forces and their allies, which resulted in massive damage to medical facilities, along with emigration of medical personnel. There are some centers providing treatment for only slight and moderate cases, and citizens must travel to Damascus City to secure treatment for serious cases.
158. People with chronic diseases suffer from high medicine prices and sometimes from difficulty in securing medicine. In its military campaigns, the Syrian regime has deliberately targeted vital facilities, in particular medical facilities, in order to spread terror among civilians and

force them to surrender. When the regime tightens its control over these areas, these facilities, like others, do not receive the attention required to rehabilitate them.

159. The government still, very rarely, subsidizes some medicines, tests and medical services at low prices, but even in these cases there is discrimination with members of the regime security forces and army and their families receiving preferential treatment in obtaining these services, with priority given to injured army and security personnel over injured and sick ordinary citizens.

160. In the context of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, people are afraid to go to hospitals for fear of being quarantined in unsanitary conditions, with a lack of healthcare, and instead depend on securing treatment outside hospitals.

#### Access to school

161. Although most of the areas in Rural Damascus, which were free of the control of Syrian regime forces, are still suffering from the impact of regime military operations on educational facilities, most of them have not interrupted the educational process. People from areas that lack schools providing all stages of education resort to finding schools in neighbouring areas. Most of the school buildings that were bombed by the Syrian regime are those, which were established by it, with the regime having prior knowledge of their locations, but its barbaric campaigns against those areas, particularly the last ones, were aimed at spreading terror among civilians and forcing them to accept settlement agreements that would displace them to other areas. The Syrian regime is not interested in conducting any school restoration and providing adequate teaching staff or educational services.

## Skype meeting with an international humanitarian organization in Syria, 25 August 2020

### *Security situation*

162. The source has not heard of security incidents taking place in al-Yarmouk Camp which is related to the fact that only a few families are living there.

163. In Palestinian refugee camps in Rural Damascus<sup>199</sup>, the situation is generally calm and Palestinian refugees have returned to some of these camps. Palestinian refugees from al-Yarmouk remain displaced and some families are residing in camps in Rural Damascus. UNRWA is providing services to these internally displaced Palestinian refugees.

164. There are rumors about looting taking place in al-Yarmouk area; however, since no organisation has access to the camp and the access of civilians to the area is highly restricted, it is not possible to comment on the information.

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<sup>199</sup> There are 12 Palestine refugee camps in Syria: nine official and three unofficial camps. There are five camps in Rural Damascus and only al-Yarmouk (unofficial camp) is located in Damascus. Apart from al-Yarmouk unofficial camp located in Damascus governorate, other Palestinian refugee camps are located in Rural Damascus, Dera'a, Aleppo, Hama, Latakia and Homs.

165. There are still concerns about ERW (explosive remnants of war) in al-Yarmouk although some rubble removal from the main streets has taken place. The few families that have returned and people who intend to return risk being subjected to explosion of ERWs.

#### Access to al-Yarmouk

166. The civilians' access to al-Yarmouk is highly restricted and return of civilians to al-Yarmouk has been very limited. In order to access the area, civilians have to have their civil documentation in order and obtain specific security approval.

167. People can occasionally get permission to visit the area to check on their property but they have to enter and exit on the same day. Very few families have been able to return permanently and the lack of infrastructure remains a huge challenge for those who return.

#### Freedom of movement

168. There are checkpoints in various locations in Rural Damascus, including checkpoints that one has to go through in order to access the Palestinian refugee camps in Rural Damascus, including Sbeineh Camp, Khan Danoun, Jaramana, Qabr Essit Camp, and around Khan al-Shieh.

169. Palestinian refugees are also checked at checkpoints in the same way as Syrians, and they may likewise risk being arrested if they are wanted by the GoS, e.g. for military service. The type of check conducted at checkpoints varies from one location to another; whilst at some checkpoints they just check the car, they also check the passenger's documentation at others. Many Palestinian refugees have lost their civil documentation and thus may face challenges regarding freedom of movement.

170. In Yalda, where a large number of Palestinian refugees from al-Yarmouk are currently residing, there are restrictions on freedom of movement.

171. Palestinian refugees are allowed by the GoS to reside in other places than in the Palestinian refugee camps. However, residing in camps makes it easier for Palestinian refugees to access UNRWA education, health services, social services, community centres etc., as most of UNRWA's services are located nearby or inside camps. Additionally, the rent is sometimes cheaper inside the camps compared to house rents outside.

172. Currently an estimated 40% of Palestinian refugees in Syria remain displaced within Syria, with two-thirds of Palestinian refugees displaced at least once since the beginning of the conflict.

173. Many former al-Yarmouk residents (Palestinian refugees and Syrians) are IDPs today. They are scattered around Syria and live in other camps and gatherings, including Yalda. Also, a large number has gone to Lebanon, Jordan or other countries.

#### *Socio-economic situation*

174. Al-Yarmouk is largely destroyed and the level of destruction is quite extensive. The infrastructure is severely damaged, including UNRWA's installations. There is thus no operational infrastructure in the al-Yarmouk Camp.

175. The authorities announced a re-organisation plan for al-Yarmouk in June 2020, and former residents had about 30 days to submit petitions or objections to the plan. In the plan, al-Yarmouk is divided into three different areas. The plan is not moving ahead yet as many petitions and objections have been submitted, which the authorities are still looking into.
176. The land-ownership situation in al-Yarmouk is complicated and most Palestinian refugees were residing on GAPAR-owned land in the camp. On GAPAR-land there is no ownership of property for Palestinian refugees, only right of usage. In the current re-organisation plan, al-Yarmouk Camp is divided in three areas depending on the level of destruction. It is still unclear what is planned for each area. People are waiting for further clarifications from the government, including what will happen with the many petitions submitted.
177. Displaced Palestinian refugees who have lost their documentation face difficulties with regard to proving their ownership of property in all areas across Syria. Generally, all communities across Syria report that housing, land and property issues are a primary protection concern. This also includes challenges such as the lack of required documentation and disputed ownership, according to the Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO).
178. The Palestine refugee camps in Rural Damascus are accessible and largely operational. The camp in Sbeineh was to some extent affected by the conflict, but it has been possible to restore clinics, schools, sewage and the water network, and to make the camp operational. The same happened in Khan al-Shieh and Qabr Essit Palestinian refugee camps in Rural Damascus.
179. The Covid-19 and the current economic crisis have had a considerable negative impact on lives of many people in Damascus and Rural Damascus with regard to access to employment and to various services available.

#### Access to electricity and water

180. There are regular electricity and water cuts in Damascus and Rural Damascus, for example three hours on and three hours off. The water cuts occur especially during summer.
181. In a situation where the Covid-19 pandemic is becoming more and more prevalent and concerning in Syria, especially within Damascus and Rural Damascus, access to water and basic infrastructure, including health facilities, remains of particular concern.

#### Access to healthcare services inside and outside the camps

182. Palestinian refugees have access to UNRWA healthcare facilities throughout the country. These facilities are found inside as well as outside the camps. Currently, specific measures are put in place due to the COVID-19, e.g. there is triage system, an appointment system to avoid overcrowding in the UNRWA healthcare facilities, and physical distancing and other preventative measures are put into place.
183. Palestinian refugees can be referred by UNRWA to secondary and tertiary healthcare, i.e. hospitals. Currently, availability of beds within hospitals is, however, limited due to Covid-19. UNRWA subsidises access to secondary or tertiary healthcare in Syria; it either refers individuals to hospitals where it covers the treatment or subsidizes the cost. UNRWA has

contact with around 20 hospitals around Syria for referral of Palestinian refugees to secondary and tertiary healthcare services.

#### Access to food

184. Food prices have increased a lot and as of June 2020 tripled in the last eight months, according to WFP.<sup>200</sup> Whereas education previously used to be one of the first priorities for Palestinian refugees in Syria, it is gradually becoming less of a priority due to the deteriorating socio-economic conditions. Instead, food security and basic needs have become the first priority for Palestinian refugees as well as for Syrians.
185. To the source's understanding, Palestinian refugees have, like Syrians, access to Smart Cards, with which they can buy basic food items at low prices. This is because Palestinian refugees in Syria are to a large extent treated in the same way as Syrians by the GoS. However, only those registered with GAPAR are provided with the card.

#### Access to school

186. UNRWA provides education services to Palestinian refugee students from grade 1 to 9. There are 103 UNRWA-managed schools around Syria, both inside and outside the camps, most of which are around Rural Damascus and Damascus. Some of the schools are hosted in government buildings and operating in second shift to make up for UNRWA schools that were damaged or destroyed during the conflict. There are 50,000 Palestine refugee students in those schools from grade 1 to 9. After 9<sup>th</sup> grade, these students move to public schools for grade 10, 11 and 12.
187. In the areas where Palestinian refugees have been displaced, UNRWA has tried to open temporary schools. For example, schools for Palestinian refugee children who were displaced from al-Yarmouk Camp were opened in Yalda.

## Skype meeting with Rami Abdurrahman, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), 18 August 2020

About the source: SOHR was founded in May 2006. From its base in UK, it documents human rights situation in Syria. Based on information collected from 236 sources throughout Syria, SOHR reports on human rights violations committed by the Syrian government as well as the opposition groups.

### *Security situation in Damascus and Rural Damascus*

188. The GoS has conducted a lot of arrests, especially of men in the military service age, in both governorates, but since the spread of Covid-19 this year, the number of arrests has decreased.
189. Wadi Barada, western Qalamoun and Sayida Zeinab are controlled by Hezbollah and its allied. Russia is working towards ending Hezbollah's control in Rural Damascus to install its own forces to support the GoS.

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<sup>200</sup> The source referred to World Food Program (WFP), *Syria Situation Report #6*, June 2020, [url](#)

190. People who stayed after the reconciliation agreements in summer of 2018 and people who returned, have not been involved in any armed attacks against the GoS. This is reason why the security situation is almost stable in all the areas of East Ghouta.
191. Russian forces control East Ghouta and are located everywhere in the area. The Syrian forces still arrest men in military service age in the area. When civilians inform the Russian police about any arrest conducted by the Syrian forces, the Russian police interfere and get the arrested released. However, there are cases where the Syrian forces do not inform the Russians about an arrest and the Russians thus do not succeed in releasing the arrested person.
192. Number of kidnappings, especially of children, has lately increased in both Damascus and East Ghouta. Most kidnappings are conducted by individuals demanding ransom in exchange for releasing the kidnapped.
193. Armed attacks against the GoS mainly take place in Qudsaya at night and in south of Damascus.
194. The road between Damascus and the Damascus Airport is safe. There are two fixed and ten mobile checkpoints at the road. Most of them are controlled by the Airforce Intelligence and Military Intelligence services. There is also a checkpoint that is manned by female volunteers.

#### *Freedom of movement in Damascus and Rural Damascus*

195. The number of checkpoints has decreased since summer 2019 in both Damascus and Rural Damascus.
196. Checkpoints in Damascus are manned by Syrian and Russian forces.
197. In Rural Damascus checkpoints are located at the entrances to the cities and not inside the cities. Since March 2020 the authorities at the checkpoints in Rural Damascus try to avoid checking people because of Covid-19 why checks are conducted at only few checkpoints in the governorate.
198. The most thorough checks are conducted at the checkpoints between East Ghouta and Damascus. The source knows people, who have residence permit in UK, who went to Lebanon and then to East Ghouta without facing any issues with the GoS. They used their Syrian ID-cards to pass the Lebanese-Syrian border and at checkpoints.
199. Previously the security forces at checkpoints held back the ID-cards (until the person returned and retrieved his/her card) or wrote down the names of everyone who passed the checkpoints. Since mid-2019, this practice has stopped, and they only check the ID-cards of men in the military service age against wanted lists, while the ID-cards of women and elder men are rarely checked.
200. People who have contact with their relatives who are wanted for security issues, risk being arrested at checkpoints. The source knows a person who was recently arrested because he had a phone call with the source in 2018. The source has also recently received information

about two women who were arrested because they had been in touch with one of their relatives who fled from the government controlled areas to Idlib.

201. In addition, women wearing *niqab*, where the face is covered, are checked thoroughly at checkpoints controlled by the Syrian security forces. However, in general women are less checked at checkpoints compared to men.
202. Areas in Damascus and Rural Damascus where people have not been allowed to return to their houses are the so-called “security areas”- i.e. areas which have experienced the harshest military operations and are therefore almost completely damaged. Among these areas are Jobar, al-Yarmouk, Wadi Barada and the city of Hajar al-Aswad (access to other areas of Hajar al-Aswad has been allowed).
203. Few areas in the Darayya district are no-access areas. Sahnaya in the Darayya district has always been a government-controlled area and access to it is allowed.
204. People, who left areas which were under IS control and whose names are not on wanted lists, have not faced issues with the GoS or been subjected to suspicions of being affiliated with IS when they returned to their areas.
205. The source knows people who moved from one area to another in Rural Damascus without facing any issue. Anyone who moves to a new area is required to register the house contract. However, a large number of people rent houses without registering the contracts. If the local civil police find out that a house contract is not registered, they will report it to the intelligence services.

### *Socio-economic situation in Damascus and Rural Damascus.*

206. The GoS provides basic services to some extent in all areas which are inhabited. Electricity and water are at least available two-three hours a day.
207. Return to East Ghouta has been allowed. Some people have returned to the area while others have left it again because most of the area is destroyed and basic services have only been partly restored. Electricity and water are at least available two-three hours a day.
208. Kafr Batna is the area where basic services have been restored to a larger extent compared to other areas in East Ghouta.
209. Jisreen is an example of an area in Rural Damascus where the GoS has not restored the basic services. This is mainly because the residents still have not returned to the area.
210. On a daily basis, people from Rural Damascus, including people from East Ghouta, go to Damascus City for work, medical healthcare and education. The source estimates that a significant number of people who live in East Ghouta go to Damascus City on a daily basis. Most people go for healthcare purposes as medical healthcare services in East Ghouta only provide primary treatment.

## Appendix 2: Terms of Reference

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### 1. General security situation in Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates January-August 2020

- 1.1. Development of the general security situation in Damascus and Rural Damascus since January 2020
- 1.2. Prevalence of security incidents and the extent and type of casualties
- 1.3. Security situation on the road connecting the airport to Damascus City and areas in Rural Damascus
- 1.4. Freedom of movement in Damascus City and Rural Damascus
  - 1.4.1. Prevalence of restricted access to or exit from certain areas
  - 1.4.2. Access to Damascus City
  - 1.4.3. Freedom of movement of women
- 1.5. Presence of ISIS and anti-government armed groups in Damascus and Rural Damascus

### 2. Socio-economic situation in Damascus City and Rif Damascus

- 2.1. General access to services (sanitation, water and food, healthcare, education)
- 2.2. Housing
- 2.3. Job
- 2.4. Areas with severe damages to infrastructures