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# SYRIA

## *Security Situation in Damascus City and Yarmouk*

Report based on interviews in Damascus, Syria, Beirut, Lebanon and Amman, Jordan, 12-23 March 2018

*Copenhagen, August 2018*

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## Contents

|                                                                                                                                                      |    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Disclaimer .....                                                                                                                                     | 3  |
| Introduction and methodology .....                                                                                                                   | 4  |
| Abbreviations.....                                                                                                                                   | 6  |
| 1. General security situation in Damascus Province .....                                                                                             | 7  |
| 1.1. Prevalence of security incidents in Damascus City and the extent and type of casualties.....                                                    | 8  |
| 1.1.1. Shelling .....                                                                                                                                | 9  |
| 1.1.2. Asymmetric warfare incidents.....                                                                                                             | 10 |
| 1.1.3. Updated security situation in Damascus City .....                                                                                             | 11 |
| 1.2. Prevalence of security incidents in Yarmouk and the extent and type of casualties.....                                                          | 13 |
| 1.2.1. Clashes .....                                                                                                                                 | 13 |
| 1.2.2. Human rights violations.....                                                                                                                  | 13 |
| 1.2.3. Updated security situation in Yarmouk.....                                                                                                    | 14 |
| 1.3. Prevalence of internally displaced persons in Damascus City.....                                                                                | 15 |
| 1.4. Freedom of movement in Damascus province, including impact of ethnic/religious background, gender, economic situation and place of origin ..... | 16 |
| 1.4.1. Freedom of movement in Damascus City .....                                                                                                    | 16 |
| 1.4.1.1. Checkpoints affecting daily movement .....                                                                                                  | 16 |
| 1.4.1.2. Purpose of checkpoints .....                                                                                                                | 16 |
| 1.4.1.3. Prevalence and locations of checkpoints .....                                                                                               | 16 |
| 1.4.1.4. Checkpoint procedures.....                                                                                                                  | 17 |
| 1.4.1.5. Wanted lists distributed to checkpoints.....                                                                                                | 18 |
| 1.4.1.6. Treatment of family members of wanted individuals approaching checkpoints.....                                                              | 19 |
| 1.4.1.7. Impact of ethnic and religious background or place of origin on treatment at checkpoints                                                    | 19 |
| 1.4.1.8. Treatment of other profiles at checkpoints .....                                                                                            | 20 |
| 1.4.1.9. Corruption and extortion at checkpoints .....                                                                                               | 21 |
| 1.4.2. Freedom of movement in Yarmouk.....                                                                                                           | 21 |
| 2. Returning to Syria, including entry in Syria via Damascus International Airport .....                                                             | 21 |
| 2.1. General pattern regarding return to Syria .....                                                                                                 | 21 |
| 2.2. Entry in Syria via Damascus International Airport.....                                                                                          | 23 |
| 2.3. Consequences of illegal exit .....                                                                                                              | 24 |
| Consulted sources .....                                                                                                                              | 26 |

|                                                               |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Appendix A: Meeting minutes .....                             | 27 |
| A Damascus-based lawyer .....                                 | 27 |
| A diplomatic source in Beirut .....                           | 31 |
| A diplomatic source in Damascus.....                          | 35 |
| A humanitarian organisation .....                             | 36 |
| A humanitarian security organisation .....                    | 39 |
| Amnesty International.....                                    | 46 |
| An international human rights organisation .....              | 48 |
| An international organisation in Syria .....                  | 52 |
| An international security organisation .....                  | 56 |
| Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW) ..... | 59 |
| Danish Red Cross .....                                        | 65 |
| Lama Fakih, deputy director, Human Rights Watch (HRW) .....   | 68 |
| Heiko Wimmen, International Crisis Group (ICG) .....          | 72 |
| Mercy Corps - Humanitarian Access Team (HAT).....             | 73 |
| REACH .....                                                   | 77 |
| Syria Direct .....                                            | 79 |
| World Health Organization (WHO).....                          | 85 |
| Annex B: Terms of Reference .....                             | 88 |

## Disclaimer

This report was written according to the EASO COI Report Methodology.<sup>1</sup> The report is based on approved minutes from meetings with carefully selected sources. Statements from sources are used in the report and all statements are referenced.

This report is not, and does not purport to be, a detailed or comprehensive survey of all aspects of the issues addressed in the report and should be weighed against other available country of origin information on the security situation in Damascus province and the situation for returnees, including entry via Damascus International Airport.

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

Furthermore, this 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.

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<sup>1</sup> European Union: European Asylum Support Office (EASO), EASO Country of Origin Information report methodology, 10 July 2012. <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4ffc33d32.html> [accessed 18 June 2018]

## Introduction and methodology

The report at hand focuses on the security situation in Damascus province in Syria, including the security situation in Damascus City and Yarmouk, freedom of movement and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Additionally, the report contains information on general patterns regarding returnees and entry in Syria via Damascus International Airport.

The report is the product of a joint mission conducted by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the Country of Origin Information Division, Danish Immigration Service (DIS) to Damascus, Syria, Beirut, Lebanon and Amman, Jordan from 12 to 23 March 2018. In the planning phase of the mission, contacts were established with relevant sources who confirmed their availability on the given dates of our mission. The delegation also consulted one source in Washington, USA via Skype.

The purpose of the mission was to collect updated information on issues recurring in cases regarding Syrian asylum seekers in Denmark. The terms of reference for the mission were drawn up jointly by DIS and DRC, in consultation with the Danish Refugee Appeals Board as well as an advisory group on COI ('Referencegruppen').<sup>2</sup> The terms of reference are included at the end of the report (Annex B).

In the scope of compiling this report, the delegation consulted 17 interlocutors, comprising international organisations, international non-governmental organizations, humanitarian organisations, analysts, journalists, diplomatic representations as well as a lawyer. The sources interviewed were selected by the delegation based on the expertise, merit and role of each source relevant to the mission.<sup>3</sup>

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. 8 out of 17 sources requested varying degrees of anonymity for the sake of discretion and upholding tolerable working conditions, as well as for personal safety. All sources are referenced in the report according to their own request.

The sources consulted were informed about the purpose of the mission and that their statements would be included in a public report. The minutes from the meetings with the sources were

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<sup>2</sup> The group consists of Danish Refugee Council, Amnesty International in Denmark, Danish Institute for Human Rights, Dignity, representatives of two Christian organizations ("Europamissionen" and "Åbne Døre"), the National Commissioner of Police and the Danish Bar and Law Society (representing asylum lawyers).

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the 17 sources mentioned above, the delegation also met with two representatives from UNHCR in Damascus on Tuesday, 22 March 2018, who requested the delegation not to include the minutes from the meeting in the final report and solely use their statements as background information.

forwarded to them for approval, giving them a chance to amend, comment or correct their statements. All sources have approved their statements.

The report is a synthesis of the sources' statements and does thus not include all details and nuances of each statement. In the report, care has been taken to present the views of the sources as accurately and transparently as possible. All sources' statements are found in their full extent in Annex A of this report.

For the sake of reader-friendliness, transparency and accuracy, paragraphs in the meeting minutes in Annex A have been given consecutive numbers, which are used in the report when referring to the statements of the sources in the footnotes. The intention hereby is to make it easier to find the exact place of a statement in the meeting minutes.

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

The security situation in Damascus changed significantly after the interviews with the sources and before drafting the report was initiated, because the Government of Syria succeeded in taking control of Eastern Ghouta and southern suburbs of Damascus, including Yarmouk. Against this background, the sources were requested to update the information regarding the security situation in Damascus City and Yarmouk when approving the minutes. The updated information received from the sources has been added to the meeting minutes.

The delegation did not succeed in collecting much information on entry into Syria via Damascus International Airport, which is one of the topics in the ToR, as the sources generally did not have much information on this issue and did not monitor returns to Syria via Damascus International Airport. According to the sources, most Syrians use land borders (particularly the border with Lebanon) to enter or leave Syria, and returns to Syria have so far mainly been from the neighbouring countries, where the land borders have been used. For this reason, the sources' information on returns to Syria was limited to mostly anecdotal reports or assumptions.

The Danish Embassy in Beirut provided valuable assistance in the planning and execution phases of the mission.

The research and editing of this report was finalised by 26 June 2018.

The report is available on the websites of [DIS](#) and [DRC](#), thus available to all stakeholders in the refugee status determination process as well as to the general public.

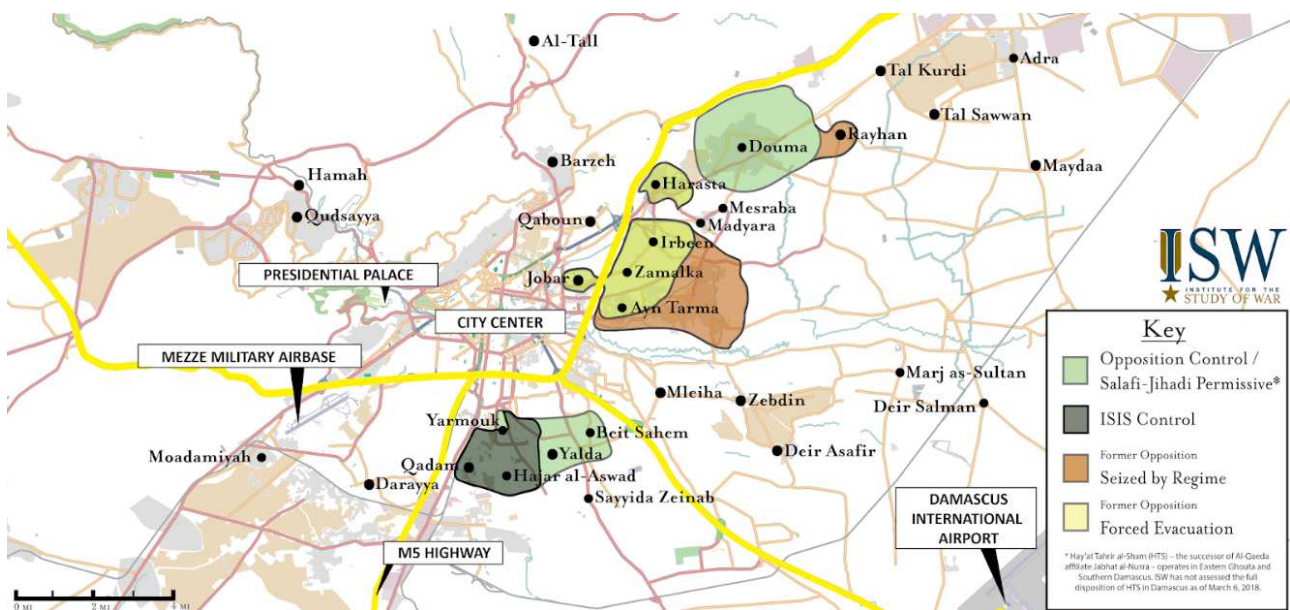
## Abbreviations

|              |                                                                       |
|--------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>COI</b>   | Country of Origin Information                                         |
| <b>DIS</b>   | Danish Immigration Service                                            |
| <b>DRC</b>   | Danish Refugee Council                                                |
| <b>EASO</b>  | European Asylum Support Office                                        |
| <b>ERW</b>   | Explosive Remnants of War                                             |
| <b>FSA</b>   | Free Syrian Army                                                      |
| <b>HRW</b>   | Human Rights Watch                                                    |
| <b>HTS</b>   | Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Organization for the Liberation of the Levant) |
| <b>ICG</b>   | International Crisis Group                                            |
| <b>IED</b>   | Improvised explosive device                                           |
| <b>IS</b>    | Islamic State                                                         |
| <b>ISW</b>   | Institute for the Study of War                                        |
| <b>NDF</b>   | National Defence Forces                                               |
| <b>NGO</b>   | Non-governmental organization                                         |
| <b>ToR</b>   | Terms of reference                                                    |
| <b>UNHCR</b> | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees                         |
| <b>UXO</b>   | Unexploded ordnance                                                   |
| <b>VBIED</b> | Vehicle-borne improvised explosive device                             |
| <b>WHO</b>   | World Health Organisation                                             |

## 1. General security situation in Damascus Province

Broadly depicted, Damascus Province was split between two types of areas in mid-March 2018: (1) government-held areas and (2) opposition-/Islamic State-controlled areas.<sup>4</sup> In government-held areas, the predominant threat was indirect fire, including artillery mortars, fired from opposition-held Eastern Ghouta<sup>5</sup>; i.e. Ayn Tarma, Zamalka, Irbin, Harasta, Douma and environs.<sup>6</sup>

Jobar, an opposition-held area on the north-eastern side of Damascus City and part of Damascus Province, had been particularly plagued by active conflict because of its location as the outmost eastern point of the city and the outmost western point of Eastern Ghouta. Satellite imagery analysis showed that approximately 93 pct. of structures in Jobar had been moderately or severely damaged, or completely destroyed.<sup>7</sup>



Source: Christopher Kozak (ISW) in Institute for the Study of War, *Regime Gains in Damascus, Syria: March 12 - 26, 2018*, available at: <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/03/regime-gains-in-damascus-syria-march-12.html> [accessed 8 June 2018]

From the beginning of 2017 and until the beginning of 2018, the Syrian government had gained control over more areas in Eastern Ghouta.<sup>8</sup> On 18 February 2018, government forces launched an intense push against the armed opposition in Eastern Ghouta<sup>9</sup>, and according to an international security organisation

<sup>4</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 92; see also map below.

<sup>5</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 2, A diplomatic source in Beirut: 35, A humanitarian organization: 73, A humanitarian security organisation: 93 – 95, Amnesty International: 137, An international human rights organisation: 150, An international security organisation: 200, Christopher Kozak: 220, Lama Fakih (HRW) 280, Heiko Wimmen (ICG): 306, Mercy Corps: 318-319, REACH: 349, Syria Direct: 358, WHO: 400

<sup>6</sup> See map below.

<sup>7</sup> REACH: 350; see also 'A humanitarian security organisation: 96' for elaborated information on the fighting in Jobar.

<sup>8</sup> An international organisation in Syria: 174

<sup>9</sup> An international security organisation: 201, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 220, Mercy Corps: 318, REACH: 349

the government had taken approximately 80 pct. of the area by 18 March 2018.<sup>10</sup> A Russian report of 20 March 2018 however stated that the Syrian army, at that time, controlled only 65 pct. of Eastern Ghouta.<sup>11</sup>

South Damascus had been divided between three pockets:

1. Qadam,
2. The Yarmouk Camp and Hajar al-Aswad, and
3. Yalda, Babbila and Beit Sahm (YBB).<sup>12</sup>

In mid-March 2018, areas in these pockets were controlled by different armed opposition forces, including Islamic State.<sup>13</sup> These opposition-held areas were besieged by government forces and thereby contained.<sup>14</sup>

In mid-March 2018, the Yarmouk Camp was largely controlled by Islamic State. A small part of the camp was controlled by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.<sup>15</sup> The surrounding areas, Yalda, Babbila and Beit Sahm, were controlled by other armed opposition groups.<sup>16</sup> In addition, pro-government Palestinian groups were present in the area during the conflict, which contributed to the complexity and dynamic of the security situation.<sup>17</sup>

In March 2018, opposition groups in Qadam accepted an evacuation deal with the Syrian Government. However, when these groups evacuated the area Islamic State moved in and temporarily seized control of the area.<sup>18</sup>

### **1.1. Prevalence of security incidents in Damascus City and the extent and type of casualties**

In mid-March 2018, Damascus City was under control of the Syrian government.<sup>19</sup> Within the past two to three years, the general security situation in Damascus City had improved because of fewer frontlines close to the city.<sup>20</sup> Before the government launched its campaign against the armed opposition in Eastern Ghouta in February 2018, the security situation in Damascus City was generally considered as relatively stable.<sup>21</sup> However, due to recent intensified shelling by armed opposition groups targeting districts in Damascus city,

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<sup>10</sup> An international security organisation: 201

<sup>11</sup> An international organisation in Syria: 174

<sup>12</sup> Mercy Corps: 326

<sup>13</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 109, An international security organisation: 208, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 232-233, Mercy Corps: 326, REACH: 351

<sup>14</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 10, A humanitarian security organisation: 109, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 232, An international security organisation: 210; see also 'Syria Direct: 369' and 'REACH: 351' commenting specifically on the Yarmouk Camp.

<sup>15</sup> A humanitarian organisation: 76, A humanitarian security organisation: 110, Syria Direct: 369; see also map above.

<sup>16</sup> A humanitarian organisation: 76, An international security organisation: 208; see also map above.

<sup>17</sup> An international human rights organisation: 153; see also 'Syria Direct: 370' commenting specifically on the Yarmouk Camp where these groups, according to the source, were present earlier in the conflict.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 233, Mercy Corps: 329 [The sources do not agree on the exact time of this event. However, both state that it happened in March 2018 (*ed.*)]

<sup>19</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 1, Amnesty International: 136; see also map above.

<sup>20</sup> Heiko Wimmen (ICG): 306

<sup>21</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 220, Mercy Corps: 324, WHO: 401; An international human rights organisation (150) said that the development with regards to the security situation had been critical during 2017

which corresponded with the government's heightened military pressure on these groups in Eastern Ghouta, the security situation in the city had turned more insecure.<sup>22</sup>

### 1.1.1. Shelling

Figures used by different sources to describe the extent of shelling in Damascus City are generally difficult to compare across the material for this report. However, two sources pointed to reports indicating that 88 indirect artillery fires hit Damascus City during 14-20 March 2018.<sup>23</sup> In comparison, another source said that, in 2017, there was an average of 60-70 indirect fire events per month with an average of two to three projectiles per event.<sup>24</sup>

The threat of shelling impacted daily life and travel around Damascus City,<sup>25</sup> but inhabitants were generally not paralysed by the situation and tried to lead a normal life.<sup>26</sup> At times when the number of projectiles hitting in the city was high or if there had been many casualties, people usually stayed indoors.<sup>27</sup>

Different types of shelling struck Damascus City. The shells were generally mortars and other manufactured ammunition but they sometimes included homemade explosives.<sup>28</sup> These weapons did not impact accurately<sup>29</sup> for a number of reasons. For instance, the weapons used by opposition groups in Ghouta were not precision weapons and at best, they hit with a precision of 100 to 200 meters. Secondly, armed opposition groups in Ghouta did not target precisely due to the fact that their firing positions were often from vehicles that did not have a stable platform. Even a small centimetre change resulted in a huge range in where the mortars would impact.<sup>30</sup>

Although only few sources were able to provide concrete examples, it was mentioned that shelling on Damascus City from Eastern Ghouta had struck military installations and government facilities or close to such premises.<sup>31</sup> However, shelling mostly impacted in areas with a high concentration of civilians<sup>32</sup> such as marketplaces<sup>33</sup>, traffic junctions<sup>34</sup> and schools<sup>35</sup>. According to an international organisation in Syria, it is very clear that the opposition intended to target civilian areas with mortars and not only government buildings or military facilities. The source assessed that this was due to the fact that if civilian areas were targeted, civilians would in turn put pressure on the government.<sup>36</sup> Amnesty International said that the main source for information about military targets was the government's news agency, SANA, according to

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<sup>22</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 35, A humanitarian security organisation: 98-99, An international human rights organisation: 150, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 220, Lama Fakh (HRW): 281

<sup>23</sup> An international organisation in Syria: 178, An international security organisation: 203

<sup>24</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 99

<sup>25</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 3, A humanitarian security organisation: 97, Danish Red Cross: 265, World Health Organization: 402

<sup>26</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 3, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 225

<sup>27</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 3, A humanitarian security organisation: 97, World Health Organization: 404

<sup>28</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 5, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 227

<sup>29</sup> A diplomatic source in Damascus: 68, A humanitarian security organisation: 102, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 224, Danish Red Cross: 264, Heiko Wimmen (ICG): 307, Mercy Corps: 330, Syria Direct: 359

<sup>30</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 102

<sup>31</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 38, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 224, Lama Fakh (HRW): 283

<sup>32</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 38, Amnesty International: 138, Lama Fakh (HRW): 283, Syria Direct: 359-360

<sup>33</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 38, Lama Fakh (HRW): 283, Mercy Corps: 320

<sup>34</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 38, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 229, Lama Fakh (HRW): 283

<sup>35</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 38, Mercy Corps: 320

<sup>36</sup> An international organisation: 176

which shelling primarily struck civilian areas.<sup>37</sup> According to WHO, the only reports about shelling in the media was about civilians being hit.<sup>38</sup> An international organisation in Syria said that 90 pct. of mortars launched towards Damascus throughout the entire conflict had hit civilian areas and estimated that 10,000-15,000 persons had been killed or injured in Damascus City within the past seven years.<sup>39</sup>

Not all areas in Damascus City were struck by shelling.<sup>40</sup> The majority of projectiles impacted in areas in close proximity to Eastern Ghouta, although some could reach further.<sup>41</sup> The Old City of Damascus and surrounding neighbourhoods were particularly vulnerable to shelling.<sup>42</sup> According to Christopher Kozak (ISW), open-source reporting claimed roughly forty to fifty civilians killed and an equivalent number injured by shelling in and around the Old City of Damascus from mid-January to mid-March 2018.<sup>43</sup>

### 1.1.2. Asymmetric warfare incidents

In addition to shelling, there had been few incidents of assassinations<sup>44</sup>, car bombs<sup>45</sup>, improvised explosive devices (IED)<sup>46</sup> and suicide attacks<sup>47</sup> targeting both civilians and military objectives in Damascus City.<sup>48</sup> A notorious suicide attack took place at the Palace of Justice in March 2017.<sup>49 50</sup> Other attacks targeted police stations<sup>51</sup> and the Sayyida Zainab Shrine<sup>52</sup>, which serves as a major mobilization point for Shiite militias.<sup>53</sup>

It is not possible to derive solid numerical statistics with regard to assassinations, car bombs, improvised explosive devices (IED) and suicide attacks in Damascus City in recent years from the material for this

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<sup>37</sup> Amnesty International: 138

<sup>38</sup> World Health Organization (WHO): 403

<sup>39</sup> An international organisation in Syria: 176-177

<sup>40</sup> Amnesty International: 137

<sup>41</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 101-102, An international human rights organisation: 150, An international organisation in Syria: 175, An international security organisation: 200, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 220, Heiko Wimmen (ICG): 305

<sup>42</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 6, A diplomatic source in Damascus: 67, A humanitarian security organisation: 101, An international organisation in Syria: 175, An international security organisation: 204-205, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 225, Lama Fakh (HRW): 282, REACH: 349, World Health Organization: 401

<sup>43</sup> Christopher Kozak: 230

<sup>44</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 9, An international organisation in Syria: 182, Mercy Corps: 323, Syria Direct: 367

<sup>45</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 9, A humanitarian security organisation: 94, Syria Direct: 367, World Health Organization (WHO): 405

<sup>46</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer, A humanitarian security organisation: 94, Lama Fakh (HRW): 284

<sup>47</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 7, Diplomatic source in Beirut: 41, Diplomatic source in Damascus: 69, A humanitarian organisation: 74, A humanitarian security organisation: 104-106, An international human rights organisation: 152, An international organisation in Syria: 180, An international security organisation: 207, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 246, World Health Organization (WHO): 405

<sup>48</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 7-9, A diplomatic source in Damascus: 69, A humanitarian security organisation: 104-105, An international security organisation: 207, Lama Fakh: 284-286, Mercy Corps: 322

<sup>49</sup> The New York Times reported on this incident on 15 March 2017: *Suicide Bombing Hits Justice Building in Damascus, Syria*; The New York Times, 15 March 2017 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/15/world/middleeast/syria-damascus-bomb-palace-justice-assad.html> (ed.)

<sup>50</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 7, A diplomatic source in Beirut: 41, A diplomatic source in Damascus: 67, An international human rights organisation: 152, An international organisation in Syria: 180, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 222, Syria Direct: 361

<sup>51</sup> A diplomatic source in Damascus: 67, An international organisation in Syria: 180, An international security organisation: 207, Lama Fakh (HRW): 286, Syria Direct: 362

<sup>52</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 222, Mercy Corps: 322

<sup>53</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 222

report. Although one source indicated increased success of Islamic State in conducting suicide attacks<sup>54</sup> and another source said that attacks, where a combination of shelling and explosives were used, happened more frequently than compared to previous years,<sup>55</sup> sources generally assessed the frequency of insurgency incidents inside Damascus City as relatively low.<sup>56</sup> One source mentioned that the rate of assassinations and car bombings against government officials and buildings inside Damascus City had generally decreased since 2015-16, and the recent months had been quiet in terms of suicide bombers in Damascus City compared to 2016 where suicide attacks were more frequent.<sup>57</sup> According to a humanitarian security organisation, 12 suicide detonations (in ten events) were recorded in Damascus and its immediate surroundings in 2017.<sup>58</sup> Mercy Corps estimated that the total number of car bombs during the past seven years was 20 to 25 and that there had been only a handful of assassination attempts.<sup>59</sup>

Several suicide attacks were intercepted at checkpoints on the rim of or outside Damascus City.<sup>60</sup> A humanitarian security organisation said that the number of suicide vehicles intercepted at checkpoints in 2017 were less than in 2016, suggesting a better capacity of Islamic State to bypass security.<sup>61</sup> Lama Fakhri (HRW) said that reported attacks seemed to be more infrequent than earlier.<sup>62</sup>

A humanitarian security organisation said that major civilian casualties from suicide bombs or attacks happened, for instance when a bomber *en route* to his target was intercepted, chased and cornered by security forces and then decided to detonate. However, there was no indication that the 'Baghdad style' bombings in areas mainly frequented by civilians resulting in mass casualties were happening in Damascus.<sup>63</sup> A humanitarian security organisation also highlighted that the Syrian society was still very much a functioning police state with high level of surveillance including electronic surveillance and that the security apparatus was still operating strongly in Damascus.<sup>64</sup>

### 1.1.3. Updated security situation in Damascus City

The Government of Syria asserted full control of Eastern Ghouta in April 2018 after conducting evacuation of a large number of opposition fighters and civilians from the area.<sup>65</sup>

Since the government has retaken control of Eastern Ghouta, mortars are no longer striking Damascus city from Eastern Ghouta.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 104

<sup>55</sup> Lama Fakhri: 284

<sup>56</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 106, Heiko Wimmen (ICG): 311, Mercy Corps: 322, WHO: 405

<sup>57</sup> Syria Direct: 362-367

<sup>58</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 104

<sup>59</sup> Mercy Corps: 323

<sup>60</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 41, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 222

<sup>61</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 104

<sup>62</sup> Lama Fakhri (HRW): 286

<sup>63</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 105

<sup>64</sup> A humanitarian security organization: 108

<sup>65</sup> An international human rights organisation: 170, Syria Direct: 390; see also Christopher Kozak: 259 and Lama Fakhri (HRW): 303 who does not mention April as time of termination but describes the situation as of 21 May 2018 and 10 May 2018 respectively.

<sup>66</sup> A diplomatic source in Damascus: 71, An international human rights organisation: 170, An international organisation in Syria: 198, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 259, Danish Red Cross: 277, Mercy Corps: 346, Syria Direct: 390, World Health Organization: 415

On 21 May 2018, it was officially announced that the Damascus-area was controlled by the Syrian authorities<sup>67, 68</sup>.

During a major military operation against the armed opposition in the southern part of Damascus (Yarmouk, Hajar al-Aswad and Babbila) in May 2018, indirect fire from the south did affect areas in Damascus City,<sup>69</sup> particularly southern areas of the city like al-Midan<sup>70</sup>, Zahira<sup>71</sup> and Tadamon<sup>72</sup>. However, the indirect fire threat had reduced significantly, and by accounts, the streets were busier and people less concerned by the indirect fire than when the indirect fire came from Eastern Ghouta.<sup>73</sup>

The sources' anticipations about the future with regard to prevalence of insurgency in Damascus Province were diverging. Most sources considered insurgency in Damascus City a possibility in the future.<sup>74</sup> While some sources considered a rise in insurgency likely<sup>75</sup>, others anticipated that the current frequency of suicide attacks would not change.<sup>76</sup> According to Christopher Kozak (ISW) and a humanitarian security organization, the overall situation over the next year may not be comparable to Iraq, but Damascus City will likely witness repeated spectacular attacks against civilian or government targets from time-to-time.<sup>77</sup>

Contrary to this view, some sources did not expect that opposition groups would shift into an insurgency mode as a new strategy against the Syrian government.<sup>78</sup> Mercy Corps considered that insurgency activity in the future would be limited. The government's security apparatus is very strong, and the experience has showed that the security branches have strong networks of informants everywhere in Syria who monitor the situation intensively and know what is going on in all areas, including recently retaken areas.<sup>79</sup>

According to Mercy Corps, there has been no insurgency from opposition groups in areas which have been recaptured by the government. The assassinations and car bombs, which have been carried out in these areas, have mostly been part of an internal fight among pro-government militia groups for economic interests.<sup>80</sup> An international security organisation expressed a different perception by saying that in areas previously controlled by Islamic State such as Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa, insurgency attacks carried out by Islamic State persisted. Such incidents occurred four to six times monthly, even though the areas are almost

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<sup>67</sup> BBC reported the same on 21 May 2018; "Syria war: Army takes full control of Damascus after ousting IS", BBC 21 May 2018 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-44198304>

<sup>68</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 34, A humanitarian organisation: 91, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 260

<sup>69</sup> A diplomatic source in Damascus: 72, A humanitarian security organisation: 134, An international human rights organisation: 172, An international organisation in Syria: 199, An international security organisation: 219, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 259, Syria Direct: 390, World Health Organization: 416

<sup>70</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 134, An international organisation in Syria: 199

<sup>71</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 134, An international organisation in Syria: 199

<sup>72</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 134

<sup>73</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 134

<sup>74</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 46, A humanitarian security organisation: 106+115, An international human rights organisation: 158+172, An international security organisation: 211, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 259, Heiko Wimmen (ICG): 315, Syria Direct: 399

<sup>75</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 46, Heiko Wimmen (ICG): 315, An international security organisation: 211, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 238

<sup>76</sup> Syria Direct: 399, A humanitarian security organisation: 106+115

<sup>77</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 106+115, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 238

<sup>78</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 12, An international organisation in Syria: 188, Mercy Corps: 334

<sup>79</sup> Mercy Corps: 334

<sup>80</sup> Mercy Corps: 325

completely cleared. The security incidents consisted of armed clashes, vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED), improvised explosive devices (IED) and suicide attacks.<sup>81</sup>

From January to the beginning of May 2018, no confirmed suicide attacks in Damascus City were reported.

<sup>82</sup> Mercy Corps said that there was one car bomb in Damascus in May 2018, but otherwise the city was almost completely calm.<sup>83</sup> A humanitarian security organisation referred to a suspected unconfirmed suicide attack reported on 9 May 2018 in the Maysaat area of Damascus,<sup>84</sup> and The National brought a news story on the same date about a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) that exploded in al-Mazraa, in front of the café at Maysaat Square, not far from the Russian Embassy.<sup>85</sup> This story was confirmed by a diplomatic source in Damascus who said that two people were killed and fourteen injured.

<sup>86</sup>

## 1.2. Prevalence of security incidents in Yarmouk and the extent and type of casualties

### 1.2.1. Clashes

In mid-March 2018, in the Yarmouk Camp and other districts of Southern Damascus, episodes of ground fighting posed a risk to civilians.<sup>87</sup> Due to lack of access to the area, it was difficult to verify or obtain information about civilian casualties caused by clashes in the Yarmouk.<sup>88</sup> However, according to Christopher Kozak (ISW), the main areas of violence remained largely unpopulated, resulting in relatively lower civilian casualties compared to Eastern Ghouta.<sup>89</sup> Correspondingly, other sources assessed the number of remaining civilians in Yarmouk to be low, as a substantial number of people had left the area because of clashes.<sup>90</sup>

### 1.2.2. Human rights violations

In mid-March 2018, Islamic State in the Yarmouk Camp and Hajar al-Aswad imposed most of the same social structures and repressive elements as it did in areas under its control in Eastern Syria<sup>91</sup>, and there

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<sup>81</sup> An international security organisation: 211

<sup>82</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 8, A humanitarian security organisation: 104, An international human rights organisation: 158, An international security organisation: 207

<sup>83</sup> Mercy Corps: 346

<sup>84</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 104

<sup>85</sup> The National reported on 9 May 2018: 'Two people were killed and several others wounded in a car bomb and shellfire in Syria's capital Damascus on Wednesday, state television said. "Two killed and 14 injured in terrorist attacks on Damascus Tower and Maysat Square," it reported. They struck at the tower in the central Marjeh Square district, and the car bomb went off in the northeast of the city. Images of security forces gathered around a burnt-out skeleton of a car in Maysat Square were broadcast on state television. The blast came as regime forces battle to flush out ISIS from the southern districts of the capital, including Yarmouk and the adjacent Hajar Al Aswad neighbourhood.' The national, 9 May 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/two-killed-in-damascus-car-bomb-and-shellfire-1.728695> [accessed 11 June 2018] (ed.)

<sup>86</sup> A diplomatic source in Damascus: 71

<sup>87</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 234, REACH: 352; see also 'A humanitarian security organisation: 111' and 'Amnesty International 139' mentioning clashes effecting the interior of the camp.

<sup>88</sup> A humanitarian organisation: 78

<sup>89</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 234, REACH: 352

<sup>90</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 45, A humanitarian organisation: 75

<sup>91</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 235

were also reports of execution of civilians by Islamic State.<sup>92</sup> Other opposition groups were, likewise, responsible for various human rights violations committed against civilians in areas under their control in southern Damascus.<sup>93</sup> A humanitarian security organisation said that there was an escalation of arrests, floggings, public punishments and executions carried out by Islamic State during the first quarter of 2018.<sup>94</sup>

### 1.2.3. Updated security situation in Yarmouk

In May 2018, pro-government forces launched a major military operation to seize the Hajar al-Aswad and Yarmouk Camp Districts held by Islamic State in Southern Damascus.<sup>95</sup> The military escalation included intense aerial and artillery bombardment of Hajar al-Aswad and Yarmouk Camp Districts.<sup>96</sup> The government launched heavy bombardments on the Yarmouk area coupled with ground advances in more open urban terrain.<sup>97</sup>

When the government took control of these last opposition-held areas in Damascus Province, 'reconciliations' were agreed upon,<sup>98</sup> and the opposition in southern Damascus neighbourhoods saw at least five rounds of relocation to northern Syria.<sup>99</sup> Armed opposition groups controlling the nearby area of Yalda, Babbila and Beit Sahm were reportedly evacuated to the North of the country in May 2018.<sup>100</sup> A humanitarian security organisation said that Islamic State initially refused to 'reconcile' with the government and just prior to the offensive, large numbers of civilian IDPs travelled eastwards into Yalda.<sup>101</sup> Islamic State in Southern Damascus later accepted a deal to evacuate from Damascus City to Eastern Syria in late May 2018.<sup>102</sup>

In connection with updating information on the security situation in Yarmouk (5 June 2018), a diplomatic source in Beirut advised that the situation in Yarmouk was still not fully clear.<sup>103</sup> Yarmouk was subjected to massive physical destruction due to the government's recent operation.<sup>104</sup> At the end of May 2018, no more than a few hundred civilians were remaining in Yarmouk.<sup>105</sup> A humanitarian security organisation pointed to prevalence of unexploded ordnances (UXO) and explosive remnants of war (ERW) as a main threat in Yarmouk after the fighting.<sup>106</sup> On top of this, it was assessed that the rubble was mixed with a very high concentration of explosive remnants of war (ERW), which would be very hazardous to the former residents of the camp if they tried to return now.<sup>107</sup> According to Danish Red Cross, in areas recently taken by the government, there are a large number of manufactured ammunitions that have not gone off, and civilians are at risk of being killed by these remnants of war. For this reason, in order to consider an area

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<sup>92</sup> A humanitarian organisation: 79

<sup>93</sup> Amnesty International 139

<sup>94</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 111

<sup>95</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 260

<sup>96</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 134

<sup>97</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 135

<sup>98</sup> A diplomatic source in Damascus: 71, Syria Direct: 391

<sup>99</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 135

<sup>100</sup> An international human rights organisation: 171, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 260, Syria Direct: 396

<sup>101</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 135

<sup>102</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 260, Syria Direct: 396

<sup>103</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 65

<sup>104</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 65, Danish Red Cross: 278, Syria Direct: 395

<sup>105</sup> A humanitarian organisation: 75 (footnote), Syria Direct: 398

<sup>106</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 135

<sup>107</sup> Danish Red Cross: 278

completely cleared, there will be a need for a centimetre by centimetre clearing of the areas. Armed opposition groups often leave behind booby traps, thereby inflicting civilian casualties.<sup>108</sup>

On 5 June 2018, the first UNRWA convoy in two years reached Palestinians refugees in Yalda.<sup>109</sup>

### 1.3. Prevalence of internally displaced persons in Damascus City

According to Christopher Kozak (ISW), in mid-March 2018, the number of internally displaced persons (IDP) in Damascus City was estimated to be at least half a million with most living in rented housing or staying with family members.<sup>110</sup> The influx of IDPs in Damascus had increased concurrently with the government regaining control of more areas in Eastern Ghouta.<sup>111</sup> A humanitarian security organisation said that from January to March 2018, there had been no significant movement of IDPs from other areas in Syria to Damascus.<sup>112</sup>

There are no IDP camps or IDP centres in Damascus City<sup>113</sup>, and IDPs in Damascus appear to be dispersed throughout the city<sup>114</sup>. The type of housing IDPs are staying in depends on their financial means.<sup>115</sup> There are also IDPs within Damascus City living on the street.<sup>116</sup> Mercy Corps said that IDPs originating from Deir ez-Zor or other hotspots would have difficulties in accessing housing in Damascus City, since IDPs would need to have an official approval from the security service in order to rent an apartment.<sup>117</sup>

In areas that have recently come under the government's control, such as areas in Eastern Ghouta, civilians have had to go through security screening processes in order to be able to enter into Damascus City.<sup>118</sup> A humanitarian organisation said that in general, men between the age of 15 and 60 years coming to Damascus City from opposition-held areas underwent a higher degree of scrutiny and that it was easier for women and children to leave Eastern Ghouta, provided that they had a sponsor.<sup>119</sup> Correspondingly, WHO said that there were some young men among the IDPs from Eastern Ghouta, but most of them stayed behind in Eastern Ghouta when other IDPs left.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Danish Red Cross: 269

<sup>109</sup> UNRWA, *First UNRWA convoy in Two Years Reaches Palestine refugees in the Damascus suburb of Yalda* available at: <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/first-unrwa-convoy-two-years-reaches-palestine-refugees-damascus-suburb> [accessed 13 June 2018]

<sup>110</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 243

<sup>111</sup> Lama Fakih (HRW): 290-304, World Health Organization (WHO): 410

<sup>112</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 119

<sup>113</sup> Amnesty International: 141, An international human rights organisation: 159, An international organisation in Syria: 190

<sup>114</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 48, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 243, Danish Red Cross: 270, World Health Organization (WHO): 409

<sup>115</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 48, Lama Fakih (HRW): 288, World Health Organization (WHO): 409

<sup>116</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 51, Lama Fakih (HRW): 288

<sup>117</sup> Mercy Corps: 335

<sup>118</sup> A humanitarian organisation: 85, Lama Fakih (HRW): 290

<sup>119</sup> A humanitarian organisation: 85

<sup>120</sup> World Health Organization: 408

## **1.4. Freedom of movement in Damascus province, including impact of ethnic/religious background, gender, economic situation and place of origin**

### **1.4.1. Freedom of movement in Damascus City**

#### **1.4.1.1. Checkpoints affecting daily movement**

Movement in Damascus City is slowed down due to checkpoints, however not completely stopped.<sup>121</sup> An international human rights organisation considered, however, checkpoints an obstacle to freedom of movement for the citizens.<sup>122</sup>

#### **1.4.1.2. Purpose of checkpoints**

The purpose of the checkpoints is to ensure security, to catch people on the wanted lists and people avoiding conscription.<sup>123</sup>

#### **1.4.1.3. Prevalence and locations of checkpoints**

There are two types of checkpoints: mobile and fixed<sup>124</sup>, and the checkpoints are dispersed across the city.<sup>125</sup> Checkpoints are also placed at the main entrances to the city.<sup>126</sup> According to an international organisation in Syria, checkpoints are concentrated around key areas such as Damascus International Airport, Mezzeh Military Airbase, the Syrian Presidential Palace and the Old City of Damascus.<sup>127</sup>

The number of checkpoints in the city has reduced markedly compared with prior years.<sup>128</sup> In this context, a diplomatic source in Beirut and Mercy Corps said that most checkpoints were now (i.e. March 2018) found close to frontlines.<sup>129</sup> One source, however, advised that the number of checkpoints had increased throughout the city due to the current tight security situation in the city and the government being concerned about terrorist attacks.<sup>130</sup> WHO said that while the number of checkpoints had decreased in some areas, new ones had popped up in other areas.<sup>131</sup> There have also been instances of the National Defence Forces setting up illegal checkpoints at their own will.<sup>132</sup>

In May 2018, an international organisation in Syria noted that since the meeting with the delegation in March 2018, the number of checkpoints in the east and south of Damascus had been reduced, and the

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<sup>121</sup> Danish Red Cross: 272, Syria Direct: 375

<sup>122</sup> An international human rights organisation: 160

<sup>123</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 58, A humanitarian security organisation: 124-125, Amnesty International: 142, An international human rights organisation: 165, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 248, 253, Lama Fakh (HRW): 294, World Health Organization (WHO): 413

<sup>124</sup> An international human rights organisation: 161, Lama Fakh (HRW): 293, Syria Direct: 375

<sup>125</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 123, An international human rights organisation: 161-162, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 245, Lama Fakh (HRW): 293, Syria Direct: 375, World Health Organization (WHO): 411

<sup>126</sup> Danish Red Cross: 272, Syria Direct: 375, World Health Organization (WHO): 411

<sup>127</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 245

<sup>128</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 53, An international organisation in Syria: 192, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 247, Mercy Corps: 336, Syria Direct: 376

<sup>129</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 53, Mercy Corps: 336

<sup>130</sup> An international human rights organisation: 162

<sup>131</sup> World Health Organization (WHO): 411

<sup>132</sup> Mercy Corps: 336

main road between Damascus and Homs is reopened.<sup>133</sup> Syria Direct confirmed the reduction of checkpoints in the city, but pointed out that there were still checkpoints that prevented civilians from entering certain recently recaptured areas such as south Damascus and Eastern Ghouta.<sup>134</sup>

#### 1.4.1.4. Checkpoint procedures

There were divergent understandings among sources with regard to whether there was one procedure according to which checkpoints were operated.

Whilst an international organisation in Syria said that procedures at all checkpoints throughout Damascus City were the same regardless of which security agency controlled them, and that checkpoints were coordinated at higher levels,<sup>135</sup> other sources considered that the procedure was not framed and differed depending on a number of factors. Those factors ranged from whether the person passing the checkpoint was 'a local known to the guards' to individual differences among guards in charge at the checkpoint and finally to the operating authority in charge and time of the day.<sup>136</sup>

Sources pointed to various degrees of ID checks and screening of cars for explosives conducted at checkpoints.<sup>137</sup> While some sources suggested that ID cards were checked at all checkpoints,<sup>138</sup> a humanitarian security organisation said that ID cards were checked randomly inside the city and not at every checkpoint.<sup>139</sup> A humanitarian security organisation added that checkpoints in more affluent neighbourhoods or neighbourhoods surrounding the presidential palace would often conduct a more rigorous ID card check.<sup>140</sup>

The level of scrutiny at checkpoints also depends on which government entity that controls the checkpoint.<sup>141</sup> According to a humanitarian security organisation, the Fourth Division of the Syrian Arab Army checks ID cards rigorously, while the less professional National Defence Forces are not that thorough.<sup>142</sup> According to Christopher Kozak (ISW), the Syrian Air Force Intelligence reportedly runs their checkpoints with a stricter adherence to regulations and more profound scrutiny check compared to the Syrian Arab Army or Syrian National Defence Forces. Syrian Air Force Intelligence checkpoints are reportedly concentrated in the western part of Damascus City near Mezzeh Military Air Base and the Syrian Presidential Palace.<sup>143</sup> An international organisation in Syria noted that it was only at checkpoints at the northern entrance to the city where people were checked more thoroughly.<sup>144</sup>

Danish Red Cross said that there were two lines through every checkpoint, one regular and one privileged line. Vehicles travelling through the privileged line are not held up for long, whereas regular people might

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<sup>133</sup> An international organisation in Syria: 197

<sup>134</sup> Syria Direct: 393

<sup>135</sup> An international organisation in Syria: 196, Mercy Corps: 339

<sup>136</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 56, World Health Organization (WHO): 413

<sup>137</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 15, A diplomatic source in Beirut: 56, A humanitarian security organisation: 123, An international human rights organisation: 164, An international organisation in Syria: 194, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 248, Syria Direct: 376, World Health Organization (WHO): 413

<sup>138</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 15, A diplomatic source in Beirut: 56

<sup>139</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 123

<sup>140</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 123

<sup>141</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 123, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 249

<sup>142</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 123

<sup>143</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 249

<sup>144</sup> An international organisation in Syria: 194

be held up for hours to pass through though this does not happen at every checkpoint. At some checkpoints, the checks appear very cursory whilst at others they are more thorough.<sup>145</sup> Mercy Corps noted that authorities at checkpoints did not pull the cars aside and check them as they did before, which was due to an improved security situation.<sup>146</sup>

Syria Direct mentioned that the most intense security checks were conducted at the entrance to the city.<sup>147</sup>

#### **1.4.1.5. Wanted lists distributed to checkpoints**

The sources did not agree on whether there was one master/unified database or several wanted lists.

Likewise, there was uncertainty about the extent of use of computers and access to digital databases at checkpoints. Sources mentioned paper lists of wanted individuals distributed to checkpoint.<sup>148</sup> Some sources said that it was only checkpoints at the entrances of Damascus City or outside the city that had access to digital databases,<sup>149</sup> while others mentioned checkpoints inside Damascus having computers with access to information about wanted persons.<sup>150</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW) said that officers at checkpoints with no access to digital lists could call some kind of clearing centre in order to cross-check the status of specific individuals approaching checkpoints in terms of whether they were wanted.<sup>151</sup>

According to some sources, the different branches of the security service do not always coordinate or share their wanted lists among each other.<sup>152</sup> This is due to the fact that there is an internal competition among the security services running the checkpoints where they try to prove that they are the best and most capable when it comes to catching persons on the wanted lists.<sup>153</sup>

Christopher Kozak (ISW) highlighted that the wanted lists were imperfect.<sup>154</sup> Sources noted that there had been examples of individuals mistaken for others on the wanted list<sup>155</sup> for instance due to name similarities<sup>156</sup>, individuals being released by one security branch and then immediately detained again by another<sup>157</sup>, individuals wanted for conscription successfully navigating checkpoints and being able to exit the country as well as individuals detained at checkpoints despite not having any issues with the regime in the first place<sup>158</sup>. Sources also mentioned cases of individuals whose names had appeared on wanted lists because someone had made false accusation against them due to private or commercial reasons.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Danish Red Cross: 273

<sup>146</sup> Mercy Corps: 337

<sup>147</sup> Syria Direct: 379

<sup>148</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 15, A diplomatic source in Beirut: 54, Amnesty International: 145, An international human rights organisation: 164, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 256, Syria Direct: 377

<sup>149</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 54, A humanitarian security organisation: 120, An international organisation in Syria: 194-195, World Health Organization (WHO): 412

<sup>150</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 15, Mercy Corps: 338, Syria Direct: 377

<sup>151</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 255

<sup>152</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 14, Amnesty International: 145, Mercy Corps: 338

<sup>153</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 14, An international organisation in Syria: 196

<sup>154</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 255

<sup>155</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 255

<sup>156</sup> Amnesty International: 145, An international human rights organisation: 164, Syria Direct: 380

<sup>157</sup> Amnesty International: 145

<sup>158</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 255

<sup>159</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 16, A diplomatic source in Beirut: 59, Amnesty International: 143-144

Wanted lists distributed to checkpoints are compiled based on information retrieved from either surveillance, investigations or from instances where the government regains control of a previously opposition-held area and discover lists of persons involved with the opposition.<sup>160</sup> Mercy Corps had heard that the list of wanted persons in Syria contained one and a half million names, including those wanted for military service, criminals and political activists. According to Mercy Corps, this wanted list also contained information on which security service branch that had listed the individual as wanted.<sup>161</sup>

#### **1.4.1.6. Treatment of family members of wanted individuals approaching checkpoints**

Family members or wives of persons affiliated with the opposition were at risk of facing discriminatory treatment, harassment or detention at checkpoints.<sup>162</sup> There have been cases of women being detained together with their children in order to put pressure on their husbands or family members, who are wanted by the government.<sup>163</sup>

Contrarily, a Damascus-based lawyer said that there had not been cases of family members of a wanted person being subjected to questioning or harassment or being detained when approaching checkpoints in Damascus. This is because the security services would usually not hesitate to search for and arrest the relatives right away instead of waiting for them approaching a checkpoint if the person were highly wanted.<sup>164</sup>

Christopher Kozak (ISW) considered that the reason that there had not been any reports on family members of armed opposition fighters experiencing difficulties at checkpoints recently was that such persons had either gone into hiding or had left government-held areas in Damascus City.<sup>165</sup>

#### **1.4.1.7. Impact of ethnic and religious background or place of origin on treatment at checkpoints**

The sources did not agree on what impact ethnic and religious background or place of origin had on freedom of movement and treatment by authorities at checkpoints.

According to some sources, people travelling to or from opposition-held areas would undergo more scrutiny at checkpoints.<sup>166</sup> Other sources said that people originating from certain areas, e.g. Darayya or other areas considered hotspots could in some instances face scrutiny, harassment or difficulties when passing a checkpoint.<sup>167</sup>

Contrarily, according to an international organisation in Syria, usually, checkpoint officers do not stop people due to their backgrounds; many internally displaced persons (IDP) from Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor live in Damascus, and they move around freely without facing difficulties at checkpoints.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 16

<sup>161</sup> Mercy Corps: 338

<sup>162</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 124, Amnesty International: 147-148, An international human rights organisation: 164 + 167, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 254, Lama Fakihi (HRW): 294, Syria Direct: 380-381

<sup>163</sup> Amnesty International: 148, An international human rights organisation: 167

<sup>164</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 18

<sup>165</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 254

<sup>166</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 17, A humanitarian security organisation: 121, Amnesty International: 146

<sup>167</sup> Lama Fakihi (HRW): 294, An international human rights organisation: 164, Mercy Corps: 339, Syria Direct: 380

<sup>168</sup> An international organisation in Syria: 193

HRW had anecdotal information that Sunni men of a certain age would be stopped and asked questions more often than Alawites or Christians.<sup>169</sup> Amnesty International advised that since 2014, persons with Sunni background or persons from Islamic State controlled areas risked being subjected to discriminatory treatment at checkpoints, although the source was not aware of the actual extent of such treatment.<sup>170</sup>

On the other hand, an international organisation in Syria considered that having a Sunni background was not, in itself, an obstacle for freedom of movement as many soldiers at checkpoints had Sunni background themselves.<sup>171</sup> According to this source, if the checkpoint personnel are suspicious of someone, it is mostly due to other factors, for instance that he/she carries a huge amount of money etc.<sup>172</sup>

According to a humanitarian security organisation, certain areas of Damascus City are off limits for certain ethnicities, such as the area surrounding the Sayyida Zainab shrine or the Bab al-Salam area, where Sunnis and sometimes Christians are either not allowed to go or are asked specifically about their purpose of going into the area. Bab Saghir and Sayyida Aisha, both traditionally religiously mixed areas, have during the last one to five years gradually changed to predominantly Shia areas – although at present not ‘off limit’ areas.<sup>173</sup>

The international organisation in Syria further noted that there had been cases where ethnic and religious background or place of origin had an impact on freedom of movement and treatment by authorities at checkpoints, but they were few, and in general, people did not face difficulties passing through checkpoints and moving around.<sup>174</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer advised that there was no discrimination at checkpoints in Damascus.<sup>175</sup>

#### **1.4.1.8. Treatment of other profiles at checkpoints**

Individuals suspected of being in contact with a wanted person was also mentioned by sources as another profile being at risk of facing discriminatory treatment, harassment or detention at checkpoints, and sources mentioned examples of a wrong number call or a call from a friend in East Ghouta as enough to put someone under suspicion.<sup>176</sup> Amnesty International further said that any person, who was an activist, human rights lawyer, a humanitarian worker or anyone who had made an anti-government post on Facebook, was at risk of being detained.<sup>177</sup> An international human rights organisation advised that unaccompanied women were extremely vulnerable when passing checkpoints.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Lama Fakih (HRW): 294

<sup>170</sup> Amnesty International: 146

<sup>171</sup> An international organisation in Syria: 193

<sup>172</sup> An international organisation in Syria: 193

<sup>173</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 126

<sup>174</sup> An international organisation in Syria: 193

<sup>175</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 17

<sup>176</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 60, A humanitarian security organisation: 124-133

<sup>177</sup> Amnesty International: 142

<sup>178</sup> An international human rights organisation: 167

#### **1.4.1.9. Corruption and extortion at checkpoints**

There were reports of widespread corruption and of extortion at checkpoints in Damascus City.<sup>179</sup> According to Syria Direct, checkpoint personnel had allegedly recently been extracting large bribes from civilians at checkpoints by the entrance to the city.<sup>180</sup>

#### **1.4.2. Freedom of movement in Yarmouk**

In March 2018, the southern parts of Damascus Province were classified as besieged since before 2016, and freedom of movement for civilians with few exemptions were limited to Islamic State areas or adjacent armed opposition areas.<sup>181</sup> There were, thus, only few entrances into the area,<sup>182</sup> and as a rule, there was no movement from Yarmouk to the government-held areas of Damascus.<sup>183</sup> The possibility to move in and out during the conflict had, however, been fluctuating. In the first quarter of 2018, some people were able to move in and out of the area for medical reasons.<sup>184</sup> In addition, students were often able to leave the Yarmouk Camp to study and to take their exams in neighbouring towns, and then return to Yarmouk afterwards.<sup>185</sup>

According to a humanitarian security organisation, access to the Yarmouk camp was very tightly controlled under Islamic State and was often closed for months. Islamic State posed travel restrictions for all males between 18 and 45 as they were considered to be of fighting age. Travel for other civilians, e.g. students, medical cases and government employees, was severely restricted, and Islamic State confiscated all documents, including ID-cards, of civilians who left the camp, thereby forcing them to return, since documents are needed for travel and everyday movement in government-held Syria. Furthermore, people from an Islamic State controlled area, who approached the authorities in order to get new papers, were perceived as Islamic State sympathizers and faced a real risk of being detained.<sup>186</sup>

Reports suggested that apart from a general fear of Islamic State, freedom of movement inside Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad had been limited by strict rules imposed on population in the area by Islamic State, for instance strict rules for how women should be dressed in public spaces.<sup>187</sup>

## **2. Returning to Syria, including entry in Syria via Damascus International Airport**

### **2.1. General pattern regarding return to Syria**

Before Syrians return from abroad, they will typically try to find out whether they have an outstanding issue with the Syrian authorities through friends, relatives or other personal contacts that are in the security

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<sup>179</sup> An international human rights organisation: 163, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 250 – 251, A diplomatic source in Beirut: 57, A humanitarian security organisation: 122

<sup>180</sup> Syria Direct: 379

<sup>181</sup> REACH: 351

<sup>182</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 127

<sup>183</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 129

<sup>184</sup> A humanitarian organisation: 86

<sup>185</sup> A humanitarian organisation: 77, Syria Direct: 371

<sup>186</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 128

<sup>187</sup> REACH: 355

services.<sup>188</sup> According to a diplomatic source in Beirut, there are 17 different branches of the security services in Syria with each branch drawing up their own lists of wanted individuals, and it is, thus, difficult for Syrians abroad to find out whether they are wanted by the regime, which leads to a reluctance to return.<sup>189</sup> Correspondingly, other sources noted that people who returned could not be completely certain on how they would be perceived by the regime when they return.<sup>190</sup>

Syria Direct knew people who had been travelling in and out of the airport several times, and then all of the sudden were arrested for just one Facebook post deemed to be an act of activism.<sup>191</sup> Lama Fakh (HRW) said that there was very little information on how returnees from Europe were treated upon their return.<sup>192</sup> Mercy Corps noted that how people were treated upon return may also depend on the officer in charge at the border.<sup>193</sup> Syria Direct pointed to cases of people realising upon return that their file against their expectations were not clean. However, the source underlined that such cases are limited.<sup>194</sup>

Reliable figures regarding returns from abroad are hard to come by,<sup>195</sup> but the number of returnees is generally estimated to be low.<sup>196</sup> Danish Red Cross assumed that there had not been any return to Damascus.<sup>197</sup> WHO considered though that many Syrians had returned to Damascus City from abroad. Especially men of military age, who had lived outside the country for more than four years, were now coming back because they could now pay the fee exempting them from military service. However, the source did not know the exact number of returnees who have come back to Syria from abroad.<sup>198</sup>

Although not able to verify the information, REACH stated that there had been reports about some Syrians who returned from Jordan through land borders to areas in Syria not controlled by the government.<sup>199</sup> Lama Fakh (HRW) noted that there had been mass expulsions of Syrians from Jordan.<sup>200</sup>

According to Lama Fakh (HRW), there have been reports of over 10,000 returns from Lebanon.<sup>201</sup> Some of these returns happened through negotiated deals. Others have returned because of a loss of legal status in Lebanon.<sup>202</sup> Similarly, it is the Danish Red Cross' view that larger flows from abroad often happen because neighbouring host countries push Syrian refugees back.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 63, Heiko Wimmen (ICG): 317, Mercy Corps: 340, Syria Direct: 385, A humanitarian security organisation: 132

<sup>189</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 63

<sup>190</sup> Heiko Wimmen (ICG): 317, Syria Direct: 386

<sup>191</sup> Syria Direct 386

<sup>192</sup> Lama Fakh (HRW): 301

<sup>193</sup> Mercy Corps: 344

<sup>194</sup> Syria Direct: 386

<sup>195</sup> A diplomatic source in Beirut: 62, A humanitarian security organisation: 130

<sup>196</sup> A humanitarian organisation: 88, A humanitarian security organisation: 130, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 258, Danish Red Cross: 275, Lama Fakh (HRW): 301

<sup>197</sup> Danish Red Cross: 275

<sup>198</sup> World Health Organization (WHO): 414

<sup>199</sup> REACH: 356

<sup>200</sup> Lama Fakh (HRW): 298

<sup>201</sup> Lama Fakh (HRW): 296-297

<sup>202</sup> For more information, the source referred to: Human Rights Watch, *Lebanon: Refugees in Border Zone at Risk – Aarsal Conditions Pressure Them to Return to Syria*, 20 September 2017, available at:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/20/lebanon-refugees-border-zone-risk> [accessed 17 May 2018]

<sup>203</sup> Red Cross: 275

Lama Fakihi also noted that Turkey had closed its borders and conducted mass expulsions, which was widely documented. There are currently speculations that Turkey will utilize its recent takeover of Afrin to create an area that will serve as a hub for refugees previously residing in Turkey.<sup>204</sup>

## 2.2. Entry in Syria via Damascus International Airport

Damascus International Airport is open, and people are travelling through the airport.<sup>205</sup> However, Lama Fakihi (HRW) highlighted that most Syrians returning from host countries in the region used the land borders to return<sup>206</sup>, and Mercy Corps considered that Syrians who had lived abroad for a long time usually used the Syrian-Lebanese land border to enter Syria.

Treatment of returnees at Damascus International Airport is a subject that is difficult to obtain corroborated information about.<sup>207</sup>

A humanitarian security organisation considered that the airport was strictly controlled by the Air Force Intelligence and heavily militarized.<sup>208</sup>

From public reporting, Lama Fakihi (HRW) knew that there may have been few cases of Syrians returning through the airport, but it is not common practice, and HRW did not have corroborated information on how they were treated by the authorities upon arrival.<sup>209</sup> The source anticipated that broadly speaking, people who had fled to Europe, particularly men, would be treated with suspicion in the event of their return to Syria.<sup>210</sup> Syria Direct stated that it was not uncommon for the Syrian Intelligence apparatus (*al-Mukhabarat*) to follow up with and investigate Syrians—especially men—who had recently returned to the country and to Damascus specifically.<sup>211</sup>

Syria Direct noted that there was a difference between people who left Syria before or after 2011 in terms of security checks upon return as those who left Syria before 2011 were not met with the same amount of suspicion upon return as persons who left after 2011. However, Syria Direct mentioned a concrete example of artists, who left Syria prior to 2011 and who were making art in support of the opposition while staying abroad. These people were arrested upon return to Syria.<sup>212</sup>

If a person is on a wanted list and enter Syria through Damascus Airport, he or she will be caught in the airport by the Syrian authorities.<sup>213</sup>

According to a Damascus-based lawyer, if people were not on any wanted lists, the Syrian authorities would in general not ask about what people did outside the country<sup>214</sup> and low-profile Sunni people who had lived

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<sup>204</sup> Lama Fakihi (HRW): 299

<sup>205</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 19, Syria Direct: 383

<sup>206</sup> Lama Fakihi (HRW): 300, Mercy Corps: 343

<sup>207</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 132, Lama Fakihi (HRW): 301

<sup>208</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 132

<sup>209</sup> Lama Fakihi (HRW): 301

<sup>210</sup> As an elaboration to the source's statement, the source referred to this article: The Irish Times, *Arrests and torture of Syrian refugees returning home reported – Evidence grows of systematic abuse of vast numbers of Syrian going back from Europe*, 17 March 2018, available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/middle-east/arrests-and-torture-of-syrian-refugees-returning-home-reported-1.3429762> [accessed 17 May 2018]

<sup>211</sup> Syria Direct: 387

<sup>212</sup> Syria Direct: 384

<sup>213</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 20, A humanitarian security organisation: 132

<sup>214</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 21

abroad for a while would not have a problem returning to Syria through the airport.<sup>215</sup> However, people who have worked in certain countries, for instance Iraq, might be asked to come to an interview with a branch of the security service to clarify why they worked there.<sup>216</sup> In continuation hereof, Mercy Corps said that if a person had visa and stamps from Turkey in his or her passports, the authorities would stop this person upon arrival and ask questions about his/her stay abroad.<sup>217</sup>

### 2.3. Consequences of illegal exit

According to a Damascus-based lawyer, illegal exit will be revealed at the border when they check the passenger's name digitally against a database available at the border. If there is no access to the database, illegal exit can still be found out by checking the passengers' travel documents for exit stamp.<sup>218</sup> Correspondingly, Syria Direct said that a travel document would reveal how a person left the country.<sup>219</sup>

The Damascus-based lawyer advised that basically, people who left the country illegally would not return through an official border, as they would be punished for their illegal exit, and they would certainly be brought in by the security service for investigation.<sup>220</sup>

The Damascus-based lawyer explained that the punishment for having exited illegally depended on whether the illegal exit was viewed strictly as a legal issue or also as a security issue.<sup>221</sup>

According to Art.263-270 of the Syrian Penal Code, the punishment for Illegal exit, when viewed as a security issue, may vary and can entail up to 25 years of imprisonment. For instance, if the authorities have evidence that a person has a connection with certain groups outside the country, they will charge a person for cooperating with an enemy of the state.<sup>222</sup>

According to Presidential Decree 8/2016 of 17.02.2016 added to other Pardons of 02.05.2012 and 18.11.2013 and 25.07.2015, all low-profile refugees, i.e. persons, whose names are not on the wanted list and who have only left the country shortly due to fighting and bombardments, will be eligible for a pardon.<sup>223</sup>

Those who return and are not pardoned within 24 hours will be kept for three months for having left illegally.<sup>224</sup>

However, the Damascus-based lawyer mentioned that there had been instances where the Syrian authorities had looked the other way with regards to the illegal exit of refugees from Syria. This has been the case for refugees who have fled the country due to and in direct connection with specific fighting

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<sup>215</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 20

<sup>216</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 21

<sup>217</sup> Mercy Corps: 341

<sup>218</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 23

<sup>219</sup> Syria Direct: 388

<sup>220</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 24

<sup>221</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 26

<sup>222</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 27

<sup>223</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 28

<sup>224</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 29

incidents, but who then have returned shortly thereafter, for instance within a day or a shorter period of time.<sup>225</sup>

According to the Damascus-based lawyer, a pardon for persons, who have left Syria through an unofficial border, was also issued in 2017. The pardon states that such persons should visit the Syrian embassy in the country in which they are staying in order to legalise their status. The authorities will subsequently conduct an investigation as to why that person has left the country illegally. People, who have been cleared through an embassy, will not be investigated or face any other reprisals for their illegal exit upon return to Syria. All low-profile refugees would be able to do this.<sup>226</sup>

A humanitarian security organisation and Lama Fakh (HRW) stated that persons who had left Syria illegally were considered traitors by the Syrian regime<sup>227</sup> and the humanitarian security organisation further assumed that having left illegally would raise suspicions about a person.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 30

<sup>226</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 25

<sup>227</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 133, Lama Fakh (HRW): 301+302

<sup>228</sup> A humanitarian security organisation: 133

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## Appendix A: Meeting minutes

### A Damascus-based lawyer

Damascus, 20 March 2018

### General security situation in Damascus Province

#### Security situation in Damascus City

1. Damascus City is fully controlled by the Syrian authorities. The security apparatus in the Syrian capital consists of Syrian Arab Army (*al-Jaysh al-Arabi as-Suri*, الجيش العربي السوري) units and various branches of the security apparatus.
2. The security situation in Damascus City is affected by the fighting in Eastern Ghouta (*Ghoutet Dimasq as-Sharqiyya*, غوطة دمشق الشرقية) in terms of shelling hitting in the city. The frequency of the shelling fluctuates.
3. Mortar attacks affect the life of people in Damascus, but only to a small degree. People in Damascus City has gotten used to the circumstances that they are living under. In those instances where the number of projectiles hitting in Damascus is very high or if there have been many casualties, people often stay indoors. However, in general the inhabitants of Damascus try to lead a normal life, which includes going to work as well as going out to restaurants etc.
4. In mid-March 2018, the situation with regard to shelling of Damascus City has improved compared to the situation a couple of weeks before. In the end of February 2018/beginning of March 2018, there was a series of days where forty to fifty rockets or other projectiles a day struck the city. After the Syrian Arab Army (*al-Jaysh al-Arabi as-Suri*, الجيش العربي السوري) has entered Eastern Ghouta, the shelling has been reduced to between three and five incidents each day. The source considers the falling number of mortar attacks as an indication of the diminishing capacity of opposition groups.
5. The type of projectiles that hit Damascus City is primarily old unsophisticated mortar weapons. In addition, homemade rockets are used. These weapons are not good for aiming at particular targets, which has resulted in civilian casualties. In the beginning of March 2018, a school in Bab Touma (باب توما) was hit, and three students were killed. In February 2018, a mortar hit a bus, and eight people were killed. In January 2018, a school bus in Bab Touma was hit, and 21 people were killed.
6. The places in Damascus City that are primarily hit by mortar rockets are the Abbasayeen Square (*Sahet al-'Abbasayeen*, ساحة العباسيين), Zabadani Street (*Sharea' az-Zabadani*, شارع الزبداني), Shaghour Street (*Sharea' ash-Shaghour*, شارع الشاغور), the Bab Touma neighbourhood and the fruit and vegetable market in Old Damascus (دمشق القديمة). A majority of mortars have struck the old city in Damascus.
7. During 2017, a few suicide attacks were seen in Damascus City. One of these attacks took place at the Palace of Justice (*Qasr al-Adl*, قصر العدل) in March 2017. Thirty-one lawyers and civilians died in this attack and sixty got wounded. In July 2017, two vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices

(VBIED) were detonated at the Liberation Square (*Sahet at-Tahrir*, ساحة التحرير). Twenty people died in this attack and fifty-three got wounded.

8. In the first quarter of 2018, no suicide attacks have been reported in Damascus City.
9. Around four to five government officials and military officers were killed by car bombs in Damascus City in 2017. In addition, a lawyer who worked with the governor of Damascus was assassinated with a gun. He opened his door at home and was shot immediately.

### Security situation in Yarmouk

10. A wing of Islamic State is based in Hajar al-Aswad (الحجر الأسود). This armed faction has attacked the Palestinian refugee camp called the Yarmouk Camp (*Mukhayyim al-Yarmouk*, مخيم اليرموك). In addition, the same people are fighting in Qadam (القدم). However, everything around the Yarmouk Camp and Hajar al-Aswad is controlled by the Syrian Arab Army.

### Assessment of future security situation in Damascus Province

11. The source anticipates that the government's operation in Eastern Ghouta will come to an end soon, and the opposition fighters will enter an agreement with the government and be evacuated to Idlib (إدلب) or other areas.
12. After the fighting in Eastern Ghouta is over, the strategy of the armed opposition will change although it is not clear yet what their new strategy would be, and the opposition has not succeeded in outlining a common plan or idea about a new rule for Syria. However, the source does not believe that opposition groups will shift into insurgency mode as a new strategy.
13. Syrian authorities are reluctant to use the Syrian Arab Army to fight armed opposition groups in the southern outskirts of Damascus. Instead, they liaise with pro-government Palestinian troops in Yarmouk to support them in fighting Islamic State and other anti-government armed groups in the area. Unofficially, Syrian security forces will supply the Palestine Liberation Army (*Jaysh al-Tahrir al-Filastini*, PLA, جيش التحرير الفلسطيني) with weapons, and they will provide air force support during PLA-attacks. Such attacks will be launched as soon as the fighting in Eastern Ghouta is finished, and it will probably not be a long campaign (maybe one week), since Islamic State in the Yarmouk-area is not that strong and resourceful.

### Freedom of movement in Damascus Province

#### Freedom of movement in Damascus City

14. Inside Damascus City there are checkpoints run by different divisions under the security apparatus, e.g. the Air Force Intelligence (المخابرات الجوية), the Republican Guard (الحرس الجمهوري), the 4th Armoured Division (الفرقة الرابعة), the Political Security Directorate (إدارة الأمن السياسي) and the Military Intelligence (المخابرات العسكرية). The different branches of the security service do not always coordinate or share their wanted lists. This is due to the fact that there is an internal competition among the security services running the checkpoints where they try to prove that they are the best and most capable when it comes to catching persons on the wanted lists. As a part of this competition, they may check up on each other's work. Sometimes, when they catch a person on

the list, they do not inform each other about it, partly because they do not trust each other and also because they want to arrest other persons through the arrested.

15. The primary purpose of the checkpoint in Damascus City is to check if people passing by are wanted or have to be conscripted for military service. ID cards are checked at all checkpoints. Some checkpoints have laptops, so they can check names against the wanted lists electronically. At other checkpoints, they have physical lists. Not all checkpoints have the same wanted lists.
16. The wanted lists distributed to checkpoints are compiled based on information retrieved from either surveillance, investigations or from instances where the government regains control of a previously opposition-held area and discover lists of persons involved with the opposition. There are also instances of people raising false accusations against commercial competitors, which sometimes leads to their names being added to the wanted lists.
17. There is no discrimination at checkpoints in Damascus. There might have been rare cases of discrimination with regard to place of origin and religious background at the beginning of the conflict in 2011 and 2012, but not now. However, people who are coming out of opposition held areas are checked thoroughly.
18. There have not been cases of family members of a wanted person being subjected to questioning or harassment or being detained when approaching checkpoints in Damascus. This is because the security services will usually not wait for family members to pass through a checkpoint to catch them in order to put pressure on the actual wanted people. Instead, if they want the person badly, they will arrest his relatives immediately.

## Returnees

### Returnees via Damascus International Airport

19. The airport is open, and people are travelling through the airport. However, because of international sanctions there are no European flights to the airport. Only planes coming from Arabic countries like Lebanon, Kuwait and maybe Tunisia are currently landing in Damascus International Airport.
20. If wanted people try to re-enter Syria through Damascus airport, they will be caught directly in the airport by the Syrian authorities. However, low profile Sunni people who have lived abroad for a while will not have a problem returning to Syria through the airport.
21. If people are not on any wanted lists, the Syrian authorities will in general not ask about what people did outside the country. However, people who have worked in certain countries might be asked to come to an interview with a branch of the security service to clarify why they worked there. Everybody who has worked in Iraq will be checked.
22. Syrian men, who have not completed their military service and who have not resolved their status before they arrive in Syria, will have to go directly to military service.

### Consequences of illegal exit

23. Illegal exit will be revealed at the border when they check the passenger's name digitally against a database available at the border. If there is no access to the database, for instance due to lack of electricity, illegal exit can still be found out by checking the passengers' travel documents for exit stamp.
24. Basically, people who left the country illegally will not return through an official border as they will be punished for their illegal exit, and they will certainly be brought in by the security service for investigation.
25. A pardon for persons who have left Syria through an unofficial border was issued in 2017. The pardon states that such persons should visit the Syrian embassy in the country in which they are staying in order to legalise their status. The authorities will investigate why that person has left the country illegally. They will check if there are any problems, connections or affiliations with extremist Islamic groups. Currently, those with extremist religious views are of particular interest for the government as throughout the war, religion has been widely utilized for a political uprising against the government. People who have been cleared through an embassy, will not be investigated or face any other reprisals for their illegal exit upon return to Syria. All low profile refugees would be able to do this.
26. The punishment for having exited illegally depends on whether the illegal exit is viewed strictly as a legal issue or also as a security issue.
27. According to Art.263-270 of the Syrian Penal Code, the punishment for Illegal exit when viewed as a security issue may vary and can entail up to 25 years of imprisonment. If the authorities have evidence that a person has a connection with certain groups outside the country, they will charge a person for cooperating with an enemy of the state.
28. According to Presidential Decree 8/2016 of 17.02.2016 added to other Pardons of 02.05.2012 and 18.11.2013 and 25.07.2015, all low-profile refugees, i.e. persons whose names are not on the wanted list and who have only left the country shortly due to fighting and bombardments, will be eligible for a pardon.
29. Those who return and are not pardoned within 24 hours will be kept for three months for having left illegally.
30. There have been instances where the Syrian authorities have looked the other way with regards to the illegal exit of refugees from Syria. This has been the case for refugees who have fled the country due to and in direct connection with specific fighting incidents, but who then return shortly thereafter, for instance within a day or a shorter period of time.
31. For instance, in June 2012 there were some refugees, who had exited Syria illegally via the border crossing of Tel Kalakh (تلالكح) by Eastern Homs on the Lebanese border. When they returned to Syria, they were immediately accepted and they faced no problems with the authorities due to their illegal exit.

32. However, the source stresses that this is only the case for refugees who return as soon as an attack or bombardment has ended. If one waits too long to return to Syria, for instance three months or so, the situation is different.

### *Updated information added to the meeting minutes*

When the source approved the meeting minutes (23 May 2018), following updated information was added regarding the current security situation in Damascus province:

33. There have certainly been changes in the security situation in Damascus City after the government took over Eastern Ghouta.
34. On 21 May 2018 Yarmouk was retaken by the government, and Damascus City and its surroundings have become completely secure.

### **A diplomatic source in Beirut**

Beirut, 19 March 2018

### **General security situation in Damascus Province**

#### **Security situation in Damascus City**

35. With regards to the development of the military security situation and the prevalence of security incidents or combat operations in Damascus city within the last year, there has been an increase in the number of mortars hitting Damascus city in comparison with the situation last year which is mainly due to the intensification of the government's offensive on Ghouta.
36. The shelling of Damascus city is retaliatory in nature, in the sense that opposition groups primarily fire mortars as a response to the regime's offensive.
37. Since mid-February 2018, the number of mortars being fired towards Damascus has been consistently high with some days up to 100 mortars impacting. On average, around twenty to thirty mortars are fired towards Damascus with some areas experiencing a higher number of shelling than others. There are no safe areas in Damascus as mortars fired from Eastern Ghouta (*Ghoutet Dimasq as-Sharqiyya*, غوطة دمشق الشرقية) have the capacity to reach the entire city.
38. The mortars have struck military installations or government facilities, for instance the Officers' Club close to Ummayyad square and the Parc of the Parliament, but are mostly impacting in areas with a high concentration of civilians such as in traffic junctions, schools and hospitals. Even the smaller mortars that are used have the capacity to cause massive civilian casualties. Armed opposition groups apply tactics similar to the tactics applied by the regime: They bomb the civilians intensively to put pressure on the other party.

39. Some areas have been particularly vulnerable to mortar attacks, such as Dahiyat al-Assad (ضاحية الاسد), Qassaa (القصاص), Bab Touma (باب توما), the area surrounding Ummayyad Square (ساحة الأمويين) as well as the central parts of Damascus where the ministries are located. Since February, there have also been mortars hitting in Mezzeh (المزة) and Malki (المالكي). However, the vast majority of mortars hit in areas with close proximity to Eastern Ghouta.
40. There are also areas that have not been affected by shelling, such as the most southern parts of Damascus<sup>229</sup>.
41. Besides shelling and mortar attacks, there have also been some high-profile suicide attacks in Damascus. For instance, last year there were suicide attacks targeting the Palace of Justice (*Qasr al-Adl*, قصر العدل), close to Souk Hamediyah and the attack on a bus of Shia pilgrims at Bab al Saghir. Most suicide attacks are however intercepted by checkpoints (e.g. on airport road). As far as the source remembers, there were 2-3 successful suicide attacks carried out in Damascus City during the previous year. To the source's knowledge, there have not been any suicide attacks in 2018. However, the source underlines that he may be wrong and the delegation has to check information on this available in open sources.
42. The source has heard of assassinations of government security employees in Euphrates Valley (وادي الفرات) but not in Damascus city.

#### Security situation in Yarmouk

43. Qadam (القدم) and Hajar al-Aswad (الحجر الأسود), located south/southwest of Yarmouk has been under the control of Islamic State for several years. There are however ongoing clashes between Islamic State and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in the camp as both groups are pushing to gain full control of the area.
44. Previously, there were very few government offensives against Islamic State in the southern suburbs of Damascus. However, the government has reportedly recently initiated assaults on Islamic State positions in Yarmouk, Qadam and Hajar Al-Aswad.
45. There are not many civilians left in Yarmouk camp. Some estimates put the number of civilians in Yarmouk at anywhere between 4,000 and 8,000 individuals which is probably overestimated. Operators dominating the delivery of Humanitarian assistance after the forced departure of UNRWA have an interest in making sure that the estimates of civilians living in Yarmouk remain high as it provides them with more goods they can subsequently sell on the black market.

#### Assessment of future security situation in Damascus Province

46. The general security risk towards Damascus Province will diminish when Eastern Ghouta falls under the control of the government. However, it is the source's assessment that fewer frontlines in the future could result in a rise in suicide attacks.

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<sup>229</sup> When approving the meeting minutes, the source added that this changed during recent Yarmouk campaign, but the campaign has now come to an end again. (ed.)

47. In terms of strategy, it is difficult to predict which area the government will focus on after Eastern Ghouta due to the fact that the situation is extremely fluid and dynamic. However, it is likely that the government will focus on either Yarmouk or the Rastan and Talbiseh-area (*Mintaqat ar-Rastan wat-Talbiseh*, منطقة الرستن والتليسة), depending on how the situation in the Kurdish areas develops.

#### Internally displaced persons in Damascus City

48. Internally displaced persons (IDP) in Damascus are spread out over the city and the type of housing they are staying in depends on their financial means.
49. The highest concentration of IDPs will be found in neighborhoods with more affordable housing in Damascus city and suburbs. Jaramana (جرمانا), southeast of Damascus city located right at the exit road between then ring road and Damascus International Airport, has since the outset of the war been a hub for IDPs and has according to the current estimates attracted a total number of two million IDPs.
50. More affluent areas, such as Mezzeh and Malki, attract IDPs who are able to match the high prices of housing.
51. Finally, there are also IDPs within Damascus city who are living in parks and on benches.

#### Freedom of movement in Damascus Province

52. There used to be 13 checkpoints between Damascus and the border with Lebanon but there are only two checkpoints left.

#### Freedom of movement in Damascus City

53. There are fewer checkpoints in Damascus city in comparison with prior years for a variety of reasons. Firstly, most checkpoints are placed in areas adjoining an active frontline or conflict zone. Secondly, the government does not have the resources to keep all the checkpoints as it needs resources for ongoing offensives and the push to retake more territory within the entire country. Thirdly, there have been several complaints by civilians, who find that the massive number of checkpoints severely restricted their freedom of movement. In general, the government tries to find a balance between securing the capital by well-functioning and regulated checkpoints and on the other hand not damaging the image of Damascus as a safe and stable city.
54. The source has not seen checkpoints with electronic measures apart from one on the road between the Lebanese border and Damascus. Most checkpoints are functioning fine with paper lists of wanted persons.
55. Checkpoints were previously run by different government entities but are now mainly controlled by the Republican Guard (الحرس الجمهوري).
56. ID checks are being conducted at every neighborhood, but in some cases it is possible to pass a checkpoint faster if the guards manning the checkpoints either know or recognize you.
57. Corruption continues to be widespread. Even before the war, when you for instance took your car with you across the border and you needed a stamp, it was common to pay a small sum to be able to get that stamp. For people of means who want to pass a checkpoint quickly and hassle-free, it is

not uncommon to bribe officials as a 'friendly gesture' by giving them a package of cigarettes or the like.

58. Generally, Syrians who do not have any outstanding issues with the government normally have nothing to fear when passing checkpoints. However, Syrians of military service age and who has not yet served or Syrians who are on a wanted list are at risk of being arrested when passing checkpoints. Men of military service age or people, who are afraid that they are on a list, often limit their movements within the city and refrain from approaching checkpoints. With regards to freedom of movement, one thing is how your status is according to the law and another thing is one's self-perception.
59. There have been instances of false accusations being put forward by someone that for instance has a personal grudge with another person and views it as a possibility to get rid of that person by accusing him of doing something criminal and thereby causing that his name is added to a wanted list.
60. There have been cases of individuals being labeled 'guilty by association' because of being contacted by a person wanted by the government – even a wrong number call can be enough. Such persons may face difficulties when approaching a checkpoint because their name may be put on a wanted list without their knowledge. This was a practice even before the conflict.

#### Freedom of movement in Yarmouk

61. There are only few NGO's and armed entities that are allowed access to Yarmouk, but generally access to these areas is extremely restricted, even for humanitarian agencies such as UNRWA that lost access to the camp around two years ago.

#### Returnees

62. With regards to the prevalence of refugees returning to Syria from abroad, the source only has anecdotal evidence on this matter and highlights that the fact that the term returnee is not defined or applied consistently in official figures makes it difficult to rely on official figures.
63. Since there are 17 different branches of the security services in Syria with each branch drawing up their own lists of wanted individuals, most Syrians abroad have a difficult time determining whether they are wanted by the regime, which leads to a reluctance to return. However, while it is rarely possible to have one's name checked against all lists, it is fairly common for Syrians to check whether their names are registered in some of the lists with the assistance of friends or relatives.

#### *Updated information added to the meeting minutes*

When the source approved the meeting minutes (5 June 2018), following updated information was added regarding the current security situation in Damascus province:

64. The security situation in Damascus City has changed since since the government has retaken control of Eastern Ghouta: there has been a reduction in incoming fire and there are no longer frontlines close to the city.

65. The regime has taken control over Yarmouk. The situation is still not fully clear. However, the area has been subjected to massive physical destruction.

## A diplomatic source in Damascus

Damascus, 21 March 2018

### General security situation in Damascus Province

#### Security situation in Damascus City

66. The security situation in Damascus City was at its most insecure point in 2012 and 2013. Since then the situation has improved. This year (i.e. 2017 and 2018) the source's staff's movements are restricted to the central parts of the city. In terms of security, the biggest problem within these central parts of the city is the mortars fired from rebel groups in the suburbs. In the beginning of 2017, the situation was good; however, the situation is now becoming very insecure again. It is a matter of being cautious to not be in the wrong place at the wrong time.
67. The areas that are mostly affected by mortars and shelling are: Old Damascus (*Dimasq al-Qadima*, باب توما (Bab Touma), (دمشق القديمة), (ركن الدين) Rukn al-Din (جرمانا), (Jaramana باب توم), (On 20 March 2018, the sports complex in Mezzeh (المزة) was shelled. ضاحية الأسد).
68. The mortars used by the opposition groups do not have the capability of targeting specific targets. They are mostly fired towards Damascus in the mornings and afternoons when children are going to or from school. Mortars are mainly hitting Christian areas of Damascus, e.g. Bab Sharqi (باب شرقي) and Bab Touma.
69. There have been few suicide attacks, e.g. the attacks on a police station and the Palace of Justice (*Qasr al-Adl*, قصر العدل) in 2017.

#### Security situation in Yarmouk

70. With the ongoing offensive in Eastern Ghouta (*Ghoutet Dimasq as-Sharqiyya*, غوطة دمشق الشرقية), Yarmouk is not currently a focus area. However, lately there have been movements in Yarmouk, and Islamic State is advancing on other rebel positions. There were clashes between regime forces and Islamic State in Qadam (القدم) throughout the week before the interview with the source. A few months before the interview with the source, there were clashes between the Free Syrian Army (FSA, *al-Jaysh as-Suri al-Hurr*, الجيش السوري الحر) and Islamic State, which resulted in Islamic State gaining more territory. It has been publicly announced by the Syrian regime that when the campaign in Eastern Ghouta is over, the Yarmouk-area will be next.

### Updated information added to the meeting minutes

When the source approved the meeting minutes (14 May 2018), following updated information was added regarding the current security situation in Damascus province:

71. As far as new development concerns, the security situation in Damascus has improved since the government has retaken control of Eastern Ghouta. There are no more mortars from that part of the city. At the same time several "reconciliations" were agreed upon and buses are transporting the armed rebels to Idlib. On 9 May 2018, a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) exploded in al-Mazraa, in front of the café at Maysat Square, not far from the Russian Embassy. The result was that two people were killed and 14 injured.
72. During the operation in the southern part of Damascus (Yarmouk, Hajar al-Aswad, Babbila), there were some mortars again, coming from that part of the city. Nowadays, when the Syrian army has regained control of the southern part of Damascus, the security situation is much better and calm.

## A humanitarian organisation

Damascus, 21 March 2018

### General security situation in Damascus Province

#### Security situation in Damascus City

73. In social media, there are a lot of reports about mortar fire from areas under opposition control hitting on Damascus City. No reports are noted from the Yarmouk area. In general, the area has been quiet in that regard.
74. Social media has previously reported that some suicide attacks aiming for targets in Damascus City originated from the Yarmouk-area. However, this information cannot be verified by the source.

#### Security situation in Yarmouk

75. Before the conflict in Syria, 160,000 Palestinians lived in the Yarmouk Camp (*Mukhayyim al-Yarmouk*, مخيم اليرموك) and surroundings. From 2012 and onward, people started leaving the camp due to the clashes in the camp. Currently, 12,000 Palestinian refugees remain in the camp and its surrounding areas.<sup>230</sup>
76. Yarmouk area incorporates (الحيـر الأسود) Hajr al-Aswad (اليرموك), Yarmouk Camp (مخيم اليرموك) and other surrounding areas. The Yarmouk area is largely controlled by Islamic State. The surrounding areas: Yalda (يلدا), Babbila (ببـيلا) and Beit Sahm (بيت سحم) are controlled by other armed opposition groups.
77. In the first quarter of 2018, there were few reported clashes in the greater Yarmouk area, including Hajr al-Aswad, Yalda, Babbila and Beit Sahm. Currently, there is an on-going negotiation between the government and the opposition groups controlling the area, but no agreement has so far been reached.<sup>231</sup> The armed groups that are controlling the Yarmouk-area tried to enforce their

<sup>230</sup> When approving the meeting minutes (30 May 2018), the source noted that an estimated 100 civilians were now remaining in Yarmouk and up to 12,000 in Yalda, Babila and Beit Sahem (*ed.*)

<sup>231</sup> When approving the meeting minutes (30 May 2018), the source noted that an agreement had now been reached with all parties. (*ed.*)

curriculum upon schools in the area. However, students are often able to leave the Yarmouk camp to study and to take their exams in Yalda, and then return to Yarmouk afterwards. The students usually go back, since they live with their families in the camp.

- 78. It is difficult to verify or obtain information about civilian casualties caused by clashes in the Yarmouk Camp.
- 79. Based on information from social media, there have been reports of execution of people by Islamic State. Additionally, a number of civilians have been killed or injured due to clashes although the extent of casualties is unclear.

#### Assessment of future security situation in Damascus Province

- 80. The general security situation in the Damascus area, i.e. Damascus City and suburbs, is volatile and is changing rapidly. According to the trend seen, the opposition-controlled areas in the whole Damascus area will be retaken and come under Government control in coming months.

#### Internally displaced persons in Damascus City

- 81. Eighty pct. of the Palestinian population in Syria are living in Damascus and suburbs (riff Damascus). Palestinian families tend to settle together in the same areas.
- 82. In response to earlier displacement (i.e. not necessarily recent displacements from Eastern Ghouta), a number of IDP shelters have been opened by the government and a UN Agency. Basic emergency humanitarian assistance is being provided by different humanitarian actors. As the continuation of shelters is not a sustainable solution, IDPs tend to move out of shelters as soon as they get the opportunity, or if they have the ability to acquire affordable accommodation in other areas.
- 83. In January 2017, estimated 2,300 IDPs, primarily Palestinians, were residing in UNRWA run collective shelters. The number has now reduced to 1,500.<sup>232</sup>
- 84. In general, IDPs in Damascus prefer to return to areas where they originate from if possible and providing that there are no restrictions of movements. Likewise, civilians originating from the Yarmouk Camp would prefer to return. The primary reason for this is that rent and life in general is very expensive in Damascus City in addition to the symbolic nature of the camp for the Palestinian community.
- 85. Regarding civilians leaving Eastern Ghouta, there were a number of government run collective shelters opened in response to persons displaced from Eastern Ghouta. Civilians are subjected to security screening by the Syrian authorities. IDPs are generally prevented from entering Damascus City until they have undergone the security screening. In general, men between the age of fifteen and sixty years coming to Damascus City from opposition-held areas undergo a higher degree of scrutiny as there is generally a high level of suspicion around civilians from Eastern Ghouta.

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<sup>232</sup> When approving the meeting minutes, the source advised that all UNRWA collective shelters were closed in May 2018.

Typically, men will either stay in Government run collective shelters until they are cleared or they will be enrolled in pro-government forces. It is easier for women and children to leave Eastern Ghouta on the condition that they are able to provide a sponsor.

### Freedom of movement in Damascus province

#### Freedom of movement in Yarmouk

86. The Yarmouk Camp, is accessed via two checkpoints; one governmental and one with armed opposition groups in Yalda. The possibility to move in and out during the conflict has been fluctuating. In the first quarter of 2018, some people were able to move in and out, e.g. medical cases. The last time the source was able to enter the camp and deliver humanitarian assistance was in 2015 and to Yalda from May 2016.
87. Palestinian refugees facing difficulties accessing humanitarian assistance can generally delegate to someone to collect their assistance on their behalf. As for all Palestinian refugees in Syria, refugees living in Yarmouk camp can also use the delegation system. In recent years, when checkpoints were closed, a small amount of goods has generally been able to enter the area. There are very few services remaining in Yarmouk including medical, electricity and water.

### Returnees

88. There is limited information about Palestinian returnees from abroad. However, numbers are estimated to be low. The number of people leaving Syria is still higher than the number of people coming back. The current trend is that people are staying in the countries where they sought refuge. A great number of people that have left Syria had an individual reason to leave, including avoiding conscription.
89. Palestinian returnees registered with GAPAR are treated in a similar way by Syrian authorities as other Syrians returning.

### Updated information added to the meeting minutes

When the source approved the meeting minutes (30 May 2018), following updated information was added regarding the current security situation in Damascus province:

90. Since the meeting, security situation has changed dramatically. The whole Yarmouk area and surroundings (i.e. Yalda (يَلْدَا), Babbila (بَبِيلَا) and Beit Sahm (بَيْت سَحْم)) are now controlled by the government.
91. On 21 May it was officially announced by the Government that all remaining opposition groups had left Damascus area.<sup>233</sup> Access to the humanitarian community is approved through an interagency convoy, however a date is yet to be announced.

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<sup>233</sup> BBC reported on 21 May 2018: *'The Syrian military has declared that it has taken full control of all areas around the capital, Damascus, for the first time in six years. "Damascus and its surroundings... are completely secure,"*

## A humanitarian security organisation

Beirut, 13 March 2018

### General security situation in Damascus Province

92. Regarding the general security situation in Damascus Province it should be noted that the area is split between two areas: government-held areas and opposition/Islamic State-controlled areas.
93. In government-held areas, the predominant threat has been indirect fire, including artillery mortars etc. that are being fired from Eastern Ghouta (*Ghoutet Dimasq as-Sharqiyya*, غوطة دمشق الشرقية). Faylaq al-Rahman (فيلق الرحمن) is the predominant group firing towards Damascus although other groups such as Jaysh al-Islam (جيش الإسلام), Fajr al-Umma (فجر الأمة) and Ahrar al-Sham (أحرار الشام) are also thought to contribute.
94. While approximately 90 pct. of the current threats with regards to the security situation in Damascus originate from indirect fire, such as mortars, another prominent threat is improvised explosive devices, car bombs, suicide vehicles and body-borne suicide bombs, the planning of which is assessed to originate from the opposition/Islamic State-held areas in southern Damascus. During the last two years, there have been 26 of such attacks in Damascus and its immediate environs.
95. Jobar (جوبر), while connected to Eastern Ghouta, is administratively within the city limits of Damascus Province and at the eastern part of the city. Jobar is an isolated and contained opposition controlled area, and is mainly controlled by Faylaq al-Rahman. There are no tunnels or crossing points to other areas above ground since the Qaboun (القابون) and Barza (برزة) pockets were taken over by the Syrian Army in May 2016. People in Jobar are mostly fighters and the number of civilians in the area is low.
96. The area has suffered heavy bombardments from barrel bombs (including naval sea mines) and airstrikes dropped from airplanes. In addition, the area has been subjected to intense shelling from the use of artillery, mortars, rockets and howitzers. During the past three years, there has been an average of eighty impacts a week on Jobar.

### Security situation in Damascus City

97. Conflict activity often impacts daily life and travel around the city. At certain times of the day there are not many people on the streets, especially during the afternoon, and this trend is prominent across the city.
98. The indirect fire fluctuates during the year and often spikes and correlates with the government of Syria's military operations in Ghouta or with high profile visits by Russian delegates in Damascus.

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*spokesman Gen Ali Mayhoub said on state television. The announcement came after troops cleared Islamic State (IS) militants from the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp and the Hajar al-Aswad district."* BBC 21 May 2018  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-44198304> (ed.)

99. At the moment such activities are quite high given the focus on Eastern Ghouta. Last year there was an average of sixty to seventy indirect fire events per month with an average of two to three projectiles per event. However, during the last two months the shelling has escalated. At the moment, Damascus City is a high-risk environment which impacts the daily life of Damascenes of which many are avoiding the streets as much as possible, especially during the afternoon.
100. In February 2018, there were 235 incidents involving multiple projectiles, which in comparison is five times higher than the number of incidents reported in December 2017. During the two first weeks of March 2018, 82 incidents have so far been reported which is the same figure as the whole of December 2017. The numbers are still high and the highest number of incidents prior to the current situation was in August 2015 where 140 incidents were reported.
101. Mortars fired from Eastern Ghouta have the range (5 – 9 km) to reach the entire city of Damascus, which means that there is no such thing as a safe area of Damascus. The reason why the mortars have mainly been hitting the old town of Damascus is not because the mortars do not have the range to hit other areas but solely because the opposition groups in Eastern Ghouta are choosing to aim for these areas and have not decided to fire at longer ranges.
102. Generally, indirect fire, including mortars, have a range of five to nine kilometres (depending on firing conditions, weather conditions etc), but the impact of the mortars is not very accurate for a variety of reasons. Firstly, these kinds of weapons are not precision weapons. At best, they hit with a precision of 100 to 200 meters. Secondly, armed opposition groups in Ghouta do not target precisely due to the fact that their firing positions are often from vehicles that do not have a stable platform. Even a small centimetre change will result in a huge range in where the mortars will impact. Furthermore, mortar attacks on Damascus are often retaliations for the government's attacks on Eastern Ghouta and the armed opposition groups therefore very quickly set up their mortars and rockets and fire them equally fast. Finally, the armed opposition groups in Eastern Ghouta rarely use spotters when firing mortars and rockets.
103. Due to the above-mentioned reasons, the indirect fire, including the mortars that are being fired by opposition groups from Eastern Ghouta are generally impacting indiscriminately.
104. With regard to suicide bombings, two trends have emerged recently:  
Firstly, Islamic State has increasingly succeeded in conducting suicide attacks within Damascus City in 2017, where Islamic State previously mainly conducted suicide attacks in the outskirts of Damascus City, in Rif Dimashq in 2016. Added to this, in 2017, Islamic State suicide attacks in central Damascus largely used body-borne Improvised explosive Devices (IEDs), as opposed to suicide vehicles (2016), which appeared to make Islamic State capable of reaching intended targets, particularly in fortified military or government areas. Islamic State mainly targets government facilities and to a lesser extent areas associated with the Shia faithful, such as Sayyida Zainab (السيدة زينب). In those instances where they have detonated bombs at checkpoints likely because the bomber was intercepted at the checkpoint and not necessarily because the checkpoints were the main targets. A large number of suicide vehicles have been intercepted at checkpoints in 2016, less so in 2017 suggesting a better capacity by Islamic State to bypass security. There have been no confirmed suicide attacks since the beginning of 2018 so far. There

has been one suspected unconfirmed suicide attack on 9 May 2018 in Maysaat (الميسات) area of Damascus. Twelve suicide detonations (in ten events) were recorded in Damascus and its immediate surroundings in 2017, while fourteen suicide detonations (in nine events) in 2016. Secondly, since July/August 2017 there has also been an increased use of multiple bombers per suicide attack.

105. There is no indication that the 'Baghdad style' bombings - of mass civilian casualty attacks in markets or other areas mainly frequented by civilians - is happening in Damascus at this time, since armed opposition groups in Syria conducting suicide bombings appear to only be intent on mainly targeting government facilities. The collateral damage to civilians is rather a question of being at the wrong place at the wrong time. However, major civilian casualties from suicide bombs or attacks happen, for instance when a bomber en route to his target gets intercepted, chased and cornered by security forces and then decides to detonate. This happened in December 2017 with a suicide vehicle detonated in a residential area, in October 2017 where a bomber detonated while running away from the police in a commercial street and in July 2017 when a bomber detonated in a restaurant. All incidents resulted in civilian casualties.
106. In terms of capacity and whether attacks will continue, the capacity of armed opposition groups to launch such (suicide) attacks does not seem to be affected by any notable arrest operations, improvised explosive device (IED) making facilities being discovered or increased checkpoints stopping such activity. The frequency is still the same with suicide attacks occurring every three to four months and it is only the modes of operation that are changing, not the capacity itself to conduct attacks. In the bigger picture, suicide attacks make up four pct. of the security incidents in Damascus City.
107. Apart from shelling, suicide attacks and explosions, there have also been incidents of crime, such as robbery, theft and car theft, pick pocketing and similar petty crime. There has been a slight increase of crime in the Eastern Mezzeh (المزة الشرقية) area of Damascus City, which the source hears about periodically. However, the source underlines that Damascus is not different from any other city with regards to prevalence of crime and it does not affect people's daily lives in any notable way.
108. The Syrian society is still very much a functioning police state with high level of surveillance, including electronic surveillance. Government institutions are still functioning and the security apparatus is still operating strongly in Damascus. The state and its institutions have been boosted by the Russians and Iranians, and there is quite an open presence of Russian forces as well as Iranian (and aligned forces such as Iraqi militias and Hezbollah) in the streets and hotels of the city.

#### Security situation in Yarmouk

109. The southern neighbourhoods consisting of Yarmouk Camp (مخيم اليرموك), Hajar al-Aswad (الحجر الأسود), Beit Sahm (بيت سحم), Babbila (ببيلة) and Yalda (يلدا) are traditionally Palestinian areas that currently are controlled by various opposition groups. All these neighbourhoods are besieged by the government and therefore very well contained.

110. Yarmouk camp is besieged by both the government and Islamic State. Al-Hajar al-Aswad, which is located south of Yarmouk, has been under the control of Islamic State for several years. Over the last year, Islamic State has steadily advanced in Yarmouk camp and has thereby been able to expand their presence from the south to the north which is a quite significant advancement within the context of Yarmouk. At the moment, Islamic State almost controls all of Yarmouk camp, except from the most northern part of the camp which is controlled by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, هيئة تحرير الشام).
111. The security situation in Yarmouk is bleak and perilous. There have been several incidents including small arm fire and mortars impacting the interior of the camp (from government and opposition forces). During the last three months there has been an escalation of arrests, floggings, public punishments and executions carried out by Islamic State which coincides with a change of leadership and with Islamic State taking control of Haifa Street in Yarmouk camp and Rijn Square (*Sahet ar-Rijeh*, ساحة الريجة). In areas recently fallen under Islamic State control, any surviving opposition fighters, even those from *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham*, were beheaded instantly if captured.
112. Despite the fall of Mosul (الموصل) and Raqqa (الرقة), Islamic State is still experimenting with their government form in areas under their control. Civilians who live in Yarmouk camp live in an extremely brutal environment where they are constantly fearful of detentions, crucifixions and floggings. There have been several incidents of civilians being arrested for instance booksellers, pigeon breeders, women who are dressed 'immodestly' or men who trim their facial hair.
113. However, despite these abuses by Islamic State, the group is relatively popular among many civilians in southern Damascus because it is largely made up of local nationals, predominantly Syrians and Palestinians, contrary to Islamic State groupings in other areas that are primarily made up of foreign fighters. However, its senior leadership in the camp is thought to be made up of several foreign North African nationalities.

#### Assessment of future security situation in Damascus Province

114. When Eastern Ghouta is taken by the government, the indirect artillery fire targeting Damascus Province will reduce significantly.
115. Despite Islamic State's advancements in the southern suburbs of Damascus, and the fact that Islamic State does have a chain of sympathisers outside the Yarmouk-area that can be mobilised for attacks in government-held areas, there is no expectation that an increase in the number of suicide attacks conducted in Damascus City will occur in the future at this point. This is also due to the fact that while high profile attacks are viewed as a useful strategy by Islamic State, it is not necessarily a priority for Islamic State.
116. Regarding the situation in Yarmouk camp in the future and the impact it will have on the situation in Damascus City, the source assesses that Yarmouk will either be completely bombarded or it will undergo the process of a so-called 'political reconciliation', i.e. an imposed agreement. The source does not consider such reconciliation process viable for Islamic State held areas, given that the group has nowhere to go and it is difficult for the government of Syria to discuss terms of surrender with Islamic State.

117. A complete bombardment of Yarmouk is more likely than the government initiating a campaign of urban warfare. This is due to the government's makeup, and how its forces normally fight. It is highly uncommon for the government to conduct full urban warfare, and since opposition areas in Yarmouk presently is not a threat, as the armed opposition groups there do not conduct mortar attacks, the government is likely to have no interest in launching an offensive against the opposition areas at this time. Furthermore, the government only has few capable forces that are capable of taking ground, one of which is the Tiger Forces (*Quwat an-Nimr*, قوات النمر). The Tiger Forces are very much a spearheaded force, they heavily use tanks that are only used for offensives and their operative goal is only to take ground and not to besiege. The Fourth Division of the army is more a besiegement force. There are other special operations forces that are also offensive, such as Hezbollah, Iraqi militias or the Iranian-led Fatemiyoun Brigade (*Liwa al-Fatemiyoun*, لواء الفاطميون). However, these forces are mainly active in flat agricultural land where they can break through a line, and large parts of Yarmouk does not fit into that strategy.
118. However, before the government eventually shifts its focus towards Yarmouk, it is expected that Islamic State will continue to advance in the pocket as there has been a significant change in Islamic State's capacity to expand.

#### Internally displaced persons in Damascus City

119. During the past two years, there have been no significant movement of internally displaced persons (IDP) from other areas in Syria to Damascus. Most people stay in their local areas. There is movement from Yarmouk, but it is mainly internally within opposition-held areas, for instance from Yarmouk camp to Yalda, Beit Sahm or Babbila.

#### Freedom of movement in Damascus Province

120. Checkpoints at the entrance to the cities of Damascus and Homs as well as between Damascus and Lebanon have computerized systems, where ID cards are being controlled electronically.
121. Whether certain groups face difficulties when moving around in Damascus Province due to their ethnic or religious background, the source considers that there is less focus on ethnicity or religious background and more focus on where people are coming from and where they are heading. For instance, people travelling from an area controlled by opposition groups will undergo more scrutiny at checkpoints. People can usually not lie to officers manning checkpoints about their place of origin as their accent discloses their place of origin.
122. People of means will often have to pay some kind of small bribe when they pass checkpoints, but the source has not heard of this group experiencing particular difficulties. The source has not heard of unaccompanied women experiencing sexist comments or assaults at checkpoints.

#### Freedom of movement in Damascus City

123. There are checkpoints in every neighbourhood of Damascus City. When traveling by car it is only possible to drive a maximum of ten to fifteen minutes before being stopped at a checkpoint. Checking of ID cards happens randomly inside the city and not at every checkpoint. Whether ID cards will be checked at checkpoints depend on whether they suspect someone as well as on the neighbourhood. For instance, checkpoints surrounding more affluent neighbourhoods or

neighbourhoods surrounding the presidential palace will often conduct a more rigorous ID card check. The level of scrutiny at checkpoints also depends on which government entity that controls the checkpoint. The fourth division of the Syrian Arab Army checks ID cards very rigorously, while the less professional National Defence Forces (Quwat ad-Difa' al-Watani, قوات الدفاع الوطني) do not check ID cards thoroughly.

124. There is a risk of being detained at checkpoints. We have knowledge of people being detained for days because they have made a phone call to a friend that was based in Ghouta or because the government use the detention as a pressure point on family members that are wanted.
125. The largest number of conscription arrests at checkpoints happens on the main routes when travelling between cities. Within Damascus City itself, there are relatively few conscription arrests. However, if a person has not fulfilled his military service duty and is stopped at a checkpoint, he will be taken for conscription.
126. Certain areas of Damascus City are off limits for certain ethnicities, such as the area surrounding the Sayyida Zainab shrine (Maqam al-Sayyida Zainab, مقام السيدة زينب) or the Bab al-Salam (باب السلام) area, where Sunnis and sometimes Christians are either not allowed to go or are asked specifically what their purpose in the area is. Bab Saghir (باب الصغير) and Sayyida Aisha (السيدة عائشة), both traditionally religiously mixed areas, have during the last one to five years gradually changed to predominantly Shia areas – although at present not 'off limit' areas.

#### Freedom of movement in Yarmouk

127. The only entrances to the besieged areas in the southern part of Damascus Province are into northern Beit Sahm and in al-Asali (العسالي) from government held areas, while internally, Yarmouk is accessed from the opposition areas via the Ouruba checkpoint (نقطة العروبة) with Yalda.
128. Access to the Yarmouk camp is very tightly controlled and is often closed for months. Islamic State pose travel restrictions for all males between 18-45 as they are considered to be of fighting age. Travel for other civilians, e.g. students, medical cases and government employees, is severely restricted, and Islamic State confiscate all documents, including ID-cards for civilians who leave the camp, thereby forcing them to return, since documents are needed for travel and everyday movement in government-held Syria. Furthermore, people from an Islamic State controlled area who approach the authorities in order to get new papers are perceived as Islamic State-sympathizers and face a real risk of being detained.
129. There is no movement from Yarmouk to the government-held areas of Damascus. In Yalda, Babilla and Beit Sahm, some university students are able to go back and forth between the opposition-held areas (which are not under the control of Islamic State) and government-held areas of Damascus.

#### Returnees

130. There have not been huge numbers of refugees returning to Syria. Furthermore, figures regarding returns from abroad are hard to come by, and official figures cannot always be relied upon. There is also a tendency that refugees registered with the UN are crossing the border into Damascus from Lebanon several times but the fact that the same person is crossing the border more than once will not be recorded in official statistics, which is why the movement of one person will often figure more than once in the statistics.

#### Returnees via land borders

131. Before the Aarsal (عرسال) offensive was launched in Lebanon in August 2017, there were around 50,000 Syrian refugees in the area. The offensive caused several movements due to agreements and IDP movements: one movement was arranged to Idlib (إدلب), one arranged movement to the Qalamun Mountains (جبال القلمون), a third arranged movement to the Islamic State corridors and a fourth small number came by themselves (i.e. not arranged) across the mountains to Lebanon using their own means. Adding all these movements up, barely ten pct. (5,000 – 7,000) of the people came back to Syria. It is telling that the majority of the people affected by the offensive were willing to stay in poor quality tents and with a lack of livelihoods and unclear futures, instead of returning to Syria.

#### Returnees via Damascus International Airport

132. Treatment of returnees at Damascus International Airport is a subject that is difficult to get corroborated information about. The source has not heard of anyone going missing at the airport, but at the same time, the source does not monitor the airport or arrivals. The source's assessment of the airport is that it is heavily controlled by the Air Force Intelligence (al-Mukhabarat al-Jawiyya, المخابرات الجوية) and heavily militarized. There are heavy electronic measures put in place, such as computers and electronic lists etc. If a person arrives at the airport and his/her name is flagged, he or she will be revealed upon arrival. A lot of Syrians will prior to their return, check whether they are flagged with for instance relatives or personal contacts that are in the security services.

#### Consequences of illegal exit

133. Generally, the perception is that persons who have left Syria illegally are traitors and the source assumes that they will face questions upon return about why they have decided to leave instead of staying and protecting their home land. The source further assumes that having left illegally will raise suspicions about the person. The government has a long memory, and even for people who have attended demonstrations and subsequently have been away for instance for ten years, the government will not have forgotten about that person. For example, the source knows of a local national who had spent four years in Turkey before returning to Syria via Lebanon for personal reasons in 2017 (and aware of the issues/conscription arrests he may face). While travelling to visit family in Tartus (طرطوس), he was stopped at a routine checkpoint and asked for his ID. Further questions were asked about valid forms of ID (unclear why) and he presented his passport that had a stamp from the Free Syrian Army (non-official stamp) when it was in control of the border with Turkey. This resulted in heavy questioning from the authorities before he was let through. However, the individual now suspects his name is on 'a list'. In short having an unofficial stamp or illegal exit on a passport appears to likely lead to increased harassment at checkpoints. Another long memory example given by the source was about an individual that the source knew who was

detained in 2017 at a checkpoint in Homs City as his name was on a list. He was detained for 26 days and periodically beaten in session in detention. He was released when his family paid to release him. He and his family were told the reasons for his detention. He was told that he was under investigation for making one phone call to an opposition area in Eastern Ghouta in 2014 that was under Jabhat al Nusra (جبهة النصرة) control and the person he spoke with was a 'terrorist' (he was telephoning his friend who was a local activist/journalist as the individual worked in the same field). He was played recordings of his phone call which demonstrated the surveillance of the state.

### *Updated information added to the meeting minutes*

When the source approved the meeting minutes (10 May 2018), following updated information was added regarding the current security situation in Damascus province:

134. As predicted, the indirect fire threat has reduced significantly – down to thirty events per month. However, periodic indirect fire still affects southern areas of the city – particularly al-Midan (Hayy al-Maydan, حي الميدان), Tadamon (التضامن) and Zahira (الزاهرة القديمة) areas. Occasionally, fire still impacts central areas of the city on a random nature, which again is largely reflective of the government's action on Islamic State areas. By accounts, streets are busier and people are less concerned by indirect fire now. This is the main change.
135. Moreover, as predicted, the government launched heavy bombardments on the Yarmouk area for nearly one month now. This has been coupled with ground advances in this area and Hajar al-Aswad that has effectively split the two areas now. The government advances in open urban areas rather than fights through dense urban areas again as predicted. Islamic State refused to 'reconcile' with the government and just prior to the action, large numbers of civilian IDPs travelled eastwards into Yalda (several hundred). Just last week (1 – 4 May 2018) at least sixty civilians who had been trapped by the fighting between the government, opposition groups and Islamic State managed to escape to Yalda. The opposition in southern Damascus neighbourhoods of Yalda, Babilla and Beit Sahm have seen at least five rounds of relocations to northern Syria, and the reconciliation process is firmly underway. The main threat in the Yarmouk area is now unexploded ordnances (UXO) and explosive remnants of war (ERW). The Islamic State areas in Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad are still getting heavily bombarded and it is expected this will continue until Islamic State surrender or all are killed inside. It is assessed that the number of civilians in Yarmouk is currently very low. Again, if this area comes under the government control, unexploded ordnances (UXO)/explosive remnants (ERW) are expected to be the main threat.

### **Amnesty International**

Beirut, 12 March 2018

### **General security situation in Damascus Province**

### Security situation in Damascus City

136. Damascus City is under strict control of the government, and the biggest and most notorious security service agencies, as well as Hizbollah forces and Iranian military personnel, are heavily present in the city.
137. Damascus has been subjected to indiscriminate mortar shelling from Eastern Ghouta (Ghoutet Dimasq as-Sharqiyya, غوطة دمشق الشرقية), which has been intensified recently. Mortars have not struck all areas, and most shelling has been concentrated around Old Damascus (Dimasq al-Qadima, دمشق القديمة), Bab Touma (باب توما) and other areas surrounding Eastern Ghouta. Mortars are indiscriminate weapons and it is impossible to determine where they will fall. Before the recent intensive shelling started, mortar attacks did not happen on a daily basis or systematically.
138. Regarding prevalence of government buildings and military installations being struck by mortars inside Damascus, the main source of information on where mortars hit is the government's news agency SANA, and according to SANAs reports, it is civilian areas that are being struck by mortars.

### Security situation in Yarmouk

139. There have been reports about human rights violations (including abductions, extra judiciary killings and shelling) committed against civilians by opposition groups in Yarmouk (اليرموك). However, Amnesty International has not been able to verify attacks on civilian areas in Yarmouk by armed groups in 2016 and 2017. Last year and the year before, there were clashes between Islamic State and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, هيئة تحرير الشام) in Yarmouk. During these clashes, civilians were affected in terms of lack of access to humanitarian aid.

### Assessment of future security situation in Damascus province

140. The source anticipates that mortar attacks will stop, once Eastern Ghouta is recaptured by the government.

### Internally displaced persons in Damascus City

141. There are no camps for internally displaced persons (IDP) in Damascus City, but a large number of IDPs from reconciled areas live in IDP camps in Damascus suburbs where they have been forced to take residence by government forces.

### Freedom of movement in Damascus province

#### Freedom of movement in Damascus City

142. Based on our findings published in our reports, there are many checkpoints in Damascus City. If a person's name is on one of the lists of wanted persons, he or she would risk being detained when approaching a checkpoint. Any person who is an activist, human rights lawyer, a humanitarian worker or has made an anti-government post on Facebook is at risk of being detained.
143. As people are never notified when their names are put on a list of wanted persons, they can never know what will happen when they approach a checkpoint. If someone has a personal grudge against another person, he can easily go to the police and falsely accuse that person of a criminal activity.

144. In Damascus, false accusations put forward by other individuals entail a real risk of detention. This is because such accusations are investigated by the security services that do not adhere to rules or due processes.
145. Lists of wanted persons are sent to checkpoints, airports and border crossings and they are physical lists that are not always up to date. The different branches of the security apparatus do not share their lists or communicate with regards to individuals that are wanted. There are examples of individuals released by one branch and then taken by another branch immediately after their release. There are also examples of individuals who have been mistaken with individuals on a wanted list and therefore detained due to the fact that their names are identical to other people's names.
146. Concerning possible impact of one's religious and ethnic background or place of origin on treatment at checkpoints, there was no sectarian based treatment of people at checkpoints in the first years of the conflict. Since 2014, persons with Sunni background or persons from Islamic State controlled areas risk being subjected to discriminatory treatment at checkpoints; however, the source is not aware of the actual extent of such treatment.
147. The source does not have recent information on how unaccompanied women are treated at checkpoints in Damascus. The last example of a woman facing difficulties at a checkpoint, which the source is aware about, was a case from June 2017 where a woman was taken at a checkpoint because her husband was a member of the city council in Zabadani (الزبداني).
148. The source has interviewed several women who were detained together with their children in order to put pressure on their husbands, who are wanted by the government, because of their affiliation to armed opposition groups.

#### Freedom of movement in Yarmouk

149. Access to Yarmouk is restricted as it is a besieged area, and it is difficult to obtain exact information on what is going on in the area.

## An international human rights organisation

Beirut, 14 March 2018

### General security situation in Damascus Province

#### Security situation in Damascus City

150. There has been a critical development with regards to the security situation during the last year. The security situation in Damascus City is very volatile as shelling of mortars and home-made rockets from Eastern Ghouta (Ghoutet Dimasq as-Sharqiyya, غوطة دمشق الشرقية) has been intensified in recent months and a number of civilian areas such as public squares, local transportation and schools have been struck. The number of mortar attacks a day fluctuates but have reached as high

as sixty rockets in one day. No areas are immune to ground based strikes, but the areas mostly hit by the attacks are areas in the vicinity of Eastern Ghouta like Jaramana (جرمانا), Dahiyat al-Assad (ضاحية الأسد) and Dwel'a (دولعة).

151. The source operates from outside Syria and is unable to attribute the responsibility of strikes to any party to the conflict. Similarly, in most cases the source can confirm if an incident occurred in a specific area and if it resulted in civilian casualties but cannot confirm the nature of the military target. The source assumes that even if military facilities were targeted, one would never be informed on that as neither the government nor the opposition would ever report something which is not in their favour. Sometimes the opposition have said that they have targeted some military facilities, government buildings or the Russian embassy, while the government has denied it and said that mortars have only struck civilian areas.
152. In 2017, the security forces reportedly succeeded in preventing some suicide attacks and car bombs at checkpoints in Damascus. However, on 15 March 2017, the Palace of Justice (Qasr al-Adl, قصر العدل) in the city's downtown area was subjected to a suicide attack. Islamic State took responsibility for this attack. In addition, there were a series of significant incidents of suicide attacks in the heart of Damascus during the summer of 2017 - e.g. on 2 July 2017, a car bomb detonated in the Bab Touma (باب توما) neighbourhood of Damascus, allegedly causing the death of at least six civilians and an unknown number of wounded. The source considers that the attack on the Palace of Justice was a message from jihadist opposition groups to the government that they are capable of striking government institutions, even in the centre of the city.

#### Security situation in Yarmouk

153. Yarmouk (اليرموك) and Hajar al-Aswad (الحجر الأسود) in south Damascus are controlled by Islamic State and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, هيئة تحرير الشام). In addition, there are a number of other groups present in the area such as pro-government Palestinian groups, which contributes to the complexity and dynamic of the security situation.
154. There have been clashes between different groups in south Damascus for more than one year, and according to reports regularly received by the source, civilians have been affected by the persistent violence plaguing the area, i.e. shootings and clashes. It is not clear yet how the government is going to tackle the situation in south Damascus. The source does not have accurate information on the number of civilians in the area or the extent to which civilians in south Damascus have been affected by the on-going conflict, including the number of civilian casualties.
155. The source has not seen reports on shelling towards Damascus City from Yarmouk.

#### Assessment of future security situation in Damascus province

156. The source stresses that it usually does not collect information about the security situation in Damascus City.
157. The source anticipates that the on-going shelling from Eastern Ghouta will diminish once the government retakes control over Damascus suburbs.

158. Although there have been no suicide attacks or car bombs in 2018, the source assesses that the risk of such attacks will remain in the future, particularly when the government has driven Islamic State and other jihadist groups out of the territories currently under the control of these groups. The source believes that there is a high risk that attacks will be conducted in Damascus in the future, including vehicle-borne explosive devices (VBIEDs), targeted assassinations and suicide attacks.

#### Internally displaced persons in Damascus City

159. According to a map of IDP centres provided by the source, all IDP centres are now located in rural Damascus.<sup>234</sup>

#### Freedom of movement in Damascus province

##### Freedom of movement in Damascus City

160. Checkpoints are an obstacle to freedom of movement for all citizens in Damascus City. All checkpoints are controlled by the army and pro-government groups, including domestic and foreign pro-Government of Syria militias.
161. There are two types of checkpoints: mobile and fixed. The source does not have information on how prevalent checkpoints are in Damascus City as the source is not present there. Checkpoints were present at key areas in Damascus City even before the current conflict.
162. The security situation in Damascus is currently tight, and the government is worried about terrorist attacks, which has resulted in an increased number of checkpoints dispersed throughout the city.
163. People are reluctant to approach checkpoints as they may face extortion and be subjected to investigation which might lead to detention.
164. There is no unified database containing all names of individuals who are wanted by the regime. Instead, different wanted lists are circulating among checkpoints, and these lists include different levels of information regarding each person that is wanted by the regime. At checkpoints, the security officials mostly check ID cards. However, the process at checkpoints is not framed, and there are a number of factors that determine what actually happens at a checkpoint and how people are treated when approaching a checkpoint. Some of these factors are: the person in charge at the checkpoint, the operating authority at the checkpoint, time of day, similarity of one's name to that of someone else who is wanted by the regime, family members wanted by the regime, a person's area of origin. In particular, information about a person's area of origin is used in a discriminatory manner as checkpoint authorities take into consideration if the area in question is controlled by the opposition or the regime.
165. There is always an uncertainty about what happens when people approach a checkpoint. Sometimes civilians who have settled previous issues with the regime or who did not have a problem with the regime in the first place are held up or arrested at checkpoints. In addition, there are examples of individuals being released by one security branch and then being arrested by

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<sup>234</sup> The map is not included in the meeting minutes as it would reveal the identity of the source. (ed.)

another security branch right after their release. However, the source underlines that the mentioned obstacles do not mean that people in general are not moving around in the city, going to work nor having a social life. The point is that some people may be subjected to obstacles when approaching a checkpoint and some people may voluntarily restrict their own movement based on fear of reprisals from the regime. As an example, men at military age not already serving avoid checkpoints for fear of being conscripted or detained.

166. A person's socio-economic background is not a key criterion with regard to freedom of movement. Other factors, as mentioned above, play a bigger role.
167. The source considers unaccompanied women being extremely vulnerable with regard to freedom of movement in the sense that they are less protected than men and they may be subjected to sexual harassment or pressure to provide information about their relatives when they go through checkpoints. In 2018, the source received reports of women being arrested at checkpoints in Damascus suburbs due to their relatives' activities. Although these cases have not been seen in Damascus City, the source assumes that this could also happen in the city.
168. The source believes that the above remains a source of concern for the protection and well-being of civilians in the foreseeable future.
169. Moreover, IDP in IDP centres in Damascus City have to carry ID documents in order to be able to move around in the city.

### *Updated information added to the meeting minutes*

When the source approved the meeting minutes (21 May 2018), following updated information was added regarding the current security situation in Damascus province:

170. The Government of Syria asserted full control of the Eastern Ghouta in April 2018 after conducting evacuation of a large number of opposition fighters and civilians from the area. As a result, ground-strikes carried out from Eastern Ghouta to Damascus and rural Damascus stopped.
171. Armed opposition groups controlling the nearby area of Yalda (يَلْدَا), Babbila (بَبِيلَا) and Beit Sahm (بَيْت سَحْم) were reportedly evacuated towards the North of the country in May 2018. As a result, no area in Damascus or rural Damascus remains under the control of armed opposition groups, with the exception of Islamic State-held Hajr al-Aswad / Yarmouk camp. Fierce clashes and airstrikes continue to be reported in these areas at the time of writing.
172. The Syrian government and its allies have been carrying out an offensive on Islamic State-held Yarmouk camp and Hajr al-Aswad since mid-April, which resulted in displacements of population towards both opposition-held and government-held areas. Sporadic ground-based strikes were reported in Damascus as well as in rural Damascus since then. Though it is expected that government forces and their allies will manage to take control of Islamic State-held areas in the near future, it is unclear when this will happen and what will be the fate of fighters and their families. An unknown number of those reportedly left the area and some of them were allegedly

detained by armed opposition groups in April. There are concerns that Islamic State-elements would in the future resort to terror attacks in Damascus after they will lose control of areas that they held in South Damascus. In May 2018, shelling towards Damascus City from Yarmouk was reported on several instances, while the source cannot formally attribute the responsibility of the strikes.

## **An international organisation in Syria**

Damascus, 20 March 2018

### **General security situation in Damascus**

173. At the moment, one of the most dangerous cities for our organisation's activities is Damascus. The only opposition held areas surrounding Damascus City are Eastern Ghouta (Ghoutet Dimasq as-Sharqiyya, غوطة دمشق الشرقية) and the Yarmouk-area. Until now, clashes in Eastern Ghouta have been concentrated in the western part of the area which is close to Damascus City while it has been relatively calm in Douma (دوما) and Harasta (حرسنا). However on 19 March 2018, the Syrian army started shelling Douma.
174. From the beginning of 2017 and until the beginning of 2018, the Syrian government has gained control over more areas in Eastern Ghouta. A Russian report of 20 March 2018 states that the Syrian army now controls 65 pct. of Eastern Ghouta.

### **Security situation in Damascus City**

175. Since the beginning of the government operation in Eastern Ghouta in March 2018, more than 300 mortars have struck Damascus City. Most of the mortars have hit the eastern parts of Damascus City, including the old city. The second most targeted part of the city has been the city centre and Abou Roummaneh (أبو رمانة). From time to time, the area around the Four Seasons Hotel and Dama Rose Hotel and the Mezzeh (المزة) area have also been hit. The reason why it is primarily these areas that have been hit is because the range of mortars is usually not more than five to six km and to reach areas beyond that, e.g. Mezzeh which is twelve km away, the opposition groups need rockets; a capacity that most of the opposition groups do not have any more. Currently, most mortars and home-made rockets are being fired from Douma because opposition groups in other areas have lost their capacity to fire mortars with longer range.
176. It is very clear that the opposition also intends to target civilian areas with mortars and not only government buildings or military facilities. The source assesses that this is due to the fact that if civilian areas are targeted, civilians will in turn put pressure on the government. Furthermore, 90 pct. of mortars launched towards Damascus throughout the whole conflict have hit civilian areas.
177. Mortar attacks against Damascus City have never stopped completely since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, and about 10,000-15,000 persons have been killed or injured in Damascus City by approximately 50,000 mortars within the past seven years. Most mortars have hit the eastern parts of Damascus and the old city. Between March and September 2017, where there was a

ceasefire, there were very few mortars fired towards the city, only around 100 during the entire period. However, the number of mortars fired towards Damascus rose again after September.

178. During the first and second week of March 2018, respectively 211 and 88 mortars struck Damascus City, so the number of mortars hitting the city has been reduced within the second week of March 2018.
179. During the year 2017, around 2,000-3,000 people were killed or injured in Damascus City due to mortar attacks. Most civilians that are initially registered as having been injured, subsequently die from their injuries.
180. During last year, there were six suicide attacks inside Damascus City where the attackers came from the Yarmouk area. They targeted places such as police stations and the Palace of Justice (Qasr al-Adl, قصر العدل). The incident at the Palace of Justice caused 80 injuries and 37 fatalities. The suicide bombers have only managed to attack targets in the southern parts of the city, because in order to penetrate further into the city, they would have to pass through checkpoints whereby increasing the likelihood of being intercepted. The total number of casualties related to the abovementioned suicide attacks were approximately fifty people. The last suicide attack was carried out in Khaled Ibn Walid street (خالد الابن وليد) in October 2017.
181. In one of the suicide incidents which took place in December 2016, a Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, هيئة تحرير الشام) member sent his eight-year-old daughter out in the streets with explosives wrapped around her body. As she was crying, the police came and took her to the police station at which point she detonated the explosives inside the police station. Later on, the father was killed by the opposition at his home in the southern parts of Damascus. After this incident, for ten days, even children were checked at all checkpoints in Damascus City (including those inside the city), when families were approaching checkpoints. However, in the next two months, such thorough checking of families was limited to checkpoints at entrances to the city, particularly the eastern and southern entrances, i.e. entrances reaching Eastetn Ghouta, the Yarmouk Camp and Dara'a.
182. Regarding prevalence of assassinations of government officials in Damascus, the last incident that the source is aware of was a car bomb targeting the prime minister. It took place three years ago near the checkpoint close to the Danish embassy, but it failed. Opposition groups continuously announce on social media that they have succeeded in assassinating government officials. However, the information that they publish on this topic is unconfirmed and unsubstantiated.

#### Security situation in Yarmouk

183. As a result of clashes between Islamic State and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, هيئة تحرير الشام) in Yarmouk Camp (مخيم اليرموك) two months ago, Islamic State succeeded in advancing in Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's areas. The fighting between the groups was due to a territorial conflict, and it did not result in any major movement of internally displaced persons (IDP) as there are not many civilians left in the Yarmouk Camp. With regards to the number of civilians inside the Yarmouk Camp, there is no statistics on how many civilians are living there. Since Islamic State took control of the camp, even UNRWA has not had access to the camp. However, based on the number of Palestinians who

have left Yarmouk for other areas like Jaramana (جرمانا) and Sayyida Zainab (السيدة زينب) the source assesses that there are not many civilians left in Yarmouk.

184. There was a small pocket in the Yarmouk Camp controlled by the Free Syrian Army (FSA, al-Jaysh as-Suri al-Hurr, الجيش السوري الحر), but they entered a reconciliation agreement with the government last week, and 300 fighters were evacuated to Idlib. On 20 March 2018, there were reports on an ambush against the army by Islamic State in the al-Qadam (القدم) area close to Yarmouk where around 100 soldiers were killed. Because of the ambush, the government launched an operation against Islamic State that began with heavy air force shelling. Until yesterday, it was expected that the government would enter a reconciliation agreement with Islamic State in Yarmouk, but after Islamic State's attack on 20 March 2018, it is anticipated that when the Eastern Ghouta offensive is accomplished, the government will launch a comprehensive military operation against Islamic State in Yarmouk and other areas in the southern part of Damascus City.

#### Assessment of future security situation in Damascus province

185. The source expects that the government will most likely be in control of the entire Eastern Ghouta, except Douma, by the beginning of April 2018 if the army advances in the same pace as it has done since the beginning of the operation.
186. In Douma, Jaysh al-Islam (جيش الإسلام) has 10,000 fighters who have rockets and missiles. However, the source assesses that the fighters in Douma will most likely enter an agreement with the government as both parties want to avoid clashes because most of Eastern Ghouta's civilians live in Douma.
187. Most reports state that there are 400,000 civilians living in Douma, but there is always an uncertainty about the number of civilians in areas controlled by the opposition, and the real number could be more or less than the expected. For instance, two years ago, when the opposition in Darayya (داريا) entered an agreement with the government and moved to Idlib (إدلب), it turned out that there were only about 500 civilians in the area while it was previously estimated that 80,000-100,000 civilians were living there.
188. Regarding the possibility of jihadist groups in the southern Damascus suburbs starting an insurgency in Damascus with suicide attacks when they have lost their territories to the government, the source does not find it highly probable. The source explains his assessment by saying that east and north Homs or east Aleppo were also previously under the control of jihadist groups, but no insurgency has emerged in these areas since the government have recaptured them. In addition, the security forces have succeeded in getting complete control over these areas.

#### Internally displaced persons in Damascus City

189. In Damascus, most of the IDPs are wealthy persons from Deir ez-Zor who reside in affluent areas of the city such as Mezzeh where they rent or buy property. Other IDPs tend to move to the west coast and cities such as Tartus (طرطوس) or Latakia (اللاذقية), because it is cheaper and safer there compared to Damascus where life has become expensive in recent years.

190. Until now, it has not been clear how the government wants to deal with civilians leaving Eastern Ghouta. At the moment, some of the civilians leaving Eastern Ghouta are accommodated in shelters in Damascus suburbs, but it is not clear whether they will be allowed to leave the shelters and/or enter Damascus City. Currently, there are no IDP camps in Damascus City.
191. The IDPs approaching Damascus City from Eastern Ghouta are primarily people from the part of Eastern Ghouta that is closest to the city. IDPs from Harasta and Douma will most probably enter some kind of evacuation deal with the Syrian government and go to another part of the country.

### **Freedom of movement in Damascus province**

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

192. It has become easier to move around in Damascus City as the number of checkpoints inside the city has been reduced by 30 pct. within the past six months.
193. Regarding impact of one's ethnic and religious background or place of origin on freedom of movement and treatment by authorities at checkpoints, there have been cases where these factors have had an impact, but they are few. In general, people do not face difficulties passing through checkpoints and moving around. Having a Sunni background is not, in itself, an obstacle for freedom of movement as many soldiers at checkpoints have Sunni background themselves. Usually, checkpoint officers do not stop people due to their backgrounds; many internally displaced persons (IDP) from Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor (دير الزور) live in Damascus, and they move around freely without facing difficulties at checkpoints. If the checkpoint personnel is suspicious of someone, it is mostly due to other factors, for instance that he/she carries a huge amount of money etc.
194. Concerning lists of wanted persons at checkpoints, the checkpoints at the entrance to Damascus have computers with access to a database with names of wanted persons. For instance, on the road to Homs, they check IDs of people who are leaving for or are coming from the northern part of Syria against such wanted lists.
195. Checkpoints inside Damascus do not have computers and the authorities would only search passing cars if they find it necessary. If they happen to want to check people's identity, it is only the ID documents which are checked and this ID is not checked against a list. If checkpoint personnel find something suspicious about a person, they may close the road and check the suspected person's mobile and social media. They may also close the road if a security incident happens. However, usually at checkpoints inside the city they do not ask people questions and will probably only search the vehicle. Five years ago, they checked everything at checkpoints inside the city, but now they mostly let people go through without checking anything. It is only at checkpoints at the northern entrance to the city where people are checked more thoroughly.
196. Checkpoints inside Damascus are run by different security agencies, and there has always been some competition between these agencies. Even before the crisis in Syria, different parts of Damascus were monitored and controlled by different security service branches. However, procedures at all checkpoints throughout the city are the same regardless of which security agency controls them, and they are coordinated at higher levels.

### *Updated information added to the meeting minutes*

When the source approved the minutes (31 May 2018), following updated information was added regarding the current security situation in Damascus province:

197. The number of checkpoints in the east and south of Damascus has been reduced now and the main road between Damascus and Homs is reopened.
198. Since the government has retaken control of Eastern Ghouta, there have been no mortar impacts from Eastern Ghouta on the city; except one in the Marjah (المرجة) area, and one IED attack in the Maysaat area (الميسات).<sup>235</sup>
199. Regarding the situation in the Yarmouk Camp, the Syrian army continues its military operation against Islamic State in the south of Damascus, and the Islamic State is targeting the southern areas of the city (Midan and Zahera areas) with mortars.

### **An international security organisation**

Damascus, 22 March 2018

### **General security situation in Damascus Province**

200. The security situation in Damascus province is highly interlinked with the situation in Rif Dimashq (ريف دمشق) as armed opposition groups in Eastern Ghouta (Ghoutet Dimasq as-Sharqiyya, غوطة دمشق الشرقية) fire mortars towards Damascus City. Indirect artillery fire is happening almost every day with approximately five to ten impacts daily. The mortars have the capacity to hit any area.
201. The government's operation in Eastern Ghouta was launched on 18 February 2018 and by 18 March 2018, the government had taken approximately eighty pct. of the area.
202. The main armed opposition groups present in Eastern Ghouta that the government is currently negotiating with are: Jaysh al-Islam (جيش الإسلام), Ahrar al-Sham (أحرار الشام) and Faylaq al-Rahman (فيلق الرحمن). According to sources, the four main armed opposition groups active in Eastern Ghouta are Jaysh al-Islam (8,500 fighters), Faylaq al-Rahman (7,000 fighters), Ahrar al-Sham (2,500 fighters) and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, هيئة تحرير الشام) (250 fighters).

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<sup>235</sup> The National reported on 9 May 2018: 'Two people were killed and several others wounded in a car bomb and shellfire in Syria's capital Damascus on Wednesday, state television said. "Two killed and 14 injured in terrorist attacks on Damascus Tower and Maysat Square," it reported. They struck at the tower in the central Marjeh Square district, and the car bomb went off in the northeast of the city. Images of security forces gathered around a burnt-out skeleton of a car in Maysat Square were broadcast on state television. The blast came as regime forces battle to flush out ISIS from the southern districts of the capital, including Yarmouk and the adjacent Hajar Al Aswad neighbourhood.' The national, 9 May 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/two-killed-in-damascus-car-bomb-and-shellfire-1.728695> [accessed 11 June 2018] (ed.)

### Security situation in Damascus City

203. During 14-20 March 2018, reports indicate that there were a total of 88 indirect artillery fires hitting Damascus City with 78 civilian casualties, i.e. seven killed and 71 wounded. In 2017, only in Damascus City, 759 indirect artillery fires were recorded.
204. The armed opposition groups launching mortars towards Damascus are not targeting specific areas and the projectiles are impacting indiscriminately, which is why civilians are put in danger. The areas in Damascus City mainly hit by mortar fire are Old Damascus (*Dimasq al-Qadima*, دمشق القديمة), Dahiyat al-Assad (ضاحية الأسد), Zablatani (زبلطاني), Jaramana (جرمانا) and Wafdeen Camp (*Mukhayyim al-Wafdeen*, مخيم الوافدين). Sources indicated that more than 48,000 civilians have been evacuated through humanitarian corridors. 20 March 2018, several mortars landed in a market place in Dwel'a (دولعة) which resulted in 44 civilians being killed.
205. The most intensive shelling of Damascus City has been in the old city of Damascus and adjacent areas with the old city being affected the most with 80-85 pct. of mortars hitting there. Some mortars have also been hitting close to Dama Rose Hotel and the Umayyad Square (*Sahet al-Umawyeen*, ساحة الأمويين).
206. Although rare, as of 22 March, every month there have been few incidents of shelling of Damascus City by armed opposition groups in Yarmouk (اليرموك) and Qadam (القدم).
207. Security incidents such as suicide bombs in Damascus City have not happened within the last two months. However, last year there were a number of suicide attacks and also several dismantled attacks. Suicide attackers primarily target government facilities like police stations. As per our sources, a total of ten suicidal/suicidal-VBIED incidents occurred in Damascus in 2017.

### Security situation in Yarmouk

208. Hajar al-Aswad (الحجر الأسود) is controlled by Islamic State whereas Yalda (يلدا), Babbila (بببلا) and Beit Sahm (بيت سحم) are mainly controlled by a variety of armed opposition groups.
209. While Yarmouk Camp (*Mukhayyim al-Yarmouk*, مخيم اليرموك) has not yet experienced the same level of engagement from the government as Eastern Ghouta, there has been an escalation of fighting between the Syrian Arab Army (*al-Jaysh al-Arabi as-Suri*, الجيش العربي السوري) and Islamic State in both Qadam and in Yarmouk.
210. Civilians in Yarmouk, Qadam, Yalda, Babbila and Beit Sahm are, due to the besiegement of these areas, stuck there.

### Assessment of future security situation in Damascus Province

211. In the future, as the government takes control of more territory, an escalation of insurgency attacks in Damascus and other places is likely. This is because, when armed opposition groups are oppressed, they will find a way to attack government facilities and soft targets. Armed opposition groups such as Al-Qaeda affiliated groups and Islamic State likely to target the international community.

212. The source has found that in areas previously controlled by Islamic State such as Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa, insurgency attacks carried out by Islamic State have persisted. Such incidents have occurred four to six times monthly, even though the areas are almost completely cleared. The security incidents consist of armed clashes, vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED), improvised explosive devices (IED) and suicide attacks.
213. An assessment of the security situation in Damascus in the future if/when Eastern Ghouta falls will depend on the current ongoing political negotiations. If the armed opposition groups decide to prolong the political talks with the government, the current situation will continue for some time. However, if the armed opposition groups accept the terms of the political talks with the government/regime forces, it will not take the government a long time to clear Eastern Ghouta. The government and the army are currently in a winning mode and are determined to clean the area, either by negotiations or by military actions.
214. The source assesses that the government will initiate an offensive in Yarmouk, Qadam, Yalda, Babbila and Beit Sahm after the operation in Eastern Ghouta has finished.

#### **Internally displaced persons in Damascus City**

215. There has been an influx of internally displaced persons (IDP) in Damascus province during the past seven years, especially from areas with active fighting and military operations. However, whenever an area is no longer close to an active frontline, most Syrians prefer to return to their homes, which is why the number of IDPs living in Damascus has diminished. For instance, a larger group of IDPs took shelter in Damascus during the offensives on Raqqa (الرقّة) and Deir ez-Zor (دير الزور), but are now gradually returning to their area of origin.
216. At the time of reporting, 80,000 civilians have exited Ghouta from different sites in Damascus suburbs, and the authorities have established several shelters in the surrounding suburban areas. The shelters are supported by the UN agencies, however, are governed by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) and the government.

#### **Freedom of movement in Damascus Province**

217. The purpose of the government's checkpoints is to check individuals travelling from other areas to Damascus where people will undergo screening and be asked about the identity and purpose of their travel.

#### ***Updated information added to the meeting minutes***

When the source approved the meeting minutes (23 May 2018), following updated information was added regarding the current security situation in Damascus province:

218. The UN has limited access to Eastern Ghouta as the Government of Syria with Regime Forces support are clearing the area from unexploded ordinances (UXOs)/mines.
219. Government of Syria forces currently are fully engaged with Islamic State in Yarmouk and adjacent areas. Airstrikes, shelling and armed conflict is reportedly daily. Damascus City areas are now receiving more indirect artillery fires from Yarmouk.

## Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW)

Skype, 17 March 2018

### General Security Situation in Damascus Province

#### Security situation in Damascus City

220. Over the past year, the situation within Damascus City has been relatively stable but shaped heavily by the corresponding situation in Eastern Ghouta (Ghoutet Dimasq as-Sharqiyya, غوطة دمشق الشرقية). The intensity of indiscriminate shelling by armed opposition groups targeting districts in Damascus City depends on the corresponding military pressure that the Syrian Government puts on Eastern Ghouta. The incidence of shelling episodes in Damascus City have increased since the start of the pro-government ground campaign against the armed opposition in Eastern Ghouta in February 2018. This shelling primarily targets districts close to Eastern Ghouta although it can reach further into Damascus City. The shelling will get worse before opposition-held areas in Eastern Ghouta such as Douma (دوما), Irbin (عربين) and Harasta (حرستا) ultimately surrender to the Syrian Government.
221. The pro-government security level inside Damascus City remains about the same as prior years although the government has closed some checkpoints in some areas to restore normalcy, potentially enabling some extremist groups (e.g. Islamic State) being able to launch attacks inside Damascus City.
222. The source suspects that the Islamic State will pose the primary threat from Southern Damascus against Damascus City as other armed opposition groups operating in Southern Damascus are not strong enough to pose a real threat to the Syrian Government. Opposition groups in Southern Damascus have already shown their willingness to enter forced reconciliation deals with the Syrian Government. Meanwhile, Islamic State has conducted several attacks attempting to target the Sayyida Zainab Shrine (*Maqam al-Sayyida Zainab*, مقام السيدة زينب) south of Damascus City, which serves as a major mobilization point for Iranian-backed proxy groups including Iraqi Shi'a Militias and the Afghan Shi'a Fatemiyoun Brigade (*Liwa al-Fatemiyyoun*, لواء الفاطميون). In addition, a suicide attack targeting the Palace of Justice (*Qasr al-Adl*, قصر العدل) in Damascus City in March 2017 likely came from Southern Damascus. Several other vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) have also been intercepted at checkpoints at the rim of Damascus City. These incidents demonstrate that Islamic State is still capable of launching attacks inside Damascus City.
223. There is humanitarian pressure within Damascus City due to the displacement of civilians from the opposition-held suburbs such as Eastern Ghouta into Damascus City itself.
224. The source considers the shelling conducted by armed opposition groups in Damascus City to be 'indiscriminate' given that the shelling tends in general to target government-held districts rather than specific military targets. Shelling is widespread across parts of Damascus City, and civilians are regularly killed or injured in shelling incidents; though not to the same degree as civilians killed and injured by pro-government forces in Eastern Ghouta. In some instances, projectiles have

struck close to military installations or political centres – particularly the Russian Embassy in Damascus - although armed opposition groups do not appear to have the capability to consistently and accurately hit specific targets in Damascus City.

225. The threat of shelling is endemic in Damascus City but life is generally not paralysed. Some districts are hit more often than others. The primary districts struck by shelling Damascus City are the districts closest to Eastern Ghouta across the M5 Highway. These districts include Old Damascus (*Dimasq al-Qadima*, دمشق القديمة) and the surrounding neighbourhoods: Abaseen (العباسيين), Jobar (جوبر), Bab al-Salaam (باب السلام), Dwel'a (دولعة), Jaramana (جرمانا), Qassaa (القصاع), Bab Touma (باب توما), and Amarah Jouwaniyah (عمارة جوانية). Liberation Square (*Midan at-Tahrir*, ميدان التحرير) has also been struck by opposition shelling.
226. Intensified shelling on Damascus City from Eastern Ghouta occurred between 19 and 21 February 2018. Since then, the intensity of shelling has declined but still continues steadily. The intensification matched the escalation of the pro-government ground campaign against the armed opposition in Eastern Ghouta.
227. Different types of shelling are used on Damascus City. The shells are generally military-style mortars and other manufactured ammunition but they sometimes include homemade explosives. Opposition groups have primarily relied upon mortars and other short-range indirect fire systems but occasionally utilize homemade and manufactured rockets with a greater range than mortar shells.
228. Opposition groups have also used so-called 'hell cannons' – large-calibre homemade artillery systems - to target areas outside Eastern Ghouta. However, the ammunition fired from 'hell cannons' is much heavier than a typical mortar or artillery shell and thus it cannot penetrate far beyond frontlines.
229. The mortars used by opposition groups against Damascus City are generally typical mortar shells in terms of size and amount of explosives. Mortars rely less upon explosives than the shrapnel packed inside each round. Some mortars have landed in populated streets in dense districts - such as the Old City of Damascus - where they have caused a number of shrapnel injuries among civilians. If a mortar lands on a concrete roof, it will probably not penetrate the structure. Most reported mortar strikes do not cause many casualties.
230. Open-source reporting has claimed roughly forty to fifty civilians killed and an equivalent number injured by shelling in and around the Old City of Damascus over the last two months. The source only collects information about major civilian casualty events and does not keep a running tally of individual casualties.
231. Recently, the armed opposition has focused its attention more upon the ground fight against pro-government forces than its shelling campaign in Damascus City. However, the opposition has nonetheless sustained mortar attacks on Damascus City. The scale of casualties due to shelling on Damascus City remains at a radically lower scale than the casualties caused by pro-government operations in Eastern Ghouta.

### Security situation in Yarmouk

232. In the southern outskirts of Damascus City, pro-government forces continue their siege of opposition-held districts of Southern Damascus. The opposition-held districts of Babbila (ببلا), Beit Sahm (بيت سحم), Qadam (القدم), and Yalda (يلدا) remain besieged by the Syrian Government. In the third week of March 2018, opposition groups in Qadam District accepted a forced evacuation deal from the Syrian Government that resulted in the displacement of 1,500 - 2,000 fighters and civilians to Idlib Province in Northern Syria on 13 March 2018. The remaining residents and civilians either remained in Qadam District under a forced reconciliation deal or displaced into Damascus City. The regime has extended similar offers to the Yalda, Babbila and Beit Sahm Districts.
233. The Hajar al-Aswad (الحجر الأسود) and Yarmouk Camp (Mukhayyim al-Yarmouk, مخيم اليرموك) Districts of Southern Damascus are still held by Islamic State. Islamic State temporarily seized control of the neighbouring Qadam District following the aforementioned evacuation of armed opposition groups from Qadam District in March 2018. The source's assessment is that Islamic State will continue to exploit the reconciliation deals in other parts of Southern Damascus in order to put pressure on local civilians and the Syrian Government.
234. In Yarmouk Camp and other districts of Southern Damascus, intense ground fighting between pro-government and armed opposition groups has resulted in civilian casualties. There have been some clashes between pro-government groups and Islamic State as well as armed opposition groups and Islamic State. However, the main areas of violence remain largely unpopulated, resulting in relatively-lower civilian casualties compared to Eastern Ghouta.
235. Islamic State in the Yarmouk Camp and Hajar al-Aswad Districts consists mostly of locals from Hajar al-Aswad District as well as fighters from areas in Western Ghouta. It imposes most of the same social structures and repressive elements applied in Eastern Syria by Islamic State. It is a full-fledged branch of the Islamic State although there is not a large population of foreign fighters in Southern Damascus.

### Assessment of future security situation in Damascus Province

236. The security situation in Damascus Province will depend on the timeframe for the defeat of the armed opposition in Eastern Ghouta. Their defeat might occur within the next one to two months. Ultimately, the armed opposition will be forced to surrender with those unwilling to reconcile with the government evacuated to other areas – particularly Idlib and Aleppo Provinces in Northern Syria. Until then, steady shelling will target Damascus City. The overall security situation will improve at the conclusion of the fighting between pro-government and armed opposition groups in Eastern Ghouta.
237. The Syrian Government has already closed checkpoints from some areas and remains willing to push that process further to demonstrate the return of normal life in Damascus City. The government desires to show its ability to clear populated areas in its capital from armed opposition groups.

238. Over the long term, we will likely see the development of an insurgency in Syria. The overall situation over the next year may not be comparable to Iraq but we will likely witness repeated spectacular attacks against civilian or government targets from time-to-time inside Damascus City. Aleppo City, which pro-government forces secured in late 2016, already sees parallel low-level insurgent violence as of March 2018. However, armed opposition groups as a whole have not yet shifted their focus away from conventional warfare and fighting over terrain towards a full insurgency model. The Syrian Government has also applied a consistent strategy to force the relocation of the most irreconcilable opposition supporters from Damascus City and other urban to other regions such as Idlib Province. Insurgent-style attacks inside pro-government urban centers are thus only currently reported every few weeks or on a monthly basis.
239. Once armed opposition groups surrender in Eastern Ghouta - which the source anticipates will occur within the next couple of months – pro-government forces might turn their eye in the direction of the Yarmouk Camp to remove Islamic State from Southern Damascus and thereby take full control of Damascus City. The Syrian Government is already allegedly negotiating an agreement with Islamic State to relocate their fighters from Southern Damascus. Islamic State previously expressed its willingness to relocate from Southern Damascus to Raqqa (الرقة) or Deir ez-Zor (دير الزور) Provinces in Eastern Syria. However, armed opposition groups blocked these initial deals by hindering the movement of Islamic State through their areas of control in Eastern Ghouta. In particular, Jaysh al-Islam (جيش الإسلام) rejected any transit by Islamic State.
240. The Syrian Government's repeated use of forced relocation deals with armed opposition groups has fuelled rumors of a deliberate policy to impose demographic change in some areas of Syria. Some analysts term these demographic changes 'organic' while others consider them to be change 'by design'. The source does not consider these changes to be an indication of a policy of total ethnic reengineering - for instance, hundreds of thousands of Sunnis continue to live in Damascus City. However, there is a focus on relocation of populations from historic opposition-supportive regions in the Damascus Suburbs (e.g. in Darayya (داريا) which accepted a forced relocation in late 2016). The Syrian Government is reportedly selling and renting property to Iran and Iranian-backed proxy elements in certain areas including Darayya, Barsa (البرسة), and Qaboun (القابون) in Damascus City.
241. The Syrian Government thus does not seem to pursue a blanket relocation of select ethnic groups (e.g. Sunnis) but rather the deliberate relocation of opposition-supportive elements to preserve the dominance of a government-supportive population in strategic areas. In some areas, these demographic shifts appear to be a deliberate effort to push out Sunnis in favour of Shi'a Muslims and Alawites. However, these efforts only occur in some areas and are not systematic enough to characterise as a deliberate nationwide social engineering campaign. Rather, relocation serves a strategic purpose for the Syrian Government.

#### Internally displaced persons in Damascus City

242. The source primarily has his knowledge about IDPs from the UN.
243. The number of IDPs in Damascus City is estimated to be at least half a million with most living in rented housing or staying with family members. The source is not aware of known 'slums' or other

areas with a high concentration of IDPs in Damascus City. IDPs appear to be dispersed throughout the city.

244. The source is not aware of any significant new movement of IDPs to Damascus City within the past two years.

### Freedom of movement in Damascus Province

#### Freedom of movement in Damascus City

245. Inside Damascus City, there is a wide network of checkpoints run by a number of pro-government armed groups including Syrian Air Force Intelligence (*al-Mukhabarat al-Jawiyya*, المخابرات الجوية), the Syrian National Defence Forces (*Quwat ad-Difa' al-Watani*, قوات الدفاع الوطني) and the Syrian Arab Army (*al-Jaysh al-Arabi as-Suri*, الجيش العربي السوري).
246. Checkpoints are concentrated around key areas such as Damascus International Airport, Mezzeh Military Airbase, the Syrian Presidential Palace, and the Old City of Damascus. In order to restore a sense of normalcy, pro-government forces have removed some checkpoints in Damascus City. This decision has resulted in some public outcry after a set of major suicide attacks in Damascus City, especially the attack on the Palace of Justice (*Qasr al-Adl*, قصر العدل) in March 2017.
247. There are currently fewer checkpoints in Damascus City than at the start of 2017. The proliferation of checkpoints nonetheless remains a significant concern. Pro-government forces will most likely remove additional checkpoints after the end of military operations in Eastern Ghouta, both to promote normalcy and concentrate their limited resources in other areas such as Southern Syria.
248. At checkpoints, pro-government fighters conduct security checks and check for individuals wanted for fighting with the armed opposition or avoiding military service. The checkpoints screen cars for explosives, check identification documents, and search for men eligible for conscription. At some checkpoints, civilians get through easily with a brief check of their documents and a quick look in the boot of their car. At others, civilians have to physically leave their vehicle for a more thorough search.
249. Syrian Air Force Intelligence reportedly runs some of the strictest checkpoints with regard to adherence to regulations and depth of scrutiny when compared to the Syrian Arab Army or Syrian National Defense Forces. Syrian Air Force Intelligence is reportedly concentrated in the western part of Damascus City near Mezzeh Military Air Base (*Matar al-Mezzeh al-Askari*, مطار المزة العسكري) and the Syrian Presidential Palace.
250. Open-source reporting has highlighted numerous reports of extortion at checkpoints in which civilians are threatened with jail or conscription if they fail to pay a bribe. Other reports allege widespread theft at checkpoints including the confiscation of jewellery and other valuables from civilians. Pro-government irregular fighters that run many of the checkpoints are not paid very well and thus often take advantage of their position to augment their income through extortion of civilians and merchants. The source considers this phenomenon to be a common characteristic of a war economy in civil conflicts.

251. At various times, civilians in pro-government areas have publically complained about abuses at checkpoints, forcing pro-government forces to take action to reduce the number of checkpoints. Open-source reports noted several episodes in which pro-government irregular fighters restricted civilian movement through parts of Damascus City in 2017. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has attempted to pass measures to restrict the number of abuses and criminal incidents at checkpoints. The source emphasizes that although extortion at checkpoints is prevalent and remains difficult to quantify in its full extent, it has not been widespread enough to paralyze Damascus City.
252. Internally-displaced persons (IDP) from other areas - particularly civilians from areas previously held by armed opposition groups or Islamic State in Eastern and Northern Syria - likely face difficulties when attempting to navigate checkpoints in Damascus City. However, there are not many reports about this issue.
253. Young men across all demographic categories consistently face difficulties attempting to navigate checkpoints due to the continued search for individuals eligible for mandatory military service.
254. Family members of armed opposition fighters also sometimes faced difficulties when attempting to navigate checkpoints. Open-source reporting has highlighted cases of such persons being subjected to deeper scrutiny, including temporarily detention for some hours or lengthy meetings with security services. The source has not seen reports on such cases within the last couple of months and surmises that most such persons have either gone into hiding or have left government-held areas in Damascus City.
255. The source stated that all checkpoints reportedly have access to a master list of wanted individuals. This list is reportedly exhaustive in terms of both individuals with links to armed opposition groups as well as individuals wanted for conscription. In some cases, individuals have been mistaken for others on the wanted list and security personnel have called a central clearing centre to cross-check the master list. However, the master list is fallible. Open-source reporting has noted examples of individuals with targetable characteristics (i.e. failure to report through conscription) who successfully navigated checkpoints to exit the country as well as individuals detained at checkpoints despite meeting none of the aforementioned criteria.
256. The Syrian Government has reportedly begun sending its master list of wanted individuals directly to checkpoint personnel in order to circumvent police stations, which are known for taking bribes to warn or turn a blind eye to individuals wanted for conscription.

#### Freedom of movement in Yarmouk

257. Previously, civilians living in Yarmouk Camp District and surrounding areas of Southern Damascus could get essentials through a passage between the Islamic State-held Hajar al-Aswad and opposition-held Yalda Districts, but this passage has been closed by pro-government forces in order to cut supplies to Islamic State.

#### Returnees

258. Currently, the numbers of returnees from abroad remains small. The number of returnees from abroad during the last year was definitely less than a hundred thousand people across all of Syria. Most returnees return due to advances by pro-government forces that move frontlines away from their homes and therefore restore calm or stability to the area. Over the past year, the largest number of returnees returned to Aleppo City after its recapture by the Syrian Government in December 2016. Civilians often return to these areas to resettle and rebuild their life or temporarily visit to check on their homes and possessions.

### *Updated information added to the meeting minutes*

When the source approved the meeting minutes (21 May 2018), following updated information was added regarding the current security situation in Damascus province:

259. The security situation has improved relatively dramatically in Damascus City since the surrender of armed opposition groups in Eastern Ghouta in March – April 2018. Jaysh al-Islam, Faylaq al-Rahman, and other armed opposition groups accepted forced reconciliation and/or evacuation deals to depart Eastern Ghouta for Idlib and Aleppo Provinces in Northern Syria. All shelling has ceased from Eastern Ghouta to Damascus City although isolated shelling from Islamic State in Yarmouk Camp District in Southern Damascus still occasionally targets Damascus City. The Syrian Government will likely over the coming month begin shifting military personnel and other security infrastructure out of Damascus City towards Dera'a and Quneitra Provinces in Southern Damascus. The Syrian Government will likely also attempt to reinforce its claims of victory in Damascus by dismantling additional checkpoints and fortifications across Damascus City. Damascus City nonetheless remains vulnerable to insurgent-style attacks by Islamic State and Al-Qaeda.
260. Pro-government forces launched a major military operation to seize the Hajar al-Aswad and Yarmouk Camp Districts held by Islamic State in Southern Damascus in May 2018. The military escalation included intense aerial and artillery bombardment of Hajar al-Aswad and Yarmouk Camp Districts. Islamic State in Southern Damascus later accepted a deal to evacuate from Damascus City to Eastern Syria in late May 2018. Armed opposition groups in the Yalda, Babbila and Beit Sahm Districts also accepted a joint evacuation and reconciliation deal to leave Southern Damascus for Idlib and Aleppo Provinces in April – May 2018. The Syrian Government declared total control over Damascus City on May 21, 2018.

## **Danish Red Cross**

Beirut, 14 March 2018

### **General security situation in Damascus Province**

#### **Security situation in Damascus City**

261. Since January 2018, the security situation in central Damascus has changed a great deal.

262. There is currently a greater risk for civilians in central Damascus. It is a matter of being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Most of the mortars land without causing any casualties.
263. The shelling of Damascus does not happen on a daily basis. There are certain periods of time where the shelling intensifies. For instance, recently there have been two periods of time where the shelling has been quite intense with up to hundreds of mortars being fired towards Damascus City during those days.
264. The armed opposition groups are not able to hit specific targets with the projectiles. The mortars hit public areas, for instance the area surrounding The Four Seasons hotel, marketplaces and residential areas. The source does not know if there are any areas that have never been hit. However, it is the source's assessment that if they can hit central Damascus, which is a bit far from Eastern Ghouta, it means that the weapons used have a long range, and they can reach other places further away.
265. Due to the inaccuracy of the projectiles, they are sometimes hitting in public areas with high concentration of civilians, such as marketplaces, which is why it has become increasingly harder for civilians to go about their daily lives. Generally, life in Damascus has become more intense because of the current situation, and daily activities have been reduced.
266. Apart from the projectiles that are being fired from Eastern Ghouta (*Ghoutet Dimasq as-Sharqiyya*, غوطة دمشق الشرقية), the situation in Ghouta has not influenced the situation in Damascus.
267. Regarding the prevalence of suicide attacks, the source has not heard of such attacks, but considers it a possibility that such attacks take place in areas with close proximity to front lines.

#### Assessment of future security situation in Damascus province

268. When Eastern Ghouta is taken by the government of Syria, it is not clear which area the government will target next.
269. In areas recently taken by the government, there are a large number of manufactured ammunitions that have not gone off, and civilians are at risk of being killed by these remnants of war. For this reason, in order to consider an area completely cleared, there will be a need for a centimetre by centimetre clearing of the areas. Armed opposition groups often leave behind booby traps, thereby inflicting civilian casualties.

#### Internally displaced persons in Damascus City

270. Internally displaced persons (IDP) are not concentrated in certain areas in Damascus but are instead dispersed throughout the city. IDPs in Damascus are from all parts of the country and often live in apartments with their relatives and friends squeezed together in one apartment.
271. The population in Damascus has grown due to the large number of IDPs living in the city. This has in turn put pressure on housing, food, water, electricity and access to schools.

## Freedom of movement in Damascus province

### Freedom of movement in Damascus City

272. Because of the security situation, the movement in Damascus City is highly regulated in form of checkpoints, and there is a very visible security presence in and around every road going in and out from Damascus. Due to the number of checkpoints in Damascus City, movement is slowed down but is not stopped.
273. There are two lines through every checkpoint, one line is a privileged line and another line is a regular line. Vehicles travelling through the privileged line are not held up for long whereas regular people are held up for hours to pass checkpoints. People are not held up at every checkpoint, and not equally. At some checkpoints the checks appear very cursory whilst at others they are more thorough. The checkpoints impede but do not stop the flow of traffic and commerce around the city. The source cannot say whether people experience random stops, or whether some people tend to be singled-out to be delayed more than others.
274. At checkpoints, various profiles are checked. Anyone who does not have a clear reason for travelling will avoid it as a lot of people are afraid of passing checkpoints. However, many people are still going out and the checkpoints do not stop them, perhaps because they have nothing to fear. Those who have something to fear would avoid exposing themselves at checkpoints because they could get into trouble trying to pass through them. The source doubts that very many people are actually stopped and arrested at checkpoints, but clearly they act as a deterrent for those who do have something to fear, from trying to pass through them.

## Returnees

275. There have not been any big flows of returns from abroad. There is a slow and steady trickle from and to Syria all the time, but that does not mean that refugees are returning for good. Mostly when people come back to Syria, it is because they want to check on the situation (their house, their land etc.) after which they exit the country again. It is the source's view that larger flows from abroad often happen because neighbouring host countries push Syrian refugees back. Most returnees are not refugees, but IDPs going back to areas where there is no longer active fighting. The source assumes that there has not been any return to Damascus.

### *Updated information added to the meeting minutes*

When the source approved the meeting minutes (27 May 2018), following updated information was added regarding the current security situation in Damascus province:

276. In short, the situation in Damascus has changed dramatically since February this year, as the Government of Syria now has complete control of all of Rural Damascus Governorate, although the state of alertness and tolerance of the security forces has not changed. If anything they are even less relaxed, perhaps not wanting to be seen as being responsible for things slipping back to the situation where the Government of Syria controlled much less than half the country.

277. Missiles/mortars have stopped falling in the centre of Damascus and the city is a lot busier at all times of day. The armed opposition groups have been moved to other governorates like Idlib, far from Damascus, or they have melted away into Syria or even across an international border, and they have not yet adopted new strategies of asymmetric warfare, such as vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attacks. In all senses Damascus seems a lot more busy and full of economic activity than a few months ago, although the overt presence of security force personnel in the streets is still very evident.
278. Yarmouk has also been retaken by the government, but it is almost completely destroyed and uninhabitable. Not only are the buildings derelict or completely collapsed but there is no power, water, sewerage or other utilities, and no people able to live there to bring life back to the camp. On top of this the rubble must be mixed with a very high concentration of explosive remnants of war (ERW) which would be very hazardous to the former residents of the camp if they tried to return now. None or very few appear to have done so.

### **Lama Fakih, deputy director, Human Rights Watch (HRW)**

Beirut, 14 March 2018

### **General security situation in Damascus Province**

279. HRW information regarding the situation is limited as it does not have access to Damascus. HRW's information mainly originates from contacts that travel there or from communication with contacts on the phone.

### **Security situation in Damascus City**

280. In terms of the security situation, there has been shelling of Damascus City by armed opposition groups in Damascus suburbs (Rif Dimashq), i.e. Eastern Ghouta (*Ghoutet Dimasq as-Sharqiyya*, غوطة دمشق الشرقية), and the frequency of shelling appears to correlate with the government's offensive in the area.
281. There is currently an escalation of shelling on Damascus City, but HRW does not know precisely to what extent people are being affected as HRW only has limited access to civilians inside Damascus City center who can confirm what HRW hears from the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA).
282. Areas with close proximity to Eastern Ghouta, for instance Jaramana (جرمانا) and Sayyida Zainab (السيدة زينب), have been hit frequently by heavy strikes in terms of shelling from opposition groups.
283. The shelling hitting Damascus City consists of smaller mortars that are not targeted and therefore strike the city indiscriminately. Despite the fact that mortars are characterized as smaller weaponry, they have the capacity to cause destruction and casualties, depending on where they hit. The mortars falling in Damascus have caused civilian casualties because they often hit civilian

infrastructure such as busy roads, school buses, market areas, around train stations etc.<sup>236</sup>

Government facilities have also been hit, but not to the same extent as civilian infrastructure. As an example, an attack on November 14 by the anti-government armed groups Faylaq al-Rahman (فيلق الرحمن) and Ahrar al-Sham (أحرار الشام) on a strategic objective, the Vehicles Administration Center, near the town of Harasta (حراستا), could be mentioned

284. Opposition groups have also made use of a combination of shelling and explosives - in the shape of car bombs, improvised explosive devices and suicide attacks -when they launch retaliatory attacks towards Damascus. The frequency of such attacks is difficult for HRW to confirm as it mainly relies on public reporting from the government. Based on the reported attacks, it seems that such attacks are happening more frequently now compared to previous years.

285. The source has not heard of any shelling from opposition controlled southern pockets on Damascus City.

286. There have also been incidents of car bombs<sup>237</sup> and suicide attacks in Damascus targeting both civilians and military objectives<sup>238</sup>, for instance there have been attacks on police stations and the Russian cultural center. The reported attacks seem to be more infrequent than earlier. Not all attacks have been claimed by armed groups.

#### Assessment of future security situation in Damascus Province

287. It is the assessment of the source that when the government retakes Eastern Ghouta there will be a decrease in mortar attacks targeting Damascus. It is a strategy for the government to secure the entire capital and once Eastern Ghouta falls, the dynamics in the capital are going to change quite significantly.

#### Internally displaced persons in Damascus City

288. There are a number of internally displaced persons (IDP) in Damascus. IDPs are, depending on their financial means, staying in rental or group accommodations. HRW has also received reports that some IDPs are staying in parks and gardens.

289. IDPs are arriving from different cities, but the largest movements of IDPs towards Damascus are mainly originating from those areas where there is ongoing active fighting. For instance, there

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<sup>236</sup> As an example, the source referred to this article by Reuters about a mortar bomb that hit the entrance to a major trade fair being held in the Syrian capital in August 2017: *Six people killed in mortar attack at Damascus fair: monitor*, 20 August 2017, available at:

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-mortar/six-people-killed-in-mortar-attack-at-damascus-fair-monitor-idUSKCN1B00MX> [accessed 17 May 2018]

<sup>237</sup> As an example of a car bomb in Damascus targeting civilians, the source referred to this article by the Daily Star: *Multiple deaths after Syria car bomb 'worse than mortar' goes off in busy square*, 9 May 2018, available at:

<https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/world-news/701521/syria-car-bomb-damascus-explosion-maysat-square-worse-than-mortar> [accessed 17 May 2018]

<sup>238</sup> As examples of military objectives being hit, the source referred to this photo at the website of the Telegraph: *Syria: car bomb shakes Damascus near headquarters of ruling party*, available at:

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/picturegalleries/worldnews/9885424/Syria-car-bomb-shakes-Damascus-near-headquarters-of-ruling-party.html> [accessed 17 May 2018]

have been IDPs travelling to Damascus from Deir ez-Zor (دير الزور) and Raqqa (الرقة), even though the vast majority of IDPs from both Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa have travelled to the Northern parts of the country.

290. IDPs displaced from Ghouta often take shelter in IDP shelters in Jaramana or in Damascus City if they have relatives there. However, in areas that have recently come under the government's control, such as Ghouta, civilians have had to go through security screening processes in order to be able to enter into Damascus City.

291. There is an expectation that there will be an influx of IDPs from Eastern Ghouta in Damascus Province in the nearest future when the government regains control of even more areas as there have already been quite a few IDPs travelling to Damascus from Ghouta.

292. IDPs displaced from Idlib (إدلب) will often flee to Turkey and only rarely to Damascus.

### **Freedom of movement in Damascus Province**

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

293. There are checkpoints around Damascus City. Some checkpoints are fixed and some are mobile.

294. Whether certain groups face difficulties when moving around in Damascus Province, it can generally be said that certain groups are more likely to face problems than others. For instance, individuals from activist families, anyone who is on a wanted list or anyone who is in the military service age will face more difficulties than others. People originating from certain areas, e.g. Darayya (داريا), can also in some instances face difficulties when passing a checkpoint. HRW has anecdotal information that Sunni men of a certain age will be stopped and asked questions more often than Alawites or Christians.

295. HRW has not come across any information suggesting that unaccompanied women face particular difficulties when passing checkpoints; on the contrary there is a tendency of women staying more outside of their homes than previously and thus moving more around in the city and through checkpoints.

### **Returnees**

296. There have been reports of just over 10,000 returns from Lebanon. Some of these returns happened through negotiated deals, such as the returns from Aarsal (عرسال), and others have returned because of a loss of legal status in Lebanon. Some of the returnees from Lebanon ended up in Idlib.

297. Following the negotiated deal in Aarsal, which was negotiated by the Lebanese army, 5,000 Syrians returned to Syria. HRW conducted interviews with many of the returnees, who expressed that they decided to return because of the conditions that they were facing in Aarsal, but they have not

returned to their community of origin.<sup>239</sup> This is a tendency that HRW picked up on with regards to other returnees from Lebanon. Hezbollah has been active in negotiating deals for Syrians to return including from the Qalamun Mountains (جبال القلمون). In one reported negotiation, returnees were ensured that they would face no harm, they would be amnestied and would not be expected to serve in the military and in addition to this that they were even allowed to hold small fire arms. The actual outcome of this negotiation is not clear.

298. The source expects that Lebanon will expel a large number of Syrian refugees back to Syria next year when the fighting is over. There have been mass expulsions of Syrians from Jordan.

299. Turkey has closed its borders and has conducted mass expulsions, which has been widely documented. There are currently speculations that Turkey will utilize its recent takeover of Afrin (عفرين) to create an area that will serve as a hub for refugees previously residing in Turkey.

#### Returnees via Damascus International Airport

300. With regards to returns through Damascus airport, it should be noted that most Syrians returning from host countries in the region use the land borders to return.

301. Returns from Europe are a trickle, not a flood. In the future, the source expects that returns from Europe will be due to lack of integration in European host countries. There is very little information on how returnees from Europe are treated upon return. However, from public reporting the source knows that there may have been few cases of Syrians returning through the airport, but it is not common practice, and HRW does not have corroborated information on how they are treated by the authorities upon arrival. The source anticipates that broadly speaking people, who have fled to Europe, particularly men, will be treated with suspicion in the event of their return to Syria.<sup>240</sup>

#### Consequences of illegal exit

302. It can generally be said that it is the regime's perception that Syrians who have left the country illegally are considered as traitors, and the president has on several occasions made statements corroborating this view.

#### Updated information added to the meeting minutes

When the source approved the meeting minutes (10 May 2018), following updated information was added regarding the current security situation in Damascus province:

303. Large parts of Yarmouk have come under government control, and the government has retaken the areas where anti-government groups were operating in Eastern Ghouta. As a consequence,

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<sup>239</sup> For more information, the source referred to: Human Rights Watch, *Lebanon: Refugees in Border Zone at Risk – Aarsal Conditions Pressure Them to Return to Syria*, 20 September 2017, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/20/lebanon-refugees-border-zone-risk> [accessed 17 May 2018]

<sup>240</sup> As an elaboration to the source's statement, the source referred to this article: The Irish Times, *Arrests and torture of Syrian refugees returning home reported – Evidence grows of systematic abuse of vast numbers of Syrian going back from Europe*, 17 March 2018, available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/middle-east/arrests-and-torture-of-syrian-refugees-returning-home-reported-1.3429762> [accessed 17 May 2018]

the anti-government fighters from Eastern Ghouta have now been pushed out of the area, many to Idlib, and do not have the capacity to strike Damascus City with mortars from there; but car bombings, improvised explosive devices, etc. are likely to continue.

304. The influx of IDPs in Damascus has increased concurrently with the government regaining control of more areas in Eastern Ghouta.

## Heiko Wimmen, International Crisis Group (ICG)

Beirut, 12 March 2018

### General security situation in Damascus Province

#### Security situation in Damascus City

305. The security situation in Damascus City varies depending on an area's proximity to actual front lines. In Damascus City, mortar impacts are more prevalent in areas close to Eastern Ghouta (*Ghoutet Dimasq as-Sharqiyya*, غوطة دمشق الشرقية), but the opposition has the ability to strike further away.
306. Within the past two to three years, the general security situation in Damascus City has improved, because there are less frontlines close to the city. However, as a consequence of the regime offensive in Eastern Ghouta, the mortar fire on Damascus City has intensified.
307. Certain areas in Damascus City may be out of range of mortars from Eastern Ghouta. However, there are certain areas within the range of mortars which you cannot avoid when living in the city, e.g. the central part of the city. Furthermore, mortars are not very accurate.
308. Mortars are reportedly used by various opposition groups, e.g. Jaysh al-Islam (جيش الإسلام) and Faylaq al-Rahman (فيلق الرحمن), and the source assumes that neither of them is more competent than the other when it comes to aiming and hitting accordingly.
309. The mortar attacks in Damascus City cannot be compared to the government's bombardment of rebel-held areas in terms of extent.
310. Areas close to the frontlines like Bab Touma (باب توما) and the mainly Christian Qasaa (القصاص) district can be reached by mortar fire from Eastern Ghouta. In the beginning of March 2018, mortars landed in Qasaa, and people got killed. However, also areas far away from the frontlines, e.g. areas like Mezzeh (المزة) and Muhajereen (المهاجرين), have been hit.
311. Currently, suicide attacks are not prevalent in Damascus City, even though there have been a few attacks lately.

#### Security situation in Yarmouk

312. There is an Islamic State held pocket in the southern outskirts of Damascus. The Free Syrian Army (FSA, *al-Jaysh as-Suri al-Hurr*, الجيش السوري الحر) and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, هيئة تحرير الشام) also

have a presence in the area. As late as January 2018, there was fighting between Islamic State and Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham in the Yarmouk Camp (*Mukhayyim al-Yarmouk*, مخيم اليرموك).

313. On 12 March 2018, an evacuation deal was made with the government by one of the opposition groups in Yarmouk. An evacuation deal usually consists of two options; the first option is to stay in the area and enter some kind of reconciliation process, promising that they will not take up arms. Then these people are supposedly deleted from the wanted lists. For unknown reasons, some may however not be removed, or there is another list from another bureau that they are not deleted from. If a person is male, he will be enlisted and sent to a war theatre that will be dangerous, and he might be forced to be part of war crimes; unless he has money to buy himself out of dangerous postings. The second option is usually that people will be shipped to Idlib (إدلب).

#### Assessment of future security situation in Damascus province

314. The source assumes that the fight for Eastern Ghouta will soon be over. Likewise, the regime will eventually regain control of the southern outskirts of Damascus City.
315. The source considers that once rebels have lost territorial control of Eastern Ghouta, Yarmouk (اليرموك) and Hajar al-Aswad (الحجر الأسود), groups like Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham will turn to insurgency. The number of attacks by use of improvised explosive devices (IED) and suicide vehicles (VBIED) will probably go up again.

#### Freedom of movement in Damascus province

##### Freedom of movement in Damascus City

316. Inside Damascus City, people can move and go wherever they want. Life appears to be normal. It is possible to a certain degree to predict where mortars might hit.

#### Returnees

317. Before Syrians return to Damascus from abroad, they tend to find out if they are on a wanted list or not. There are different channels to find out about that. However people who return cannot be completely certain how they will be treated upon return.

### Mercy Corps - Humanitarian Access Team (HAT)

Beirut, 23 March 2018

#### General security situation in Damascus Province

##### Security situation in Damascus City

318. Before the campaign in Eastern Ghouta (غوطة دمشق الشرقية) which started in February 2018, there were very few cases of shelling, suicide attacks etc.
319. Since the campaign started in Eastern Ghouta, there has been an increase in shelling against Damascus which is very unusual. Before that, the extent of mortar attacks from Ghouta was very limited.

320. Mortars are inaccurate, and they do not have a range of more than two to four kilometres. They have hit near the Russian embassy, but also at market places, schools and other civilian areas have been hit by the projectiles. There have been complaints from the bar industry about their businesses in Bab Touma (باب توما) being severely affected by mortar attacks as people are afraid to go to bars in this area.
321. In total, about 11,000 people, including military personnel and civilians, have been killed in Damascus City during the entire conflict.
322. The number of suicide attacks or car bombs inside Damascus City has been very low; the largest suicide attack occurred in 2016 close to the Sayyida Zainab shrine (Maqam al-Sayyida Zainab, مقام السيدة زينب) where sixty people were killed. There certainly have been a few suicide attacks and car bombs in Damascus City since then with lower death tolls, for instance Palace of Justice bombing and Midan police station bombing in 2017, but the Sayeda Zeinab bombing was the largest attack with the highest death toll.
323. The source estimates that the total number of car bombs during the past seven years is 20-25. There have also been a handful of assassination attempts in Damascus.
324. Apart from the recent intensive mortar attacks against the city within the past month, the security situation in Damascus has been very stable.
325. There has been no insurgency from opposition groups in areas which have been recaptured by the government. The assassinations and car bombs, which have been carried out in these areas, have mostly been part of an internal fight among pro-government militia groups for economic interests.

#### Security situation in Yarmouk

326. South Damascus has been divided between three pockets: Qadam (القدم), which is the western end of south Damascus; the Yarmouk Camp (Mukhayyim al-Yarmouk, مخيم اليرموك) and Hajar al-Aswad (الحجر الأسود), which is controlled by Islamic State; and Yalda (يلدا), Babbila (بببلا) and Beit Sahm (بيت (YBB), which is controlled by a collection of different armed groups.
327. Since Palestinian armed groups in South Damascus are only nominally part of the opposition, they have a special relationship with the government via branch 235 under the Syrian military intelligence directorate, the so called Palestine Branch (Farae Filastin, فرع فلسطين). There is a lot of coordination between Palestinian groups and the government and most of the negotiations between the government and opposition groups in south Damascus go through Palestinians.
328. The government has played Islamic State and opposition groups in south Damascus against each other by supplying both sides with guns to fight each other. One year ago, the government negotiated a reconciliation agreement in Qadam and YBB which, and unlike reconciliation agreements in other places, did not imply evacuation from the area, but it was conditional in the sense that the opposition groups should fight against Islamic State. The government would then, as part of the deal, supply them with money and guns for that purpose.

329. Two weeks ago, when opposition fighters in Qadam were evacuated to Idlib due to a reconciliation agreement, Islamic State took over the area, which was not acceptable for the government.
330. Islamic State in the southern part of Damascus province is different than Islamic State in other places in the sense that the people who have pledged allegiance to Islamic State in the Yarmouk-area mainly are people, who came to the area from Quneitra (القنيطرة) thirty years ago after being displaced from the Golan Heights (هضبة الجولان) by Israel.

#### Assessment of future security situation in Damascus province

331. The source anticipates that once the operation in Ghouta is finished in near future, the mortar attacks will also stop. The source further expects that, within two months, there will be no areas in Damascus suburbs controlled by opposition groups as the government will take full control of Eastern Ghouta, defeat Islamic State and make reconciliation agreements with other armed groups in south Damascus. The source does however not consider southern Damascus as an opposition-held area because of the special cooperative relationships between the governing Palestinian bodies in the area and the government.
332. The source assesses that, as soon as the operation in Eastern Ghouta is over, the government will start a large operation against Islamic State in coordination with other opposition groups in YBB, and, as soon as the Islamic State is defeated, the government will enter a reconciliation agreement with these other opposition groups. This reconciliation agreement will probably be softer than other reconciliation agreements in the sense that some of the fighters and their leaders will be evacuated while others will be allowed to stay and join pro-government forces.
333. In terms of the impact of an operation against Islamic State on the security situation inside Damascus City, Islamic State would probably start shelling southern part of the city, but their capacity to cause severe damages would be limited, since they do not have the same weapons as the armed opposition groups in areas like Eastern Ghouta. The source assesses that Islamic State fighters in south Damascus will at the end be evacuated to somewhere else, conscripted by the government forces or recruited by other groups.
334. Regarding the probability of Islamic State and other jihadist groups starting an insurgency with suicide attacks and car bombs inside Damascus City once they are defeated in Damascus suburbs, the source considers that insurgency activity in the future will be limited. However, the government has previously proved to be very effective in recruiting remaining opposition fighters in a recaptured area into the army or pro-regime militias once they have evacuated their leaders and hard-line members of these groups to Idlib (إدلب) or Aleppo (حلب), and that is what the source anticipates will happen in Damascus suburbs in the future. Additionally, the government's security apparatus is very strong, and the experience has showed that the security branches have strong networks of informants everywhere in Syria who monitor the situation intensively and know what is going on in all areas, including recently retaken areas.

### Internally displaced persons in Damascus City

335. Internally displaced persons (IDP) originating from Deir ez-Zor or other hotspots will have a difficult time in accessing housing in Damascus City as IDPs will need to have an official approval from the security service in order to rent an apartment.

### Freedom of movement in Damascus province

#### Freedom of movement in Damascus City

336. The purpose of installing checkpoints in Damascus City is two-folded: to ensure the security and to catch people avoiding conscription, however conscription is currently the main purpose of checkpoints. Almost every time someone is detained at a checkpoint, it is due to conscription. The number of checkpoints in Damascus has been reduced with 75 pct. since 2015-2016, and most checkpoints are close to frontlines. There have been instances of the National Defence Forces (*Quwat ad-Difa' al-Watani*, قوات الدفاع الوطني) setting up illegal checkpoints at their own will.
337. Authorities at checkpoints do not pull the cars aside and check them as they did before, which is due to the improved security situation.
338. There is a computer at each checkpoint with access to a list of wanted persons. The source has heard that the list of wanted persons in Syria contains one and a half million names, including those wanted for military service, criminals and political activists. This wanted list contains information on which security service branch that has listed the individual as wanted. The air force security branch does not share its wanted list with other branches of the security apparatus.
339. Concerning possible impact of one's religious and ethnic background or place of origin on treatment at checkpoints, the source considers that it is mainly one's area of origin that will pose an issue. There have been cases of people, particularly young men from certain areas considered hotspots, who have faced problems and harassment at checkpoints. Other instances are if the officer at a checkpoint has lost a family member in Deir ez-Zor (دير الزور), a person from this area may receive a discriminatory treatment when approaching the checkpoint. This depends on the individual officer at the checkpoint.

### Returnees

340. People have to find out through their relatives whether they have an issue with the government, for instance with regard to their military service, and they have to have the problem settled before they return, otherwise they would face difficulties upon return.
341. Upon arrival in Syria, if a person has visa and stamps from Turkey in his or her passports, the authorities would stop this person and ask questions about his/her stay abroad.

#### Returnees via land borders

342. The source's information on this issue is based on anecdotal reports.
343. Syrians who have lived abroad for a long time usually use the Syrian-Lebanese land border to enter Syria.

344. How people are treated upon return may depend on the officer in charge at the border, similar to the situation at checkpoints mentioned above.

### Consequences of illegal exit

345. According to a law passed in 2016, those who have left Syria without passports and/or correct stamps should obtain their passport through Syrian embassies. The goal of the new regulation seems to be gaining money from people rather than penalizing them as a new passport costs 800 USD.

### Updated information added to the meeting minutes

When the source approved the meeting minutes (18 May 2018), following updated information was added regarding the current security situation in Damascus province:

346. The mortar shells into Damascus City have completely stopped, and the government has fully retaken and reconciled both Eastern Ghouta and opposition-held south Damascus. There was one recent car bomb in Damascus, but otherwise the city is almost completely calm.
347. The Government of Syria is launching a major offensive into Islamic State-held Yarmouk. Currently, the fighting is extremely intense, but is limited to the neighbourhood itself. The Government of Syria has made steady progress and will likely retake the area in the coming weeks.

## REACH

Amman, 15 March 2018

*About the source: One of REACH's main activities in Syria has been to collect information about areas in Syria which is hard to access, including besieged areas such as Yarmouk (اليرموك) and Eastern Ghouta (Ghoutet Dimasq as-Sharqiyya, غوطة دمشق الشرقية). REACH collects both broad and specific information with the overall goal to inform the humanitarian community. The organisation also ensures that the produced information is disseminated to coordinating bodies working within the field of aid deliverance. REACH works across several hubs in Syria, including Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq.*

### General security situation in Damascus Province

#### Security situation in Damascus City

348. REACH's coverage of the situation in Damascus City is less extensive compared to their coverage of other areas in Syria.
349. According to media reports, shelling over Damascus has intensified since 18 February 2018 when the operation in Eastern Ghouta started. Mortars have mostly struck eastern neighbourhoods of Damascus, including Old Damascus (Dimasq al-Qadima, دمشق القديمة) and Bab Touma (باب توما), which are close to Eastern Ghouta. According to reports, the range of mortars is limited which is the reason why for instance the western part of the city has not been hit. REACH does not have information on the nature of the targets of these mortar attacks as it is difficult to know which areas that are targeted. The attacks have reportedly led to a number of civilian casualties.

350. Jobar (جوبر), which is an area in north-eastern side of Damascus City and part of Damascus province, has been a sort of frontline between opposition groups and the government, because the area is the outmost eastern point of the city and the outmost western point of Eastern Ghouta. It means that active conflict has been continuous in the area. Satellite imagery analysis shows that approximately 93 pct. of structures in Jobar have been moderately or severely damaged, or completely destroyed. It is one of the most damaged areas that has been assessed by REACH.

#### Security situation in Yarmouk

351. Yarmouk is one of the areas that have been covered by REACH's activities. Yarmouk was originally, and still is, a Palestinian refugee camp. The security situation in Yarmouk is very volatile and was controlled by the group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, هيئة تحرير الشام), an Al-Qaeda affiliate. As of May 2018, the area has been retaken by the government.<sup>241</sup> The area has been classified as besieged since before 2016, and freedom of movement for civilians has been limited to Islamic State areas or adjacent armed opposition areas. Previously, around one to ten pct. of people from Yarmouk could exit formally to get supplies in government-controlled areas, but as of October 2017 for Yarmouk and November 2017 for other areas, formal access points were closed and this could no longer occur.

352. When REACH had access to Yarmouk, there were sporadic clashes between parties to the conflict which could last for three to four days, but within the last few months, the clashes have escalated and have become more frequent. Additionally, as all formal routes were reportedly shut, residents who used informal routes to move between communities reportedly faced the risk of gunfire at times.

#### Internally displaced persons in Damascus City

353. Generally, some people from Barzah, Qaboun and Jobar were displaced into Eastern Ghouta and live in very poor conditions as internally displaced persons (IDPs). With regards to Jobar, there was a large displacement in March 2017, and some of the IDPs returned to Jobar in subsequent months because of the harsh living conditions as IDPs in Ghouta and also due to a perceived lessening of hostilities in Jobar. However, a majority of them left again in June 2017 due to the escalation of the conflict. REACH's data indicates that they did not return to Jobar again.

#### Freedom of movement in Damascus province

##### Freedom of movement in Damascus City

354. In areas such as Qaboun (قابون) and Barzeh (برزة) in the north-eastern corner of Damascus City, civilian movement and the movement of commercial and humanitarian vehicles and goods were severely restricted until the areas were re-taken or truce agreements were reached between parties to the conflict. In Barzeh, most restrictions were lifted in June and July. In Qaboun, – REACH stopped covering the area in February 2018, but access restrictions were lifted considerably in December 2017, and the situation remained stable in January 2018. Prior to

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<sup>241</sup> This statement about the situation in May 2018 was added by the source when it approved the meeting minutes on 27 May 2018.

December, residents had reportedly been unable to leave Qaboun for more than 2-3 hours at a time. Between June and December 2017, only one to ten pct. of the population in Qaboun were reportedly allowed to leave the area, often children and persons in critical medical conditions. Although REACH has not covered the situation in Qaboun since January 2018, it is possible that the situation remains unchanged in Qaboun with regard to restricted freedom of movement.

#### Freedom of movement in Yarmouk

355. Reports suggest that apart from a general fear of ISIL, freedom of movement inside Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad has been restricted by strict rules which have been imposed on population in the area by Islamic State, for instance strict rules for how women should be dressed when moving in public space. REACH does not directly collect this information and cannot verify these reports.

#### Returnees

356. In areas assessed by REACH, most of those who return to their areas of origin in Syria are IDPs, not returnees from abroad.

#### Returnees via land borders

357. There have been reports that some returnees from Jordan who initially fled because of their political beliefs returned to non-state areas through land borders. REACH does not collect information on this and does not have any evidence to verify these reports.

### Syria Direct

Amman, 15 March 2018

*About the source: Syria Direct is a non-profit journalism organization based in Amman, Jordan that produces coverage of Syria while training young and aspiring Syrian and international journalists.*

### General security situation in Damascus Province

#### Security situation in Damascus City

358. [As of 15 March 2018] there is on-going shelling in Damascus City coming from Eastern Ghouta (Ghoutet Dimasq as-Sharqiyya, غوطة دمشق الشرقية). The shelling is happening on a consistent basis and is typically increased correspondingly with the armed campaign of the Syrian regime in Eastern Ghouta.

359. A lot of projectiles hit close to military barracks and the Russian embassy. However, the shelling does not seem to be aimed that well, since civilians are also hit on a frequent basis. During the first months of 2018, the source estimates that dozens of civilians have been killed from shelling in Damascus City.

360. One of the reasons why civilians are hit might be because the weapons used are not the most advanced kind of weapons in terms of technology.

361. [As of 15 March 2018], the area most subjected to shelling in Damascus City is Jaramana (جرمانا) but almost every part of Damascus is hit. However, because Damascus is a big city there are areas that have not been hit, and there are areas in the southern part of the city that the armed opposition in Eastern Ghouta has not been able to hit by shelling.
362. Compared to 2016 where suicide attacks were more frequent, the recent months have been quiet in terms of suicide bombers in Damascus City. In 2017, there was a bombing at the Palace of Justice (Qasr al-Adl, قصر العدل). Additionally, in October 2017, there was a bombing on a Damascus police station that killed more than ten people.<sup>242</sup>
363. In April 2018, a car bomb reportedly exploded in the Birzeh district of Damascus killing the driver and injuring six others.<sup>243</sup>
364. In 2018, both Israel and the United States have launched a series of strikes on Syrian government and Iranian military installations in and around Damascus. The attacks resulted in casualties among Syrian government, Iranian and other pro-government forces.
365. There is a general fear of armed radical Islamists among Damascenes, e.g. the Islamic State. The government has spoken of terror-related cells having a presence inside Damascus City. The bombing of the Palace of Justice is just one example, but it is not an isolated incident. People in Damascus are frustrated about why there have been bombings in a city like Damascus which is so secure and filled with so many checkpoints; especially in a place like the Palace of Justice.
366. About a week after the bombing of the Palace of Justice, a car bomb went off near Qaboun (القابون). Nobody claimed responsibility for that car bomb.
367. While assassinations and car bombings against government officials and buildings have been conducted inside Damascus City, the rate of such attacks has generally decreased since 2015-16. According to the source, there are not really any assassinations or car bombings today.

#### Security situation in Yarmouk

368. The Yarmouk Camp (مخيم اليرموك) is one of the most difficult areas in Syria for the source to cover because of the complexity in terms of actors and areas of control.

<sup>242</sup> The source referred to this article about the mentioned bombing on a Damascus police station: Aljazeera, *Deadly bombing hits Damascus police station*, 3 October 2017, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/coordinated-bombing-strikes-syria-damascus-171002131512968.html> [accessed 28 May 2018]

<sup>243</sup> The source referred to this article about the mentioned car bomb that exploded in the Birzeh district of Damascus: Arabic Sputnik, *مقتل مدني وإصابة 6 آخرين جراء انفجار عبوة ناسفة في منطقة برزة بدمشق*, 6 March 2018, available at: [https://arabic.sputniknews.com/arab\\_world/201804061031377416-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B2%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%A9-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%81%D8%A9-%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A5%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA/](https://arabic.sputniknews.com/arab_world/201804061031377416-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B2%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%A9-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%81%D8%A9-%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A5%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA/)

369. The Yarmouk Camp is twice-encircled. Government forces have encircled the camp, and within this encirclement, the Islamic State has encircled civilians and other armed actors inside the camp. There are two main armed groups that control the Yarmouk Camp. By far, the largest armed opposition group is the Islamic State, followed by Jabhat al-Nusra also known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, هيئة تحرير الشام) that controls a small part of the camp, i.e. about one square kilometre.
370. There have previously been Palestinian factions inside the Yarmouk Camp that never got along with either Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham or the Islamic State as they were rumoured to be pro-government. However, these Palestinian groups no longer have a presence in the Yarmouk Camp as a direct consequence of the Islamic State's presence in the area.
371. In spite of the besiegement, students from the Yarmouk Camp used to be able to temporarily leave the camp for the neighbouring towns of Yalda (يلدا) and Babbila (بيبلا) in order to attend exams. The Islamic State is now severely restricting all movement in and out of the camp and has instead enforced its own curriculum on students. As of March 15, 2018, the few students who were able to leave the camp to attend schools faced harassment and the threat of arbitrary arrest by Islamic State members. Because of the besiegement of the Yarmouk Camp, there was a government-sponsored evacuation process in the Qadam-neighbourhood (حي القدم) in the beginning of March 2018 where more than 1,000 fighters, their families and civilians were evacuated. The evacuated fighters primarily came from the opposition group called Ajnad al-Sham (أجناد الشام).
372. The Qadam-neighbourhood is significant because it is the gateway between the army-controlled and the Islamic State-controlled territory in south Damascus. Evacuation of the Ajnad al-Sham fighters from this area corresponds with rumours about an impending government operation against Islamic State held territory that the source has recently heard about.
373. The source estimated that the number of civilian Palestinians living in the Yarmouk Camp is around 3,000-5,000. The source assumes that these people will probably be failed by both the government and the Islamic State in the event of clashes between the two sides. For instance, the government had just given civilians 48 hours to get out of the camp, before the government would block the entrance. There were rumours that the Islamic State was preventing people from leaving the camp because they use civilians as human shields in the event of a government-lead assault on the camp. At the same time, there were also rumours that the government would ask the people who were leaving the camp to go back and join the government in its fight against the Islamic State.
374. During the first two months of 2018, Islamic State leaders have been paying bribes to regime forces to be allowed to leave the Yarmouk Camp for the north-western part of the country. This is similar to the way that Islamic State has reacted in other areas, where there have been reports about Islamic State leaders ensuring safe passage from an area before any armed confrontation with government forces.

## Freedom of movement in Damascus Province

### Freedom of movement in Damascus City

375. There are fixed and mobile checkpoints in Damascus City. Checkpoints run by different branches of regime security agencies are present across Damascus City and at the entrances of the city. The amount of checkpoints slows down the daily movement of people and people are spending some time standing in line at the checkpoints.
376. The amount of checkpoints in Damascus City fluctuates. In 2015-16 the amount of checkpoints were significantly higher than in the beginning of 2018. In addition, previously the checkpoint personnel conducted more thorough car searches which severely slowed down the movement of traffic in Damascus.
377. At checkpoints, cars are searched for weapons and bombs, and the identity of the passengers is checked to see if they are on any of the regime's wanted lists. The checkpoints have computers, so they can check people's names against the wanted lists electronically. In addition, the checkpoints have wanted lists printed on paper. So if the computers are not working, the personnel can still run checks against the lists.
378. Also, ID-cards of passengers travelling with minibuses, a common mode of public transportation in Damascus, are checked at the checkpoints. If one of the passengers in the minibus was listed on one of the wanted lists, it could slow down the entire bus. A bus could be held up for one or two hours while the checkpoint officer is talking to the person who is listed as wanted.
379. The most intense security checks are at the entrance to the city. For the most part, civilians can travel within Damascus relatively easily, certainly compared to a few years ago. At the entrance to the city, checkpoints are quite extensive—as mentioned previously—and checkpoint guards have recently been allegedly exacting large bribes from civilians at these crossings into the city.
380. Some people are searched more thoroughly than others. If people are from opposition-held areas, they might be more carefully searched. The same goes for people with a family name (*kunya*, كنية) similar to the family name of people wanted by the regime. In such cases, sometimes people are held up at a checkpoint for hours in order for the security personnel to search them. There are also instances of people being held up because they have a family member that is wanted by the regime. The source referenced a case where a person had experienced arrest and torture three times due to his family connections until finally deciding to leave the country.
381. Unaccompanied women are not treated differently than men because of their gender. However, fewer women than men have been arrested at checkpoints. The reason why fewer women have been arrested is because fewer women took part in the demonstrations at the beginning of the conflict in 2011, so not as many women are listed on the wanted lists. However, there have been cases of women being arrested at checkpoints in order to put pressure on family members who are or are suspected of being affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA, *al-Jaysh as-Suri al-Hurr*, الجيش السوري الحر), political activists or media activists.

382. The two most prominent security institutions running checkpoints in Damascus are the Fourth Division (الفرقة الرابعة) as well as the Air Force Intelligence (المخابرات الجوية). In addition, from the beginning of 2017 and until the end of the first quarter of 2018, there has been an increase in the number of pro-regime militias in Damascus City, particularly Iranian- and Afghan-backed militias.

## Returnees

### Returnees via Damascus International Airport

383. The procedures at Damascus International Airport are still regular airport procedures, and it is still relatively easy to travel through the airport. People travelling through the airport go through security and will be searched as in other airports.
384. There is a difference between people who left Syria before 2011 and people who left Syria after 2011 in terms of security checks. People who left Syria before 2011 are not met with the same amount of suspicion when they return as compared to people who left after 2011. However, there have been cases where well-known artists who left Syria before 2011, were making art in support of the opposition while staying abroad, and did not know that the government had knowledge about this. Upon return to Syria, they were arrested because of their activities abroad.
385. People who decide to return to Syria via the airport are most often very confident that they have no outstanding issues with the government or they will make sure to clarify beforehand whether they are considered a threat. If people are well-known opposition members or have taken part in opposition activities like protests in 2011, it would not be wise of them to go back to Syria.
386. The source underlines that people can never be certain whether they are wanted by the regime or not when travelling through the airport. The source knows people who have been travelling in and out of the airport several times, and then all of the sudden, they have been arrested for just one Facebook post that has been deemed to be an act of activism. The source also gives an example of some people returning to Syria thinking that their file is clean, to realise upon return that their file was in fact not clean. However, these cases are limited.
387. It is not uncommon for the Syrian Intelligence apparatus (*al-Mukhabarat*, المخابرات) to follow up with and investigate Syrians—especially men—who have recently returned to the country and to Damascus specifically.

### Consequences of illegal exit

388. The authorities present at the airport are able to see if someone has exited the country without the proper paperwork and stamps. For instance passports issued abroad contain a special coding that reveals if someone has left the country through official or unofficial routes.

### Updated information added to the meeting minutes

389. When the source approved the meeting minutes (25 May 2018), following updated information was added regarding the current security situation in Damascus province:

390. After the Syrian government recaptured Eastern Ghouta in April 2017, shelling from Eastern Ghouta onto the capital ceased. Opposition fighters surrendered and either settled their status with the Syrian government or opted to leave for northern Syria. After the fighting in Eastern Ghouta concluded, sporadic shelling on Damascus still continued from areas in south Damascus, including the Yarmouk Camp. In the three days since the government's recapture of south Damascus in May 2018, there has been no mortar shelling on the capital. It remains to be seen if the Syrian government can now ensure a more secure Damascus given that it controls the entire capital city and surrounding areas for the first time since the start of the war.
391. There have, however, arisen a host of security-related challenges in the wake of the Syrian government's Damascus-area military advances, particularly as pertaining to the residents of these post-reconciliation areas (e.g. Eastern Ghouta and south Damascus). Residents are largely prevented at the present time from freely returning to Eastern Ghouta and south Damascus, and there are reports of wide-scale looting on the part of pro-government forces. Also of concern, dozens of civilians from these areas have been reportedly detained by the Syrian government in recent weeks and face immediate military conscription despite assurances that they would not face such conscription for at least six months after settling their status with the Syrian government.
392. Massive challenges are also now arising as related to housing, land and property rights for civilians from these recaptured areas, most notably through the recently announced Law 10.
393. Today, there are fewer checkpoints than compared to 2015 because the Syrian government has now reclaimed all territory that was once under opposition control in the surrounding Damascus suburbs. The Syrian government is currently attempting to ease restrictions on movement for civilians; however, today there are still checkpoints that prevent civilians from entering certain recently recaptured areas such as south Damascus and East Ghouta
394. After a violent, weeks-long military campaign that killed scores of fighters and civilians in the Yarmouk Camp, the Syrian government reclaimed complete control over the Yarmouk camp in May 2018. This marked the first time that the Syrian government controlled south Damascus and the entirety of the greater Damascus area since the start of the war.
395. As of May 25, 2018, the Yarmouk Camp has been almost entirely emptied of its civilian residents, and aid has not yet entered the camp. UNRWA has also not yet been able to enter the Yarmouk Camp. In the first week after the government's recapture of the Yarmouk Camp, government security forces have entered the camp, and there have been accusations of looting. There are also still reportedly corpses buried underneath the rubble in the Yarmouk Camp.
396. Fighters from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham were cleared from the south Damascus area at the beginning of May 2018 for Idlib province along with a number of their family members. It has also been reported that as many as 900 Islamic State fighters were transported from the Yarmouk Camp to Badia (البادية) (northern Suwayda province) while their family members were mostly transported to northern Syria.

397. Very few fighters opted to remain in south Damascus and reconcile their status with the Syrian government. At most, perhaps 10-15 pct. of fighters elected to remain in south Damascus.
398. Prior to the Syrian government's offensive on the Yarmouk Camp, approximately 3,000 people resided in the camp. By the final days of the campaign, there were only a few hundred individuals still in the camp as hundreds fled in the lead up to the fighting.
399. Today, the Syrian government is in complete control over the Yarmouk Camp, south Damascus and the greater Damascus area. Mortar shells, including from south Damascus, have not fallen on Damascus for almost a week—since the Syrian government announced complete control. This, however, does not guarantee that the capital city is safe from future attacks given the still-present threat of bombings carried out by local, terror-related and anti-government cells.

## World Health Organization (WHO)

Damascus, 22 March 2018

### General security situation in Damascus province

#### Security situation in Damascus City

400. With regard to the security situation, the situation in Damascus City should not be considered in isolation. The current situation in the suburbs highly affects the security situation in Damascus City and in the Yarmouk Camp (*Mukhayyim al-Yarmouk*, مخيم اليرموك). Damascus City is hit by various types of rockets coming in from Eastern Ghouta (*Ghoutet Dimasq as-Sharqiyya*, غوطة دمشق الشرقية), and the Yarmouk camp is besieged by armed groups.
401. The security situation in Damascus City was quite good throughout most of 2017, but it deteriorated in the first weeks of March 2018 as more and more mortars from Eastern Ghouta have started coming in. However, mortar fire has only caused a few fatalities and some material damage around Old Damascus (*Dimasq al-Qadima*, دمشق القديمة), and compared to the number of rockets that have fallen, there have been few casualties. Being hit by mortar fire is all a matter of being at the wrong place at the wrong time.
402. As a consequence of the deterioration of the security situation in Damascus City during the first weeks of March 2018, civilians are careful when they go to Old Damascus, for instance to Bab Sharqi (باب شرقي) and Bab Touma (باب توما), as the area is considered a high risk area. In other areas, the daily life has not been affected.
403. The shelling on Damascus City hits randomly. The only reports about shelling in the media are about civilians being hit.
404. During the hours between 9 AM and 2 PM, when a corridor for internally displaced persons (IDP) coming out of Eastern Ghouta is open, there is much less shelling on Damascus City. Generally, people in Damascus City do not go out at night due to the risk of shelling.

405. There have been incidents of car bombs and suicide attacks inside Damascus City. However, there have not been that many. The security is good and the situation inside Damascus City is relatively safe with regard to these kinds of attacks because the Syrian security apparatus is working quite well to prevent them.

#### Assessment of future security situation in Damascus province

406. The source assesses that the situation in Eastern Ghouta could go on for months or years. That is what has been seen in Aleppo as well.

#### Internally displaced persons in Damascus City

407. More than 50,000 people in Eastern Ghouta have left their homes. However, the government encourages people not to leave the area as there is a high pressure on shelters which the IDPs have to stay in while they are screened with regard to security by the government. The source has seen very few men crossing into Damascus City from Eastern Ghouta.
408. The Syrian authorities facilitate the exit of ordinary civilians from Eastern Ghouta, but the hard-core fighters and a lot of young men will stay behind. This is quite clear when you look at the IDP population in Damascus City: there are some young men among the IDPs from Eastern Ghouta but most of them are still inside Eastern Ghouta.
409. IDPs are dispersed throughout Damascus City depending on availability of housing, their financial means, as well as where they have friends and relatives in the city. In particular, a lot of IDPs live in al-Midan (Hayy al-Maydan, حي الميدان), Bab Musallah (مصلى باب), Kafr Sousah (كفر سوسة) and Mezzeh (المزة).
410. A lot of areas surrounding Damascus City have recently been re-taken by government troops, which has led to a great number of IDPs moving into these areas.

#### Freedom of movement in Damascus Province

##### Freedom of movement in Damascus City

411. There are checkpoints across Damascus City and at the main entrances to the city. While the number of checkpoints has decreased in some areas, new ones have popped up in other areas.
412. The checkpoints at the main entrances to Damascus City have computers with access to wanted lists. People's IDs are checked against these lists when they pass by these checkpoints.
413. At checkpoints, Syrian authorities are checking cars for explosives and checking the baggage of the passengers, e.g. by opening the boot of the cars. They also check the IDs of people crossing the checkpoints and in addition, they check if young men have completed their military service. Civilians who are not in possession of their ID-cards and draft evaders will have a problem if they try to cross a checkpoint. However, if people approaching a checkpoint are locals known by the officers in charge at the checkpoint, or if they move together with their families, it is only their baggage, which is checked.

#### Returnees

414. Many Syrians have returned to Damascus City from abroad. Especially men at military age who have now lived outside the country for more than four years are coming back because they can now pay for exemption from military service. The source does not know the exact number of returnees who have come back to Syria from abroad and therefor refers to UNHCR.

*Updated information added to the meeting minutes*

When the source approved the meeting minutes (10 May 2018), following updated information was added regarding the current security situation in Damascus province:

415. Since the government took over Eastern Ghouta, Damascus neighbourhoods (particularly those in eastern Damascus) have been calm and quiet in terms of artillery shells falling. A similar security level has not been witnessed since 2013. The only vulnerable areas that remain unsecure are those north of the Yarmouk Camp, namely the al-Midan area.
416. To date, government strikes on the Yarmouk Camp continues, and armed opposition groups inside the camp still have some capabilities for striking back on Damascus City, which happened yesterday when two small rockets hit a tower building in downtown Damascus; however, the frequency of such strikes is very low (i.e. once in ten days).

## Annex B: Terms of Reference

### **1. The general security situation in Damascus Province**

- 1.1. Prevalence of fighting and the extent and type of casualties
- 1.2. Prevalence of security incidents and the extent and type of casualties
- 1.3. Freedom of movement in Damascus Province, including impact of ethnic/religious background, gender, economic situation and place of origin
- 1.4. Prevalence of internal displaced persons or refugees abroad returning to Damascus
- 1.5. Development of the general security situation in Damascus within the last year
- 1.6. Impact of security situation in Damascus suburbs (*Riff Dimashq*) on security situation in Damascus

### **2. Entry in Syria via Damascus International Airport**

- 2.1. Entry procedures
- 2.2. Impact of ethnic/religious background, gender, economic situation, place of origin in Syria, reason for exit and place of residence outside Syria on treatment upon arrival
- 2.3. Possible consequences of illegal exit