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Home Office

Country Information and Guidance

Syria: the Syrian Civil War

Version 3.0

August 2016

Preface

This document provides country of origin information (COI) and guidance to Home Office decision makers on handling particular types of protection and human rights claims. This includes whether claims are likely to justify the granting of asylum, humanitarian protection or discretionary leave and whether – in the event of a claim being refused – it is likely to be certifiable as ‘clearly unfounded’ under s94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.

Decision makers must consider claims on an individual basis, taking into account the case specific facts and all relevant evidence, including: the guidance contained within this document; the available COI; any applicable caselaw; and the Home Office casework guidance in relation to relevant policies.

Country Information

The COI within this document has been compiled from a wide range of external information sources (usually) published in English. Consideration has been given to the relevance, reliability, accuracy, objectivity, currency, transparency and traceability of the information and wherever possible attempts have been made to corroborate the information used across independent sources, to ensure accuracy. All sources cited have been referenced in footnotes. It has been researched and presented with reference to the [Common EU \[European Union\] Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information \(COI\)](#), dated April 2008, and the [European Asylum Support Office’s research guidelines, Country of Origin Information report methodology](#), dated July 2012.

Feedback

Our goal is to continuously improve the guidance and information we provide. Therefore, if you would like to comment on this document, please email [the Country Policy and Information Team](#).

Independent Advisory Group on Country Information

The Independent Advisory Group on Country Information (IAGCI) was set up in March 2009 by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration to make recommendations to him about the content of the Home Office’s COI material. The IAGCI welcomes feedback on the Home Office’s COI material. It is not the function of the IAGCI to endorse any Home Office material, procedures or policy. IAGCI may be contacted at:

Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration,

5th Floor, Globe House, 89 Eccleston Square, London, SW1V 1PN.

Email: chiefinspectorukba@icinspector.gsi.gov.uk

Information about the IAGCI’s work and a list of the COI documents which have been reviewed by the IAGCI can be found on the Independent Chief Inspector’s website at <http://icinspector.independent.gov.uk/country-information-reviews/>

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Guidance

Updated: 19 August 2016

1. Introduction

1.1 Bases of Claim

- 1.1.1 That a person is at risk of serious harm or persecution from rebel groups on the basis of actual or perceived support for the ruling Assad regime; **or**
- 1.1.2 That a person is at risk of serious harm or persecution from the Assad regime on the basis of actual or perceived support for Syrian rebel groups; **and/or**
- 1.1.3 That the general security or humanitarian situation is so severe that a person's removal will breach Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR); **and/or**
- 1.1.4 That the general security or humanitarian situation is so severe that a person's removal will breach Article 15(c) of the Qualification Directive.

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2. Consideration of Issues

2.1 Credibility

- 2.1.1 For information on assessing credibility, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).
- 2.1.2 Decision makers must also check if there has been a previous application for a UK visa or another form of leave. Asylum applications matched to visas should be investigated prior to the asylum interview (see the [Asylum Instruction on Visa Matches, Asylum Claims from UK Visa Applicants](#)).
- 2.1.3 Decision makers should also consider the need to conduct language analysis testing (see the [Asylum Instruction on Language Analysis](#)). People of different nationalities may claim to be Syrian. An Equality Act exemption effected on 20 February 2013 allows the targeted testing of those claiming to be Syrian nationals.

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2.2 Exclusion

- 2.2.1 All sides in the conflict have been responsible for serious human rights abuses (see [Protagonists](#)). If it is accepted that the person has been involved with armed groups then decision makers must consider whether one of the Exclusion clauses is applicable.

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2.3 Assessment of risk

i. Refugee Convention

- 2.4.1 Decision makers should first consider if the person faces persecution or serious harm for a Refugee Convention reason noting that a state of civil

instability and/or where law and order has broken down does not of itself give rise to a well-founded fear of persecution for a Convention reason.

- 2.4.2 Where the person qualifies under the Refugee Convention, decision makers do not need to go on to make an assessment of the need for protection firstly under Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and if that is unsuccessful, under Article 15(c) of the Qualification Directive.
- 2.4.3 It is only if the person does **not** qualify under the Refugee Convention that decision makers need to make an assessment of the need for protection firstly under Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and, if that is unsuccessful, under Article 15(c) of the Qualification Directive.
- 2.3.1 In the Country Guidance case of [KB \(Failed asylum seekers and forced returnees\) Syria CG \[2012\] UKUT 426 \(IAC\) \(21 December 2012\)](#), the Upper Tribunal found that ‘in the context of the extremely high level of human rights abuses currently occurring in Syria, a regime which appears increasingly concerned to crush any sign of resistance, it is likely that a failed asylum seeker or forced returnee would, in general, on arrival face a real risk of arrest and detention and of serious mistreatment during that detention as a result of imputed political opinion. That is sufficient to qualify for refugee protection. The position might be otherwise in the case of someone who, notwithstanding a failed claim for asylum, would still be perceived on return to Syria as a supporter of the Assad regime’ (paragraph (b)).
- 2.3.2 Since this determination, the scale and spread of human rights abuses has widened. Currently, Assad supporters (or those perceived as such) may also be at risk of persecution, particularly in areas controlled by armed opposition groups. Armed opposition groups target civilians either to retaliate against, or because they perceive them to support, the Government. The UNHCR identifies that those at risk in areas under the ‘de facto’ control of such armed groups include (but are not limited to):
- persons supporting or perceived to be supporting the government, including government officials and members of government-affiliated parties;
 - members and perceived members of government and pro-government forces;
 - civilians perceived to be collaborating with government or pro-government forces;
 - family members of persons supporting or perceived to be supporting the government;
- civilian inhabitants of urban neighbourhoods, towns and villages perceived to be supporting the government. (See [Protagonists](#))
- 2.3.3 This document does not provide guidance on other types of asylum claims. Decision makers must note that, in most cases, a person will likely qualify for asylum for the reasons given above.

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ii. Humanitarian situation

- 2.3.4 A third to a half of the population has been internally displaced and over 13 million people need humanitarian assistance, which is being denied to them. Over 4.6 million people live in hard-to-reach areas. At the end of 2015 almost a third of the population lived in abject poverty. All parties to the conflict have targeted and interrupted vital services, including water, electricity, food and medical care, and have prevented people from moving. The most affected people are reportedly internally displaced families who have lost sources of income, the urban poor, subsistence farmers, small-scale herders, casual labourers and petty traders. All of Syria is affected, but most people in need are in Aleppo, Rural Damascus and Idlib governorates. (See [Humanitarian situation](#))
- 2.3.5 In most cases people are likely to face a real risk of Article 3 harm as a result of the humanitarian crisis. However, decision makers must consider all a person's circumstances when making an assessment. These may include age, gender, health and available support.

iii. Security situation

- 2.3.6 Unlike Article 3 ECHR, Article 15(c) of the Qualification Directive applies only to civilians, who must be genuine non-combatants and not those who are party to the conflict. This could include former combatants who have genuinely and permanently renounced armed activity.
- 2.3.7 Government forces have shelled areas controlled by armed opposition, or where the opposition are present, and inflicted heavy loss of life and destruction of property. Non-state armed groups commit war crimes, including massacres, murder, torture, hostage-taking, enforced disappearances, rape and sexual violence, using children in hostilities, and attacking protected objects. Violence is particularly fierce in and around major cities and lines of communication. In general, the consistency and level of indiscriminate violence in the main cities and areas of fighting is at such a level that substantial grounds exist for believing that a person, solely by being present there for any length of time, faces a real risk of harm which threatens their life or person (see [Nature and level of violence](#)).
- 2.3.8 In areas where there is no general Article 15(c) risk, decision makers must consider whether there are particular factors relevant to the person's circumstances which might nevertheless place them at risk.
- 2.3.9 For guidance on Article 15(c), including consideration of enhanced risk factors, see the [Asylum Instruction on Humanitarian Protection](#).

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2.4 Protection

- 2.4.1 If the person's fear is of serious harm or persecution on the basis of actual or perceived support for the Assad regime, the onus will be on that person to establish that they are unable to obtain sufficient protection from that regime.
- 2.4.2 If the person's fear is of serious harm or persecution on the basis of actual or perceived support for rebel groups, the onus will be on that person to

establish that they are unable to obtain sufficient protection from those groups.

- 2.4.3 In most cases it will not be possible for a person to obtain sufficient protection because of the difficulties of moving from one area to another.
- 2.4.4 For further guidance on assessing the availability or not of state protection, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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2.5 Internal relocation

- 2.5.1 Violence has restricted people's ability to move around the country, particularly in and around major cities and lines of communication. It has led to the suspension of commercial flights, road closure, and restricted access to, and closure of, border crossings. In opposition-held areas, people who (or are assumed to) support the government have their movement restricted. Movement is very restricted in besieged areas.
- 2.5.2 Government and opposition forces both control security checkpoints. Civilians have been prevented from crossing checkpoints to escape unsafe areas. Men are reportedly at risk of arrest and enforced disappearance at checkpoints. Women risk physical assault, arrest and abduction when travelling between areas. In some areas under opposition control, opposition armed groups have confined women to their homes.
- 2.5.3 In general, a person is highly unlikely to be able to internally relocate within Syria. This is because the ability to move around the country is very limited, and the unpredictability and scale of the violence is such that a person cannot reasonably be expected to stay in another part of the country.
- 2.5.4 However, decision makers must consider all the facts of the case, including the general circumstances prevailing in the intended place of relocation and the circumstances of the person. Where internal relocation is suggested, decision makers must also consider accessibility of the intended place of relocation.
- 2.5.5 For further guidance on internal relocation, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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2.6 Certification

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

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3. Policy summary

- 3.1.1 Caselaw has established that it is likely that a failed asylum seeker or forced returnee would, in general, on return to Syria face a real risk of arrest and

detention and of serious mistreatment during that detention as a result of imputed political opinion. It noted that the position might be otherwise for someone perceived as a supporter of the Assad regime.

- 3.1.2 However, since this caselaw was promulgated in 2012, the situation is now such that actual or perceived Assad supporters may have a well-founded fear of persecution, depending on where they are.
- 3.1.3 The humanitarian crisis, which continues to deteriorate, is such that for most returnees removal would breach Article 3 of the ECHR.
- 3.1.4 The level of indiscriminate violence in the main cities and areas of fighting in Syria is at such a level that substantial grounds exist for believing that a person, solely by being present there for any length of time, faces a real risk of harm which threatens their life or person breaching Article 15(c) of the QD.
- 3.1.5 If a person faces a well-founded fear of persecution, they are unlikely to be able to obtain protection from the authorities.
- 3.1.6 It is unlikely that a person will be able to reasonably internally relocate to another part of the country, because of the highly limited ability to move, and move safely, from one part of Syria to another, and the unpredictability and scale of violence, and the humanitarian situation faced by the displaced, in areas of proposed relocation.
- 3.1.7 Where a claim falls to be refused, it is unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002

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Country Information

Updated: 15 July 2016

4. Background

- 4.1.1 For background to the conflict, see the [BBC's 'story of the conflict'](#) (14 March 2014); and for a timeline of events, see the [BBC's Syria Profile](#).
- 4.1.2 Due to the very serious situation in Syria, information is hard to come by and sometimes inconsistent. In 2014 the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) described Syria as the most dangerous place for journalists in the world.¹ In March 2014, the CPJ reported that at least 65 journalists had been killed, more than 80 were abducted and approximately 30 went missing in the three years since the Syrian crisis began. In November 2013, Reporters Without Borders reported that more than 110 news providers had been killed in the course of their work on Syria. The report stated:

'The government uses the state media in a propaganda and disinformation war. At the same time, new media often turn into puppets of the 'revolution' and end up trying to impose a new form of thought control. Foreign Journalists, who are often denied visas, rarely have access to both sides. But the presence of these neutral and independent observers on both sides of the front line is essential for deciphering a complex situation and explaining the realities of this war to the international community.'²
- 4.1.3 Since June 2012, most western diplomats were declared 'persona non grata'.³ Reporting access to the country is therefore very limited.

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5. Protagonists

5.1 Overview

- 5.1.1 A Brookings Institute paper, dated May 2014, explained:

'The conflict in Syria has become an intensely complex affair, incorporating overlapping political, religious, sectarian, ethnic, and tribal narratives. The anti-government insurgency currently involves approximately 100,000-120,000 fighters—roughly 7,000-10,000 of whom are non-Syrian nationals—divided among over 1,000 distinct armed units. A majority of these factions are further organized into an assortment of coalitions, fronts, and temporary local alliances known as 'military operations rooms.' Meanwhile, government

¹ Committee to Protect Journalists, 'Syria, the most dangerous place for journalists', 15 March 2014, <https://cpj.org/2014/03/syria-the-most-dangerous-place-for-journalists.php>, accessed 7 July 2016

² Reporters Without Borders, 'Journalism in Syria, impossible job?', 6 November 2013, <https://rsf.org/en/reports/journalism-syria-impossible-job>, accessed 7 July 2016

³ Reuters, 'Syria lists 17 envoys as 'persona non grata'', 5 June 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-diplomats-idUSBRE8540HC20120605>, accessed 7 July 2016

forces—principally the Syrian Arab Army (SAA)—have both encouraged and adapted to the war's sectarian overtones, primarily deploying Shia and Alawi units in front-line operations alongside increasingly professionalized paramilitaries and Shia militias composed largely of foreign fighters. All the while, both sides receive considerable levels of support from foreign states, organizations, and individuals'.⁴

5.1.2 The source also noted:

'The foregoing refers only to the dynamic of Sunni militias fighting against the Syrian government. The conflict, however, is by no means two-dimensional. Other elements include, but are not limited to, the role of the Kurdish autonomist group, the Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, and its armed wings, the Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) and Yekîneyên Parastina Jin; the eruption of fighting against the al-Qaeda-disavowed Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) [Daesh]; the interest-specific role of Lebanon-based Hizballah in backing President Bashar al-Assad; the damaging role of frequently incompatible or mutually conflicting policies of opposition-supporting Gulf states; and increasingly evident divisions within the political and military components of the two main Western-backed opposition structures, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (or Syrian National Coalition; SNC) and the Supreme Joint Military Command Council (SMC).'⁵

5.1.3 A UN Commission of Inquiry report, dated February 2016, noted:

'The intensity of fighting has fluctuated among different regions according to the actors involved and the strategic value of the objectives at stake. In recent months, the most intense hostilities have set government forces and their allies against the rebels in Latakia, Idlib and Aleppo governorates, and Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) against YPG forces and their allies in Hasakah and Ar Raqqa. The situation in southern governorates has remained broadly unchanged despite incessant confrontations...

'Government forces and their allies have recently regained the operational initiative on a number of fronts, reversing the conflict trajectory to their advantage. Bolstered by the Russian airstrikes and foreign militia reinforcements, they have made substantial advances during large offensive operations in the countryside of Latakia and Aleppo governorates...

⁴ Brookings Institute (Charles Lister), Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape, 19 May 2014, p. 1, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/05/19%20syria%20military%20landscape%20lister/syria%20military%20landscape%20english.pdf>, accessed 8 July 2016

⁵ Brookings Institute (Charles Lister), Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape, 19 May 2014, p. 1, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/05/19%20syria%20military%20landscape%20lister/syria%20military%20landscape%20english.pdf>, accessed 8 July 2016

'The Government has also made important gains in the governorates of Homs and Damascus countryside through local ceasefire agreements reached after months of besiegement and bombardment.'⁶

It should be noted that the Commission's 'investigations remain curtailed by the denial of access to the Syrian Arab Republic'.⁷

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5.2 State armed groups

5.2.1 A May 2014 briefing from the Brookings Institute noted: 'Prior to the outbreak of the revolution in Syria, the SAA's [Syrian Arab Army] total active deployable manpower was estimated at 295,000 personnel.'⁸ The 295,000 personnel figure comes from the Military Balance publication from the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2011. This is, however, not an open source so this reference cannot be checked.

5.2.2 A UN Commission of Inquiry report, dated February 2016, noted: 'Severely constrained by a shortage of manpower, government regular ground forces have relied on a growing number of foreign militia groups in their recent attacks, implying an increasing fragmentation of the government forces and the decentralization of Syrian State authority...

'Growing in complexity, the Syrian conflict has involved an increasing number of belligerents on a multitude of interconnected front lines. While no party seems able to achieve "victory", all appear to have sufficient capacity to sustain operations for the foreseeable future, perpetuating death and destruction along the way.'⁹

National Defence Forces (NDF)

5.2.3 The Brookings Institute, in a May 2014 briefing, noted: 'The NDF now constitutes as many as 100,000 personnel, which when combined with Hizballah (which has deployed as many as 3,500-7,000 at any one time) and

⁶ United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 11 February 2016, paras 15, 21, 22, <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A-HRC-31-68.pdf>, accessed 8 July 2016

⁷ United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 11 February 2016, para 2, <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A-HRC-31-68.pdf>, accessed 8 July 2016

⁸ Brookings Institute (Charles Lister), Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape, 19 May 2014, p. 11, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/05/19%20syria%20military%20landscape%20lister/syria%20military%20landscape%20english.pdf>, accessed 8 July 2016

⁹ United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 11 February 2016, paras 23, 32 <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A-HRC-31-68.pdf>, accessed 8 July 2016

other pro government militias (which constitute at least several thousand fighters), has represented a crucial loyalist infantry manpower boost'.¹⁰

Hizbullah (Lebanon)

5.2.4 The Brookings Institute reported in May 2014 that Hizbullah 'contributes anywhere from 3,500-7,000 personnel to fighting opposition forces inside Syria at any one time.'¹¹ This information originally comes from Phillip Smyth, of The Washington Institute.

5.2.5 The Congressional Research Service noted:

'As of September 2014, Hezbollah fighters remained engaged in operations in the Qalamoun region northwest of Damascus, where the departure of some Iraqi paramilitary forces could place additional pressure on the group. The London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights in August reported that at least 561 Hezbollah fighters had been killed in Syria since early 2013. A senior Israeli military official in March 2014 stated that Hezbollah currently maintains 4,000 to 5,000 fighters in Syria. Over the past year, Hezbollah has worked with the Syrian military to protect regime supply lines by helping to clear rebel-held towns along the Damascus-Homs stretch of the M-5 highway.'¹²

Shia Militia Groups (Iraq)

5.2.6 A Congressional Research Service report, dated September 2014, noted:

'Analysts estimate that there are between 2,000 and 5,000 Iraqi Shia fighting in Syria on behalf of the Syrian government. Many hail from Iraqi Shia political and militia groups including Asa'ib Ahl al Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah. Members identify their objective as the defense of Shia holy sites such as the tomb of Sayyida Zeinab, the granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammad, in southern Damascus. Other reports describe these groups as assuming a broad operational role, noting that militias have formed sniper teams, led ambushes, established checkpoints, and provided infantry support for Syrian armored units. It is difficult to assess the motivations of individual Iraqi fighters in Syria or determine whether Asad's survival is their primary goal. Some of the fighters appear to be young volunteers driven by a desire to protect Shia holy sites, while others are trained militiamen who previously fought coalition forces in Iraq. Reports suggest that Iraqi fighters receive

¹⁰ Brookings Institute (Charles Lister), Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape, 19 May 2014, p. 11, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/05/19%20syria%20military%20landscape%20listers/syria%20military%20landscape%20english.pdf>, accessed 8 July 2016

¹¹ Brookings Institution, A Glossary of Forces in the Syrian Civil War, 27 May 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/brookings-now/posts/2014/05/a-glossary-of-forces-in-the-syrian-civil-war>, accessed 9 July 2016

¹² Congressional Research Service, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 17 September 2014, Pro-Asad Forces, p. 16, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/232511.pdf>, accessed 9 July 2016

training in Iran before being flown in small batches into Syria, and that they work closely with Lebanese Hezbollah. However, it is unclear who ultimately exercises command and control over these militias. Clashes between Iraqi and local Syrian militias in mid-2013 resulted in some Iraqi combatants refusing to fight under Syrian command. Recent gains by ISIL in Iraq have prompted some Iraqi fighters in Syria to return home and join local militias.¹³ This information originally comes from the Christian Science Monitor, Combatting Terrorism Centre and the New York Times.

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5.3 Non-state armed groups

Free Syrian Army (FSA)

- 5.3.1 The FSA is an active Syrian political militant group whose principle aim is to overthrow the government. The group was officially founded on 29 July 2011 by a former colonel in the Syrian Air Force, Riyad al-Asad, who defected from state security forces because they allegedly brutalised unarmed protestors. The FSA's first recorded attack was on 20 September 2011 where they shot dead a soldier near Homs City. Three days later, the FSA merged with the Free Officer's Movement, and developed into an well-organised movement. The FSA began to coordinate with the main political opposition movement, the Syrian National Council (SNC), in December 2011. In November 2012, it became part of the newly-formed Western-backed National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary Opposition Forces. In December 2012, Asad effectively ceded power to Brigadier General Selim Idriss, while retaining a formal command role. The FSA's armed forces became increasingly dispersed throughout the country. They came to represent a loose affiliation rather than a formally structured group. The FSA became increasingly marginalised following the emergence of other jihadist groups, although remains a notable actor within the conflict.¹⁴
- 5.3.2 The Brookings Institute, in a May 2014 briefing, noted: 'While the Free Syrian Army (FSA) has not represented a distinct military organization for some time, it remains an important umbrella term for those groups and coalitions generally perceived to be acting in the interest of the exiled SNC opposition'.¹⁵
- 5.3.3 The Congressional Research Service, in a September 2014 report, noted: 'As of September 2014, the term "Free Syrian Army" does not correspond to an organized command and control structure with national reach and unified procurement, intelligence, logistics, or sustainment capabilities. [...] At

¹³ Congressional Research Service, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 17 September 2014, Pro-Asad Forces, pp. 16-17,

<http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/232511.pdf>, accessed 9 July 2016

¹⁴ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment, Syria – Non-State Armed Groups, updated 18 April 2016, subscription source, accessed 8 July 2016

¹⁵ Brookings Institute (Charles Lister), Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape, 19 May 2014, p. 2, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/05/19%20syria%20military%20landscape%20lister/syria%20military%20landscape%20english.pdf>, accessed 8 July 2016

present, a number of fighting groups actively refer to themselves as part of a broader “Free Syrian Army” while carrying on operations independently.¹⁶

Daesh (Islamic State/of Iraq and al-Sham/ of Iraq and the Levant)

- 5.3.4 Daesh is the latest name for the group dominated by the former Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). AQI (formerly Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad) was a Sunni militant group founded in October 2004 by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who pledged loyalty to Osama bin Laden. AQI then formed a coalition with a few smaller jihadist groups and, in 2007, rebranded itself as the Islamic State of Iraq. In 2013, the group’s name was, again, changed to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) to reflect their increasing activity inside Syria.¹⁷ The UK Government uses the name Daesh to refer to the group.¹⁸
- 5.3.5 Daesh operates mainly in northern and eastern Syria. It also operates in Iraq, in, among other provinces, Anbar, Baghdad, Salah al-Din and Diyala. It has become known in Iraq for indiscriminate attacks, often using suicide bombers, which has caused massive casualties. In June 2014, Daesh announced the establishment of a khilafa (caliphate) from Aleppo in Syria to to Diyala in Iraq, and al-Baghdadi as the khalifa (caliph).¹⁹
- 5.3.6 The Brookings Institute, in a May 2014 briefing, noted:
- ‘Jabhat al-Nusra’s comparatively pragmatic, localized, and socially-integrated approach has secured it both al-Qaeda affiliate status and strong levels of popular support—or at least acceptance—inside Syria. ISIS’s actions, meanwhile, have left it increasingly perceived as imperious, self-interested, and unconcerned with taking part in a broader revolution. Its consistent brutality and refusal to participate in Islamic-court mediation efforts proposed by the opposition led to its disavowal by al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri on February 2, 2014. Given their different interests and approaches, it was unsurprising, yet extremely significant, that moderate insurgents opened up a front against ISIS in northern and eastern Syria in early January 2014. This new confrontation has had a pronounced impact on the dynamics of the conflict inside Syria. While initial anti-ISIS operations were launched by the SNC-linked Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) and the comparatively moderate Jaish al-Mujahideen, the subsequent involvement of the Islamic Front and then Jabhat al-Nusra has led to the near total isolation of ISIS within the Syrian insurgent theatre.’²⁰

¹⁶ Congressional Research Service, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 17 September 2014, Pro-Asad Forces, p. 5, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/232511.pdf>, accessed 9 July 2016

¹⁷ Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment, Syria – Non-State Armed Groups, updated 18 April 2016, subscription source, accessed 8 July 2016

¹⁸ Gov.uk, ‘UK action to combat Daesh’, <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/daesh/about>, accessed 9 July 2016

¹⁹ Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment, Syria – Non-State Armed Groups, updated 18 April 2016, subscription source, accessed 8 July 2016

²⁰ Brookings Institute (Charles Lister), Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria’s Military Landscape, 19

5.3.7 The Report of the Commission of Inquiry, dated February 2016, noted:

'ISIS remains in control of large swathes of the Syrian eastern and north-eastern governorates, while maintaining smaller pockets in other areas, including around Damascus. Recently, the terrorist group has come under mounting military pressure from different belligerents, including, in particular, SDF [Syrian Democratic Forces] in Hasakah and Ar Raqqa, and pro-government forces in Homs and Aleppo. In reaction to its recent losses in eastern Aleppo and in Al-Hawl near the Iraqi border, the group has escalated its military pressure on government-held areas in Dayr al-Zawr and eastern Homs countryside.

'The coalition led by the United States and the Russian air strikes have diminished the financial and operational capabilities of ISIS, but failed to eradicate its ability to attack sensitive areas, such as the Hamah-Aleppo supply line or in the country's central corridor in eastern Homs. As its ability to conduct symmetric operations has been hampered, ISIS has gradually reverted to its preferred tactics, including the extensive use of explosive devices and the conduct of operations in enemy territory, often by means of sleeper cells.

'YPG [Kurdish People's Protection Units] and allied Arab and Assyrian armed groups have made significant gains in their military operations targeting ISIS in the northern governorates. Recently integrated into SDF, they have launched new attacks in Hasakah, Aleppo and Ar Raqqa, pushing farther south into territory held by ISIS and inflicting significant damage to their lines of communications. Benefitting from the air strikes made by the international coalition led by the United States, they have increasingly threatened key towns held by ISIS, including Al-Shaddadeh (Hasakah) and Manbij (Aleppo).'²¹

Islamic Front

5.3.8 The Brookings Institute, in a May 2014 briefing, noted: 'Whatever the long-term viability of the Islamic Front's structural unity, the sheer military clout of its 50,000-60,000 fighters makes it a pivotal actor inside Syria.'²²

May 2014, p. 8,

<http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/05/19%20syria%20military%20landscape%20lister/syria%20military%20landscape%20english.pdf>, accessed 8 July 2016

²¹ United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 11 February 2016, paras 28 - 29

<http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A-HRC-31-68.pdf>, accessed 8 July 2016

²² Brookings Institute (Charles Lister), Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape, 19 May 2014, p. 5,

<http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/05/19%20syria%20military%20landscape%20lister/syria%20military%20landscape%20english.pdf>, accessed 8 July 2016

Liwa al-Tawhid (Battalion of Monotheism), al-Tawhid Brigade

- 5.3.9 The group was founded in July 2012 as a merger of militias from the northern Aleppo countryside. Initially, the group was comprised of the Fursan al-Jabal, Daret Izza and Ahrar al-Shamal brigades. In August 2013 Liwa al-Tawhid reorganised into nearly 30 sub-factions. Several accounts suggest that Liwa al-Tawhid, with around 11,000 fighters, is the strongest group in Aleppo province. On its founding, leadership of Liwa al-Tawhid was divided between its political and military wings, with Abdul Aziz Salama as political leader and Abdul Qadir al-Saleh as military leader. Like other Islamic Front brigades, Liwa al-Tawhid has suffered heavy losses at the hand of Daesh. On its In February 2014, Daesh militants assassinated one of the group's most important commanders, Adnan Bakkour, in northern Aleppo. However, Saleh was killed in a military airstrike in Aleppo in November 2013. Mohammed Hamadeen, former leader of Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal, emerged as the group's preeminent military commander thereafter. The group's original objective was to overthrow the government but they have adopted a more hardline stance and called for the implementation of sharia law.²³

Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam), formerly known as Liwa al-Islam or Islam Brigade

- 5.3.10 The group was formed on 29 September 2013 with the merger of Liwa al-Islam and dozens of other smaller Sunni insurgent factions operating in the Damascus area - such as Liwa Fath al-Sham, Liwa Tawhid al-Islam, Liwa al-Ansar, Kataib al-Jaish al-Islamiyya, the Ghouta Shield Brigades, and Kataib Omar bin Khattab. Jaish al-Islam has since integrated further groups from across Syria, but its capability remains heavily focused in and around the capital city. Their leader is Zahran Alloush, a formerly imprisoned Salafist activist who founded Liwa al-Islam, and he also serves as the military chief of Al-Jabha al-Islamiyya, or the Islamic Front, of which Jaish al-Islam is an important component. Estimates of Jaish al-Islam's strength vary, but IHS Jane's estimates the group maintains a force of approximately 25,000 fighters. There have been multiple reports (but no definitive proof) that the group is supported by Saudi Arabia.²⁴

Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, or the Movement of the Free People of Islamic Syria

- 5.3.11 Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya was formed as Ahrar al-Sham before it merged with three other groups in February 2013 and adopted its new name.

²³ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment, Syria – Non-State Armed Groups, updated 18 April 2016, subscription source, accessed 8 July 2016

²⁴ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment, Syria – Non-State Armed Groups, updated 18 April 2016, subscription source, accessed 8 July 2016

Also known as Kataib Ahrar al-Sham or the Battalions of the Free People of Syria, it dominates the Islamic Front coalition.²⁵

- 5.3.12 Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya is a Sunni militant group that operates in Syria, and aims to replace the government with an Islamic state ruled by Shari'a. Under the name Ahrar al-Sham, the group first announced its existence in January 2012, but some of the group's fighters commented that it had been active in Idlib governorate since late 2011. In its initial statements, the group framed the Syrian revolution in explicitly sectarian terms, claiming that Sunni 'mujahideen' were waging jihad against a 'Safavid plot' by Shia Iran. In its first six months of operating, Ahrar al-Sham was largely active in Idlib, where it carried out mainly ambushes using improvised explosive devices (IEDs). In late 2012 and early 2013, it expanded its operations, and claimed to have 83 katiba (battalions) in Idlib, Aleppo, Latakia, Tartus, Deraa, Al-Raqqa, Al-Hasakah, and Rif Dimashq governorates, and in Damascus.²⁶
- 5.3.13 Between October 2012 and January 2013, the group increasingly assaulted government targets in large-scale, sustained operations. On 21 December 2012, it formed a coalition, known as Al-Jabha al-Islamiyya al-Suriyya or the Syrian Islamic Front, of 11 militant groups. The coalition became a leading player within the insurgency. On 1 February 2013, Ahrar al-Sham merged with three groups in the Syrian Islamic Front to form Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, or the Movement of the Free People of Islamic Syria. In November 2013, a new coalition, Islamic Front, replaced the Syrian Islamic Front. Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya is currently the leading group within the Islamic Front, and it has been involved in almost all of the major rebel victories over the Syrian regular army. Since the start of 2014, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya has been involved in the infighting between Daesh and other Islamist rebel group. Later in 2014, the leader of Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, Hassan Aboud (alias Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi), and a large number of the group's senior commanders, were killed by an explosion in the Ram Hamdan area of Idlib. Hashem al-Sheikh (alias Abu Jabbar) became the new leader.²⁷
- 5.3.14 The Brookings Institute, in a May 2014 briefing, noted that Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya is 'avowedly Salafi' and known to coordinate with Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra.²⁸

²⁵ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment, Syria – Non-State Armed Groups, updated 18 April 2016, subscription source, accessed 8 July 2016

²⁶ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment, Syria – Non-State Armed Groups, updated 18 April 2016, subscription source, accessed 8 July 2016

²⁷ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment, Syria – Non-State Armed Groups, updated 18 April 2016, subscription source, accessed 8 July 2016. The explosion which killed many of the group's commanders is corroborated by: Congressional Research Service, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 17 September 2014, Pro-Asad Forces, p. 7, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/232511.pdf>, accessed 9 July 2016

²⁸ Brookings Institute (Charles Lister), Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape, 19 May 2014, p. 3,

Jabhat al-Nusra

- 5.3.15 Jabhat al-Nusra is a Sunni militant group that operates in Syria. They first became public with the release of an internet video in January 2012, which featured its leader, Golani. Its main objectives are to overthrow the government and to create an Islamic state under Shari'a law. The group has a particularly strong presence in Aleppo, Idlib, Deir ez Zour and Deraa governorates, and in the towns surrounding Damascus. Since its first claimed attack, a suicide bombing that killed 26 people in Damascus on 6 January 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra has become one of the main perpetrators of suicide attacks and mass-casualty operations against the government. The group are mainly armed with small arms and Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs). However, they have begun to fight with heavy weapons, such as battletanks, after they seized fixed military positions in late 2012 and throughout 2013.²⁹
- 5.3.16 The group is a considerable threat to local security and has undermined government control in several regions, especially in the north and east. In December 2012, the US government designated the group as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation. The US government claimed that the group were founded by former AQI operatives, that they had been directly guided by AQI leader al-Baghdadi and were responsible for over 600 attacks. On 9 April 2013, al-Baghdadi said that he had sent Golani to Syria in July 2011 to form a militant group, to be subsumed within AQI and to be known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham. The following day, Golani swore allegiance to al-Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri, but he claimed no knowledge of the previous day's statement and insisted his group would remain known as Jabhat al-Nusra. AQI and Jabhat al-Nusra have since followed different policies about other groups; sometimes they have fought each other, as at Raqqa in January 2014.³⁰
- 5.3.17 A briefing from the Brookings Institute, dated May 2014, noted:
- 'As an al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra's hardline ideology is clear, but since mid-to-late 2012, the group has demonstrated a surprising level of pragmatism in terms of moderating its behavior and limiting its immediate ideological objectives. In keeping with its allegiance to al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra aims, in the long term, to establish an Islamic state in Syria as a stepping stone to liberating Jerusalem and establishing an Islamic Caliphate. In the short term, however, the group is operating at a very local level while paying particular attention to maintaining healthy relations with civilians and moderate rebels. It has also banned the imposition of hudud punishments during 'war,' thereby distinguishing itself from the more brutal ISIS, whose

<http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/05/19%20syria%20military%20landscape%20list/syria%20military%20landscape%20english.pdf>, accessed 8 July 2016

²⁹ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment, Syria – Non-State Armed Groups, updated 18 April 2016, subscription source, accessed 8 July 2016.

³⁰ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment, Syria – Non-State Armed Groups, updated 18 April 2016, subscription source, accessed 8 July 2016.

extreme behaviour and refusal to cooperate with moderate armed groups led to its disavowal by al-Qaeda in February 2014.³¹

Khorasan Group

- 5.3.18 The BBC, in September 2014, reported that the Khoasan Group – a name apparently coined in the US – is made up of around 50 veteran militants from Pakistan and Afghanistan, whom jihadists refer to as ‘Khorasan’, and North Africa and Chechnya. US officials said that al-Zawahiri has sent the group to Syria not to fight the government but to ‘develop external attacks, construct and test improvised explosive devices and recruit Westerners to conduct operations’. The group embedded into the al-Nusra Front, and obtained land and buildings in its strongholds.³²

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6. Nature and level of violence

- 6.1.1 The FCO’s Human Rights and Democracy Report, which covered 2015, stated:

‘In 2015, the human rights situation in Syria continued to deteriorate as conflict intensified. The Asad regime continued to commit human rights violations on a large scale, persistently violated international humanitarian law (IHL), and failed to comply with numerous UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. Regime forces continued to arbitrarily arrest, disappear, and torture detainees, many of whom have died in detention.

‘The Asad regime and its allies (including Russia) carried out indiscriminate attacks that directly targeted civilians, including bombardment of civilian residential areas, schools, market areas and medical facilities, with barrel bombs, artillery, aerial attacks and mortars, resulting in mass civilian casualties. Lengthy sieges, mainly by regime forces, led to severe malnutrition and even starvation. The UK believes that both the Asad regime and Daesh have used chemical weapons in Syria. Daesh has been responsible for systematic and widespread violations of IHL, including targeting civilians. IHL violations were also carried out by al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, and some other extremist groups. This violence and instability continued to force people from their homes and increased the numbers of internally displaced persons and those fleeing the country as refugees.’³³

³¹ Brookings Institute (Charles Lister), *Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria’s Military Landscape*, 19 May 2014, p. 3, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/05/19%20syria%20military%20landscape%20lister/syria%20military%20landscape%20english.pdf>, accessed 8 July 2016

³² BBC News, ‘What is the Khorsan Group?’, 24 September 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29350271>, accessed 8 July 2016

³³ Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), *Human Rights and Democracy, the 2015 Foreign and Commonwealth Report*, April 2016, p. 48, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/518658/FCO755_Human_Rights_Report_2015_-_WEB.pdf, accessed 8 July 2016

6.1.2 In December 2015, UNHCR stated:

‘Nearly all parts of Syria are embroiled in violence, which is playing out between different actors in partially overlapping conflicts and increasingly involves different regional and international actors...As international efforts to end the conflict in Syria have yet to yield results, the conflict continues unabated with devastating consequences for the Syrian population, including rising civilian casualties, large-scale displacement inside and outside the country, and an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Tenuous local ceasefires have been brokered in some areas between government and antigovernment forces, resulting in temporary de-escalations of fighting at the local level...

‘The deliberate targeting of civilians and the failure of parties to the conflict to protect civilians are reported to be the main causes of displacement. Furthermore, people are increasingly forced to flee due to collapsing services, including inadequate health care and loss of livelihoods amidst rising living expenses. Multiple displacements are a striking feature of the Syria conflict as frontlines keep shifting and formerly safer areas become embroiled in conflict. Incidents of internally displaced persons (IDPs) being targeted and forcibly displaced again have been recorded.’³⁴

6.1.3 Regarding the use of chemical weapons, see the website of the [Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons \(OPCW\)](#).

6.1.4 The UN Human Rights Council’s Commission of Inquiry on Syria stated in its February 2016 report:

‘Most parties to the conflict continue to employ siege warfare on neighbourhoods and localities (albeit to different degrees) in combination with continuous bombardment. Whenever the tactical circumstances have allowed, the sieges have been imposed in an attempt to force opponents and their supporting communities to surrender or to extract political concessions.

‘The conflict has devolved into a multisided proxy war steered from abroad by an intricate network of alliances. States, entities and individuals outside the Syrian Arab Republic have supported all sides, profoundly shaping their operational capabilities and performance. Paradoxically, the international and regional stakeholders that are ostensibly pushing for a peaceful solution to the war are the same that continue to feed the military escalation’.³⁵

6.1.5 The February 2016 report of the Commission of Inquiry noted:

³⁴ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Protection Considerations with Regard to People Fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic, Update IV, December 2015, pp. 6-7, <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5641ef894.pdf>, accessed 7 July 2016

³⁵ United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 11 February 2016, paras 16 - 17 <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A-HRC-31-68.pdf>, accessed 8 July 2016

‘Destruction of the structures of civilian life – houses, businesses, schools, parks, markets and hospitals among them – continues apace as the conflict storms towards its sixth year. The proliferation of warring parties and front lines has challenged the ability of civilians to survive even further.

‘Aerial bombardments continued to pummel civilian-inhabited areas controlled by anti-government armed groups, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, resulting in hundreds of casualties. Civilians remaining in localities that have suffered attacks for several years are often unable to leave owing to personal circumstances, including poverty, chronic ill health or disability and unwillingness to abandon the family’s personal property. In besieged areas, civilians are prevented from leaving.

‘Areas not under government control suffered from ground shelling by pro-government forces. Many missile and rocket attacks were launched on areas containing no discernible military targets. Where they resulted in casualties, the majority – if not all – were civilians, including a large number of children.

‘In Aleppo city, the neighbourhoods of Al-Firdous, Al-Kalasa, Al-Huluk, Al-Sukkari and Al-Saliheen experienced aerial bombardments throughout the period under review. Numerous attacks with heavy civilian casualties were documented from October to December.

‘In the south and east of Aleppo governorate, aerial bombardments by pro-government forces presaged a movement of Syrian ground forces into the area. The air strikes prompted the mass displacements of tens of thousands of men, women and children. Some of the internally displaced moved to the Azaz region of Aleppo governorate, where there are intense clashes along multiple front lines. Others fled towards Idlib and into makeshift camps along the border with Turkey. This influx has strained camps, which have scarcely been able to provide for the needs of existing internally displaced persons, and where the infrastructure to support civilian life is inadequate.’³⁶

6.1.6 The UNHCR’s November 2015 update of their protection guidelines stated:

‘Nearly all parts of Syria are embroiled in violence, which is playing out between different actors in partially overlapping conflicts and increasingly involves different regional and international actors. The country is deeply fractured as parties to the conflict, including Syrian military forces, the group “Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham” (hereafter ISIS), anti-government armed groups, and Kurdish forces (People’s Protection Units, YPG), exercise control and influence in different parts of the country. As international efforts to end the conflict in Syria have yet to yield results, the conflict continues unabated with devastating consequences for the Syrian population, including rising civilian casualties, large-scale displacement inside and outside the country, and an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Tenuous local ceasefires have been brokered in some areas between government and

³⁶ United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 11 February 2016, paras 33 - 37 <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A-HRC-31-68.pdf>, accessed 8 July 2016

antigovernment forces, resulting in temporary de-escalations of fighting at the local level.

‘At the time of writing, Syrian military forces continue to exert full or partial control over most provincial capitals (except Raqqa and Idlib), including the capital Damascus, as well as the coastal areas of Latakia and Tartous Governorates. However, over the course of the last year, Syrian military forces have reportedly lost strategic locations and military positions in several governorates, including in eastern Homs, Idlib and Dera’a governorates as a result of manpower shortages and increased military pressure by non-state armed groups. More recently, with increasing support from foreign allies, government forces have reportedly launched a major military offensive along several fronts to regain lost territory, including in the governorates of Aleppo, Hama and Latakia.

‘ISIS has consolidated its hold over a largely contiguous stretch of territory in mainly northern and central Syria (as well as large areas in neighbouring Iraq), including the eastern Aleppo countryside, Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zour and southern Hassakeh governorates, despite heavy losses to the YPG in north-western Syria, along the border with Turkey. At the same time, ISIS has reportedly expanded its areas of control and influence, most notably in central parts of Syria, in eastern parts of Homs governorate (where it captured the towns of Palmyra and Qaryateen on 21 May and 6 August 2015, respectively), but also in areas further south, including Dera’a and Suweida governorates.

‘An array of anti-government armed groups — with diverse ideological and political backgrounds and shifting alliances — operate mainly in the southern governorates of Dera’a and Quneitra, in Rural Damascus, the northern part of Homs governorate, the Latakia countryside and in Idlib and Aleppo governorates. Anti-government armed groups reportedly made notable tactical gains against government forces in Dera’a, Aleppo and Idlib governorates, including by taking full control of the provincial capital, Idlib, at the end of March 2015. Anti-government armed groups also continue to intermittently fight ISIS in the countryside of Aleppo governorate and the southern part of Damascus governorate. Jabhat Al-Nusra (JAN) reportedly plays a dominant role among anti-government armed groups and seeks to impose its extremist ideology on communities.

‘The YPG, supported by local armed groups and international coalition airstrikes, has further advanced and consolidated control over the de facto self-administered Kurdish areas in the north, namely Hassakeh, Kobane (Ayn Al-Arab in Arabic) and Afrin. It has also captured previously ISIS-held territories, most notably the strategic towns of Kobane (Aleppo governorate) and Tal Abyad (Raqqa governorate) in January and mid-June 2015, respectively. As a result, the YPG now controls a significant stretch of contiguous territory linking the cantons of Kobane and Al-Jazire (Hassakeh governorate). The YPG continues to clash with ISIS across northern and north-eastern Syria and has intermittently engaged in fighting with JAN and

other anti-government armed groups in Aleppo and Hassakeh governorate.³⁷

6.1.7 The UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, in June 2015, stated:

‘Conflict continued at unprecedented levels across the Syrian Arab Republic, resulting in massive violations against children. The United Nations verified 2,107 grave violations by all parties to the conflict in major urban and rural areas. ISIL has taken over large parts of the country and used public brutality and indoctrination to ensure the submission of communities; children were specifically targeted. The United Nations had limited capacity to verify information in the areas under the control of ISIL. Sieges and bombardments of civilian areas continued, particularly by Syrian Government Forces, which also hampered the verification of incidents...

‘Indiscriminate attacks launched in civilian populated areas continued to cause widespread killing and maiming. The United Nations verified the killing of 368 children (184 boys, 66 girls, 118 gender unknown) by Syrian Government forces (221), ISIL/ANF (44), FSA-affiliated groups (24), international coalition airstrikes (4) and unknown parties (75). There were 771 cases of children maimed (420 boys, 142 girls, 209 gender unknown) by Syrian Government forces and pro-Government groups (336), FSA-affiliated groups (296), ISIL and ANF (19), YPG/YPJ (1) and unknown parties (119) across the country. Actual numbers are believed to be much higher.’

The source also documented examples of child recruitment, detention, killings, Daesh brutality against children, sexual violence, destruction of educational establishments, destruction of medical facilities, abductions (by Daesh) and starvation warfare.³⁸

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7. Humanitarian situation

7.1.1 The FCO reported in April 2016:

‘Through its role in the UNSC [UN Security Council] and the International Syria Support Group, the UK is supporting a peace process which aims to end the violence and achieve political transition away from Asad. UNSC Resolution 2254, adopted 18 December 2015, calls for ceasefire planning and an immediate end to attacks against civilians. The UK has been at the forefront of promoting the participation of minority groups, and especially women, in the peace process. We support progress that has subsequently been made on the political track, including the start of intra-Syrian peace

³⁷ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Protection Considerations with Regard to People Fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic, Update IV, December 2015, pp. 3-5, <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5641ef894.pdf>, accessed 7 July 2016

³⁸ UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Syrian Arab Republic, 5 June 2015, <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/countries/syria/>, accessed 7 July 2016

talks, cessation of hostilities, and some improvements in humanitarian access.

'The UK led the adoption of three resolutions on the human rights situation in Syria at the UN Human Rights Council during 2015 and co-sponsored the UN General Assembly Third Committee Resolution on the human rights situation in Syria, which was also successfully adopted. We support the UN Commission of Inquiry's investigations into human rights violations and abuses in Syria.

'More widely, the UK continued to play a leading role in addressing the humanitarian situation in Syria. We have now pledged a total of £2.3 billion in humanitarian assistance to support Syrian refugees up to 2020. This is our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis.

'The UK supported a range of projects focused on human rights and accountability amounting to £10.3 million as at the end of 2015. These programmes included the provision of capacity building for Syrian human rights activists to gather evidence of violations of international criminal and humanitarian law. This evidence is intended for use in future international and/ or Syrian-led criminal and accountability processes. We also provided IHL and Law of Armed Conflict training, and supported women's empowerment in policing, civil defence, and local councils inside Syria. In addition, we are working to improve local capacity to document sexual violence in order to strengthen future justice mechanisms and reconciliation processes. We will continue this programme of work in 2016.'³⁹

- 7.1.2 The Syria Needs Analysis Project (SNAP), part of the Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS) – made up of three NGOs (Action Contre la Faim - ACF, Norwegian Refugee Council and Save the Children International) – produce quarterly reports on the humanitarian situation in Syria. The December 2015 report stated:

'As the conflict heads into its sixth year, 13.5 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance –four million more than in 2013, and 1.3 million more than a year ago. 8.6 million are in urgent need of assistance.

'More than 250,000 people have been killed and more than one million injured since conflict began in 2011. Civilians and civilian infrastructure, including schools and health facilities, continue to be targeted.

'Access constraints remain severe, with 4.5 million people living in hard-to-reach areas, and protection remains the highest priority need. WASH [Water, Sanitation and Hygiene] and health are not far behind.'⁴⁰

- 7.1.3 And:

³⁹ Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Human Rights and Democracy, the 2015 Foreign and Commonwealth Report, April 2016, p. 48, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/518658/FCO755_Human_Rights_Report_2015_-_WEB.pdf, accessed 8 July 2016

⁴⁰ Assessment Capacities Project, Crisis Overview 2015: Humanitarian Trends and Risks for 2016, December 2015 – Syria, <http://www.acaps.org/country/syria/special-reports>, accessed 8 July 2016

‘Over half of Syria's population is now displaced. The number of IDPs fell by one million in 2015, explained by changes in data collection combined with the high number of Syrians fleeing the country. More than 500,000 Syrian asylum seekers have been registered in Europe since 2011: almost 300,000 of them arrived in 2015 (HNO 2016, UNHCR, 19/10/2015).

‘Despite a fall in the total number of IDPs, an estimated 1.2 million people were newly displaced in 2015. Many had already been displaced several times before. Idleb, Ar-Raqqa, Al Hasakeh, and Dar’agovernorates recorded the largest number of newly displaced in 2015 (OCHA⁴¹, 22/09/2015).

‘The 480,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria are particularly vulnerable: 95% are completely dependent on humanitarian assistance to meet their basic needs (Protection Cluster, 31/08/2015).’⁴²

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) reported, as of December 2015, that 6.6 million people (out of a population of 18.5 million) were internally displaced within Syria.⁴³

7.1.4 The UNHCR’s December 2015 update of their protection guidelines stated:

‘With the conflict in Syria in its fifth year, the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate rapidly. The total number of people in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria has reached 13.5 million, up from 12.2 million in February 2015, including approximately 6.5 million IDPs. While the whole of Syria is affected, the majority of those in need of assistance are, according to reports, concentrated in the governorates of Aleppo, Rural Damascus and Idlib. At the end of 2014, more than four out of every five Syrians were estimated to live in poverty, with almost 65 per cent living in extreme poverty, able only to secure the most basic food and non-food items required for the survival of their households. Thirty per cent of the population were found to live in abject poverty, with households unable to meet even the most basic need for food, and, in the case of those living in conflict/besieged areas, facing hunger, malnutrition and starvation.

‘Access to food, water and sanitation, housing, health care, and education is severely affected by the cumulative effects of armed conflict and the related destruction of infrastructure, disruption of essential services and loss of livelihoods. All parties to the conflict are implicated in targeting vital services resulting in interruptions to the supply of safe drinking water and electricity.

‘According to the reports of the UN Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014) and 2191 (2014), UN humanitarian agencies and partners were able to deliver humanitarian

⁴¹ The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) publishes the official figures that all of the United Nations is supposed to use. It is on the basis of the figures calculated by OCHA that appeals to governments for funding or raising awareness on the humanitarian situation is made.

⁴² Assessment Capacities Project, Crisis Overview 2015: Humanitarian Trends and Risks for 2016, December 2015 – Syria, <http://www.acaps.org/country/syria/special-reports>, accessed 8 July 2016

⁴³ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), Syria, updated December 2015, <http://www.internal-displacement.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/syria/>, accessed 8 July 2016

assistance to millions of people in need, including cross-line and cross-border. However, according to the UN Secretary-General, humanitarian access remains “extremely challenging” as a result of insecurity and access constraints imposed by parties to the conflict. Of particularly critical concern is access to an estimated 4.6 million people, approximately a quarter of the population, in 127 hard-to-reach locations. Of these, some 393,700 people are reported to live in areas that remain besieged by Syrian military forces and ISIS. Security risks to humanitarian workers are high, as dozens of humanitarian workers have been killed, detained or abducted and UN vehicles, warehouses and ambulances have been attacked.’⁴⁴

- 7.1.5 For more detailed information on the most up-to-date situation about livelihoods, food security, shelter, health and education, see the most recent quarterly SNAP report and monthly supplements, available on [ACAP’s website](#).
- 7.1.6 For the latest information on the humanitarian situation, and the names of the UN agencies and NGOs working inside Syria on humanitarian assistance, see the [Syrian Humanitarian Response Plan](#).
- 7.1.7 See also the [report by the UN Secretary-General to the Security Council on the implementation of resolutions 2139 and 2165](#). These resolutions are on the ability of the humanitarian community to access those in need. Information is collated from most humanitarian organisations (UN and NGOs) working inside Syria.

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8. Freedom of movement

- 8.1.1 The US State Department report, which covered events in 2015, noted that people’s freedom of movement varied by region and by individual because of the fighting. Freedom of movement for government supporters or perceived supporters (especially the Alawi and Shia populations) was highly restricted in rebel-held areas. The regime restricted freedom of movement, but to a lesser extent. The violence, coupled with significant cultural pressure, led to severely restricted freedom of movement for women in many areas. Additionally, the law allows certain male relatives to place travel bans on women.⁴⁵
- 8.1.2 See the latest [FCO travel advice](#), which has up-to-date information about road routes and border crossings. The situation is fluid and changes constantly. However, it should be noted that this is FCO travel advice for British nationals travelling to Syria; it is not Home Office asylum or removals policy.

⁴⁴ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Protection Considerations with Regard to People Fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic, Update IV, December 2015, pp. 17-19, <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5641ef894.pdf>, accessed 7 July 2016

⁴⁵ US State Department, Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 2015, Syria, Section 1.d., <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper>, accessed 8 July 2016

8.1.3 The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria found in its December 2015 report:

‘Communities countrywide have been fragmented, separated from one another by checkpoints, front lines or ongoing clashes. When displaced by violence or the fear of violence, religious and ethnic communities have tended to cluster together. In seeking safety, their flight has aligned the geographic divisions with differences in real or perceived political loyalties. There is a danger of such geographic divisions becoming entrenched...

‘Women’s greater freedom of movement through checkpoints has increased their vulnerability to sexual and physical assault by warring parties and by individual criminal elements. Trauma of this type, which often remains unspoken, can be an obstacle to the healing of the survivor, the family and the wider community.

‘In areas controlled by ISIS, Syrian women and girls continue to live under almost unbearable restrictions, their access to education, work and freedom of movement severely curtailed or completely denied. Rigidly defined gender forces, harshly enforced, have removed women and girls from public life, limiting their ability to contribute to their community beyond the accepted roles of wife and mother.’⁴⁶

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⁴⁶ United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 11 February 2016, paras 95, 101-102, <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A-HRC-31-68.pdf>, accessed 8 July 2016

Annex A: Sources

The following sources contain up-to-date resources about the security and humanitarian situation in Syria:

- a. [Amnesty International, Syria 2015/2016](#)
- b. [Assessment Capacities Project \(ACAPS\) Strategic Needs Analysis Project](#)
- c. [The Brookings Institution](#)
- d. [Carter Center](#)
- e. [Center for Documentation of Violations in Syria](#)
- f. [Congressional Research Service](#)
- g. [Human Rights Watch \(HRW\)](#)
- h. [Institute for the Study of War \(ISW\), Syria Project](#)
- i. [International Crisis Group](#)
- j. [The Jamestown Foundation](#)
- k. [The Long War Journal](#)
- l. [Relief Web, Syria country page](#)
- m. [The Syrian Human Rights Committee](#)
- n. [UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic](#)
- o. [UN Office for Disarmament Affairs \(UNODA\)](#)
- p. [US State Department's Humanitarian Information Unit \(USSD HIU\)](#)

Version Control and Contacts

Contacts

If you have any questions about the guidance and your line manager or senior caseworker cannot help you or you think that the guidance has factual errors then email [the Country Policy and Information Team](#).

If you notice any formatting errors in this guidance (broken links, spelling mistakes and so on) or have any comments about the layout or navigability of the guidance then you can email [the Guidance, Rules and Forms Team](#).

Clearance

Below is information on when this version of the guidance was cleared:

- version **3.0**
- valid from **August 2016**

Changes from last version of this guidance

No substantive change to the guidance

Updated sources

New sources

List of new sources in the annex

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